

A NOVEL

# EMBRACING FAMILY

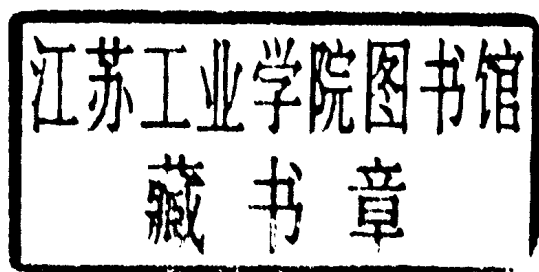
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# *Embracing Family*

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*Embracing Family*



## *Prologue*

Ever since Michiyo had become their maid, the Miwa household looked worse than ever. Shunsuke, the man of the house, was not pleased. The living room was a mess from the night before, and Michiyo, instead of straightening it up, was having tea in the kitchen with his wife, Tokiko, talking and laughing. Ordinarily Tokiko was fussy about having a clean, orderly house, but lately she seemed to have stopped supervising the maid altogether. This can't go on, Shunsuke said to himself. Perturbed, he walked into the kitchen, but when he spoke, the sound of his voice was gentle and he didn't even bring up the matter.

"Tokiko, that trip I told you about—you're coming with me, aren't you?"

Tokiko didn't answer. Instead, she turned to Michiyo and said, "My husband wants me to go away on a trip with him. Isn't that precious? But why would I want to go with him? It won't be any fun!" She made no attempt to disguise her hostility.

"Madam, you should go," Michiyo said. "Taking a trip together when you're no longer young can be wonderful. Think of me, a poor widow . . ."

Hearing the middle-aged woman's unctuous tone confirmed Shunsuke's sense of his house being unclean.

"It's only two nights," Shunsuke found himself pleading. "We'll be alone after I'm done with my lecture."

"I don't want to," Tokiko replied, then turned to Michiyo again. "You see, when my husband went to America, he didn't ask me to accompany him, even though I was invited too."

"If I were you, I'd go without making a fuss," Michiyo said, pretending not to have heard Tokiko's complaint.

Tokiko's laughter was shrill. "I have a better idea. Let's buy a car and we'll all go on a trip," she said.

"That sounds fun," Shunsuke said quickly, trying not to show his embarrassment. "But I'm afraid that with George, Michiyo, and the children, there won't be any space for you," Tokiko said. "You'll have to stay home."

"Oh," Shunsuke said. "Well, anyway, isn't it about time for George to get up?"

"You needn't worry about him. *I* asked Michiyo to bring him to stay with the children."

"That may be, but I'm the head of this household. I'm supposed to be responsible for what's going on here," Shunsuke said.

"Oh, I don't know about that. In America, it's the wife who takes responsibility. Aren't I right, Michiyo?"

"Yes, you are. And if the wife does a good job, her husband rewards her."

Tokiko ignored this.

A young American soldier, twenty-three years old and not much taller than Shunsuke, walked into the kitchen. Although it was a chilly morning, he wore only an undershirt on top. His light brown hair was in a GI cut, making his small head look even smaller; his thick muscled arms were covered with downy hair. He had green eyes, which would narrow when he was about to say something he thought was amusing. He was entirely unimpressive.

"This young man was so excited about coming here for Christmas, he got confused about which was his day off and he ended up

AWOL,” said Michiyo in Japanese.

“I guess he likes it here.”

“Of course he does. To be welcomed by a respectable Japanese family is quite an honor. Even though he’s cheap, he didn’t come without a gift.”

“He isn’t cheap,” said Tokiko.

A large woman two years older than her husband, Tokiko was wearing a pink sweater; this was the first time Shunsuke had seen her in it.

“George, dear, why don’t you show us how you do the Charleston,” Michiyo said. Michiyo had met George through Henry, an American serviceman who was George’s guardian; Henry lived with Michiyo’s younger sister, who was his mistress.

“No, not now,” George said. “I want to eat something.”

“You can eat later. Come on, dance the Charleston for us.”

George started dancing on the wooden kitchen floor.

Watching George go through his steps made Shunsuke think of the first time Tokiko danced the Charleston for him—on the tatami floor of his apartment shortly after they had met. Now this kid was in their life. They’d invited Henry and Michiyo’s sister over to dinner one night; George came instead. That was over a month ago. How long was this going to go on?

“He’s good,” Tokiko said as George wound down. “Let’s have breakfast. I’ll make scrambled eggs the way he showed us the other day.”

Shunsuke translated this into English for George.

George’s eyes followed Tokiko as she moved about in the kitchen, and Shunsuke joined him watching her, trying to suppress his uneasiness.

George asked Shunsuke if he knew anything about Walt Whitman. He’d studied him at high school, he said, and proceeded to recite a poem in broken Japanese, gesturing with his hands:

*I, you, become friends;  
I was looking for you. Together we talk, eat, and sleep.*



"That's from 'To a Stranger.'"

"Right," answered George. Shunsuke recited the poem in English for Tokiko, but she neither looked up nor acknowledged him.

