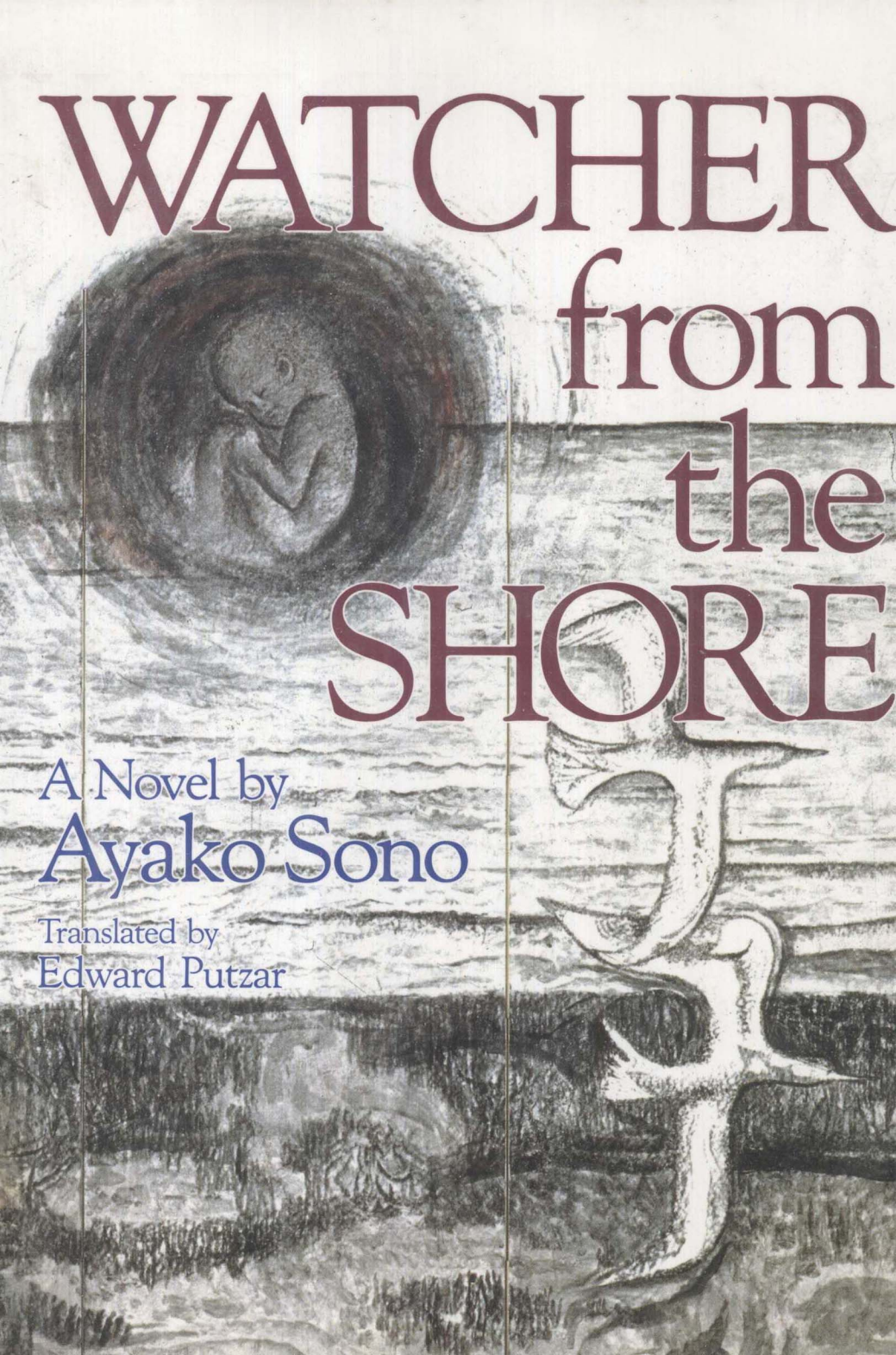
WATCHER from the SHORE



A Novel by
Ayako Sono

Translated by
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Chapter One

Wind and Light

Ten years had passed since Sadaharu Nobeji had found a bit of land where he could build his obstetrics and gynecology clinic. The place was as close as he could get to the ocean. He'd been born where the scent of the Pacific Ocean was always in the wind, even though one could not actually see the water. As though he had the instincts of some amphibious creature, when it came time to build his own home he sought a place where he could hear the sound of the sea.

But there was a problem. Most people did not live quite so close to the ocean, and the place he wanted was not convenient for his patients. Eventually, for the sake of his profession, he sacrificed his personal taste and settled on a spot along the west side of the Miura Peninsula, a cabbage field where watermelons grew in summer and long *daikon* radishes in winter. Standing there, on high ground, he could just glimpse the ocean from his two thousand square meters of land. As it was, when it came to actually buying the land, the most important point was that it was cheap. Even so, he had to sell property that he'd inherited from his long-deceased father, and some securities besides. Further, to make up the balance through a bank loan, he mortgaged the house and land occupied by his mother.

He was newly married then. The opening of the clinic and the birth of his daughter, Kaori, occurred within a month of each other. The residence part of the building was merely painted

siding, the interior of the rooms painted plywood—inexpensive construction that barely deceived the eye. But since the clinic itself would be in use for a long time, Sadaharu allowed himself more extravagance there. A round hall served as a waiting room, and from the second and third floors there was a fine view of the ocean. This was partly based on his feeling that for a place like a clinic there could be no such thing as too much light.

Each morning at 8:45 Sadaharu appeared in his examination room to meet with the nursing staff, including the nurse on duty the previous night, the cook, and the maintenance staff, but on this particular morning, as soon as he appeared, a woman entered at the same time from the waiting room. About fifty years of age, she wore her hair up in a nylon scarf, her slacks baggy at the knees. She wore no makeup and began speaking immediately.

"Doctor, excuse me, but I must ask you something. It's true, isn't it, that all the babies born here are male?"

Sadaharu stared at the woman. At first, he thought she was a stranger, but then he wondered whether she might not know him. His eyesight was excellent. Had he been born at another time he might have become a fighter pilot instead of a physician. And he had an eye for remembering faces. But when it came to his patients—especially the farmers' wives with their faces covered by their straw hats—he had given up trying to keep track of them all. The enemy, so to speak, could see him clearly, while he could see little or nothing of the women's faces.

"Who told you all the children born here were boys?"

"No one in particular," she replied. "But the Tanaka family and the Hara family too had their children here, and they were all boys."

In a semi-rural place like this, there were Tanakas and Haras everywhere; Sadaharu had to ask which Tanaka and which Hara.

"Ah, the old Tanaka family, you know, and the Hara family with the variety store had a son about six months ago."

In an informal tone Sadaharu said to her, "Come, now. Think

about what you're saying! It makes no sense, and besides, what would happen to Japan if only boys were born here?"

"But so far in our family there have been two, both of them girls, and if she doesn't have a boy this time, well . . . She's been going over to the city hospital until now, but I want her to come here."

What a reputation to have! Sadaharu thought. If only they believed I was good at surgery, or could cure sterility, something like that. But these folks are coming for quite another reason.

"She's your daughter?"

"She's my daughter-in-law."

Not that the old lady cared if Japan became all male. She was only thinking about her family getting a male heir.

"Now, please, don't worry about whether the child is a boy or a girl; its sex has already been determined."

Sadaharu spoke without the slightest attempt to humor the woman, then strode into his examination room. He employed thirteen women at the clinic, all under the supervision of head nurse Shigeko Okubo. With one or two usually absent, the morning staff meetings included about ten people.

Five patients had come in the previous night. Three women were staying for postpartum care, and one farm girl was there for emergency treatment of a threatened miscarriage. Another patient was being treated for severe anemia after miscarrying. The woman who gave birth last night could not sleep because of severe cramps; otherwise, her condition was stable. Of the three newborns, two were boys. For the little girl with jaundice, they had begun phototherapy.

"Two appointments today."

Sadaharu looked at the memo on his desk. The appointments were with patients coming in for abortions.

Already a patient had arrived, but Sadaharu could not see her immediately. His desk telephone was ringing. He answered and heard the voice of his daytime housekeeper, Motoko Inoue.

"Is that Mr. or Mrs. Higuchi?" he inquired after a moment. The reply came and he asked Motoko to send Mr. Higuchi to the clinic.

During the few moments it took for Higuchi to walk over from the house, Sadaharu waited without seeing a patient. When he was younger, Sadaharu would have been impatient at this sort of interruption, but now, having passed forty years of age himself, to his own amazement he had become more tolerant. In medical school, all his classmates wanted to open an office in Tokyo, but Sadaharu had preferred a place even more remote than his rural home town. He had no taste for the fast track.

When it came down to financial matters, Sadaharu was still heavily in debt. He liked money and wanted to acquire it, but he didn't think earning money was everything in life. On rare occasions, his waiting room might look like a congested train station, but Sadaharu would never hurry. And he knew his patients were not really in a rush no matter what they said to the contrary.

Higuchi, a white-haired man in his late fifties with a vaguely perplexed manner, made his way through the waiting room, now filled with patients, and entered the examination room.

Sadaharu greeted him, and Higuchi opened the bundle he was carrying, removed the contents, and explained that he had intended to come earlier.

"This is just a small gift for your daughter," he said.

Sadaharu thanked him and asked where he had spent the night.

"I stayed further out on the peninsula last night, with a guest, a Swedish man who owns a villa there."

"On a yacht?" Sadaharu asked.

"Yes. We went up to Enoshima," Higuchi said. "How is your wife?"

"Well, she said she would be back by the fifteenth, but she hasn't appeared yet."

"Where did she go this time?"

"To Hawaii. She was at home during our daughter's winter vacation, but she left again, on the ninth."

Sadaharu had no idea how many times he had recited this account of his wife's activities. A doctor's wife might well enjoy traveling. There was enough money, after all, so it was understandable. But someone listening to Sadaharu might expect some change in his expression, might even wonder that he was not worn down by such a wife. The listener, however, was usually just perplexed when Sadaharu was neither disturbed nor showed anything but complacency with his wife's ways. It was nice of him to put on such a calm face, they said, and if he felt like going along with her behavior—well, it was no one else's business. And Sadaharu never indicated that anything was amiss in his married life. Mayumi was always on the move, but perhaps that was nothing more than a quirk in her personality. In any case, Sadaharu didn't think it was possible for her to change the way she was through any special training or reeducation.

But today he was discussing all this with Higuchi, a man who had a special place in Sadaharu's feelings. Mayumi had become acquainted with Higuchi's wife, Takako, after meeting her at a concert, and through Takako she became absorbed in astrology and fortune telling.

"Is your wife also out today?" Sadaharu asked cheerfully.

"No. She's at home."

"Hmm. It seems that even the closest friends don't always travel in the same direction," Sadaharu said lightly.

"She is not supposed to leave the house until after February 4. It's been going on since the end of last year. She doesn't even go out shopping."

Sadaharu smiled. "And my wife had to stay in Hawaii until then."

Sadaharu's nurse, Keiko Iwanami, yawned conspicuously. Nurse Iwanami was full-figured, but like other young women, she prob-

ably would have preferred to be thin. She had no idea how useful she was. With her sturdy body, she was the strongest of Sadaharu's nurses.

"My wife has really been a nuisance to you . . ." Higuchi began, frankly and pathetically acknowledging that it was his wife's fault that Mayumi had turned into a fanatic about fortune telling.

Sadaharu, on the contrary, did not imagine that Mayumi's attachment to fortune telling was due only to Mrs. Higuchi. She was the type of person who was easily influenced. Mayumi had once informed Sadaharu that these days fortune telling was terribly popular among upper-class wives.

Sadaharu had been reading his newspaper and without looking up said, "Really. And that makes you upper class?"

"Intellectual people are quite interested," she replied. "For instance, Mr. Shimokawaji's wife and Mr. Sudo's wife both go to our fortune teller."

Shimokawaji was an ex-foreign minister, while Sudo was currently minister of Trade, or maybe it was Finance, Sadaharu recalled.

"Then you must be an intellectual," he said.

"Don't tease me!" Mayumi was indignant.

"What are you going to ask this fortune teller?"

"About directions and about fixing dates. There is a right time for entering a hospital, or for travel. Did you know that?"

Mayumi had continued with a recitation of names of half a dozen wives of men well known in the financial world, all of whom followed the instructions of her fortune teller "so as not to endanger themselves." And none of their husbands, she insisted, ever objected. She gave the impression that the political and economic world of Japan was guided by fortune tellers.

Sadaharu felt that really might not be such a bad thing. In the world of politics, if it were not fortune telling, then people would cling to some other kind of fraud, just as individuals will fasten upon

some kind of weakness in themselves as an excuse for the way they live.

The Higuchi couple was childless, but Mr. Higuchi often came to Sadaharu with gifts of cake or sweets by way of apology for his wife's throwing Sadaharu's home life into confusion. He thought that within the family the one potentially the most at risk was Sadaharu's daughter. But Kaori, a growing girl, nine years old, was healthy and suntanned, and her mother's nearly perpetual absence did not seem to have harmed her development. The path she took to school was a mere three hundred yards from home, and she loved to linger along the way. In fact, she was spared the kind of damage commonly inflicted on children by mothers overly concerned with their child's education.

Sadaharu talked with Higuchi for a few minutes before the man left. Nurse Iwanami, with her innocent yawn, was once again the catalyst for action.

"So. Let's get started," Sadaharu said.

He looked at the record cards lined up on his desk and spoke to his head nurse, Masako Ono. She announced the name of the first patient into a microphone.

Sadaharu often received questions from people about his work. Most had to do with his reasons for becoming a gynecologist, suggesting that the motive might be erotic interests.

Sadaharu's standard reply was that a person would only have to spend a day with him in the examination room to understand. To himself, he often compared his work to that of an automobile repair shop. As far as the work being interesting, Sadaharu had read somewhere about a writer remarking that for the most part writing was like laying bricks and another time that a tailor, seeing a concrete worker preparing a wooden form for his job, had observed that it was just like cutting a paper pattern.

The first patient called was the young woman whose mother-in-law had just asked Sadaharu about only boys being born at his

clinic. The woman had been examined at the city hospital, but since her first two children were girls, she now wanted a boy and so had changed hospitals on her relatives' advice.

In examining her, Sadaharu found that the lower part of her uterus was already protruding between the navel and the pubic bone. Even the sound of the fetus's heart could be heard as a regular beat through a tiny microphone. She was in her fourth month.

After the examination, the woman said, "I'm so grateful to you, doctor. It makes me very happy to think that my next child will be a boy."

From time to time, the thought crossed Sadaharu's mind that some people in this world were truly experts at living. Others might detect a cynical tone in such an observation, but Sadaharu, on the contrary, frankly admired the ability of some people to master their own lives.

To put it simply, the sex of the fetus is determined at the moment of conception, and only God knows how. But some people ignored such facts. An extreme case was the woman now in front of Sadaharu, so utterly self-centered that if her child turned out to be a boy it would be through her own merit—and if a girl, it would be Sadaharu's fault.

Intellectual types took an even more deterministic attitude than Sadaharu himself. For a while, he was persistently badgered by a patient about AIH, artificial insemination between spouses, because the couple wanted a male child so much that they insisted on centrifugal separation treatment of the semen. The sperm determines the sex of a child, not the mother's egg, and the small Y chromosome produces a male, while the X chromosome produces a female. When the semen is treated in a centrifuge for five minutes or so, the heavy X chromosome and the light Y chromosome can be separated. The lighter part, the clear top of the liquid, is removed and used to impregnate the egg. For this couple the impregnation was successful, but every time the husband