"Madam," said Michiyo, "you should let George teach you how to dance."

"Yes, someday."

After that, Michiyo asked George to sing "Night in China."

"He's tone-deaf, but he's got the lyrics right," Tokiko remarked.

Shunsuke sang along, getting a bit carried away.

"Stop being silly," Tokiko snapped at him. "Instead of wasting time with us, you should get back to your work. You may think you're young, but you're forty-five years old."

Shunsuke got up and left. When he got to the next room, he called Tokiko.

"Yes, what is it?" she said as she went to him reluctantly.

"Well, I guess you don't want to go on the trip. But we can't buy a car for a while. I'm sorry, since you finally got your driver's license."

"You called me here to tell me that?"

Shunsuke, suddenly needing to be alone, decided to return to the translation of a play he was working on. He had to pass through his wife's room to get to his study. He was angry at himself for having sung the old song so loudly and eagerly.

After an hour, he decided to go out. As he dressed, he noticed that a button was still missing from his overcoat, the thread hanging. Several days ago he had asked Tokiko to take care of it; this time he called out to Michiyo, telling her to sew on a button.

"We couldn't find the right button. Wasn't that the reason, Madam? I'll take care of it when I can," she called back to him.



Shunsuke went alone on his business trip where he spoke on the American way of life to an audience made up mostly of house-

wives. He was a recognized authority on this subject, having spent a year at an American university where he lectured on Japanese literature.



Several weeks passed. Shunsuke came home late one evening to the sound of laughter. He heard his son Ryoichi saying, "He's back!" When Shunsuke opened the glass door to the living room, he found the group sitting in front of the television: Tokiko; Noriko, his daughter, who was a junior high school student; and George and Ryoichi, who were drinking beer. Shunsuke said hello and was about to join them when he noticed the odd face George was making. It made everyone laugh.

"No, no! It should be like this," Tokiko piped up, making a similar odd face.

Were they imitating him, making fun of him?

"Look at him! Wasn't I right?" Tokiko said, pointing at her husband.

Shunsuke felt he had to say something. "Oh, I see. It's my expression," he said, consciously changing his frown to a smile. Their imitations of him may or may not have been good, but he noted how, if his wife made fun of him like this, she had lost all restraint.

He sat for a while, watching as George proceeded to imitate a monkey, then a bleating goat. He also laughed. But he felt a chill going through his body. He could still hear everyone laughing at him as he came into the house; the sound of it reverberated in his head like a gong.



Shunsuke was eating his breakfast in the kitchen as Tokiko and Michiyo discussed plans to visit Henry in the Army Hospital.

“Henry’s sending a car for us, Madam,” said Michiyo.

Shunsuke glanced at his calendar. “I’m free that day,” he said. “I can go too. You know, I heard Henry was in the same Army unit as John Wayne. I wonder if that’s true.”

“George is a bit afraid of going to see that Henry by himself,” said Michiyo. “Henry helped him out when he was AWOL, so he feels sheepish and obliged.”

Tokiko turned to Shunsuke. “I want you to go shopping with me,” she said. “I want to buy something to take with us.”

“I’d be happy to,” Shunsuke said. In truth he had no desire to visit Henry, but not being asked along had hurt his pride. When Tokiko asked him to help her with the shopping, he was relieved.



On the morning of their scheduled visit to Henry, Tokiko went to the florist. When she returned, she told Shunsuke how a young man had seemed to fancy her. “It was odd. He was wearing a red sweater; he could have been a university student. How could someone his age be interested in an older woman like me?”

When Shunsuke smiled without saying anything, she continued, “When I was getting on the bus, I noticed other people looking at me too. I guess a well-dressed woman my age attracts attention.”

Shunsuke slipped on his overcoat and, getting the vase they had purchased for Henry, waited in the living room for Tokiko. Freshly powdered, she came in with Michiyo. “Oh, are you coming with us?” Tokiko asked, barely looking at him.

“Yes, I am,” he replied, trying to sound casual.



On the way to the hospital, Tokiko spoke only to George, commenting on the passing landscape. She acted as if she was in some

kind of competition and gave Shunsuke no chance to speak.

While they waited at the reception desk, Shunsuke tried to help Tokiko remove her coat. She pushed his hand away.

"But this is a Western custom," said Shunsuke.

"It looks silly!"

When an American officer glanced their way, Shunsuke grew quiet.



In Henry's room, Tokiko arranged the flowers in the vase they'd brought. Shunsuke noticed that she seemed to be gazing at George's chest; George was standing a bit on the side with an indifferent expression on his face.

"He's wearing a handsome tie, don't you think?" Shunsuke whispered.

"Tie?" Tokiko said, blushing a little. "I don't think it's anything special."

"I think it's nice. I like it," Shunsuke insisted. Then it occurred to him that Tokiko might have given George the tie. Tokiko bought all of his clothes too; realizing this made him feel a little lost.

Tokiko wanted to go to the ladies' room. Shunsuke said he had seen it at the end of the corridor, near the entrance, and he began to lead her to it. The corridor was long. At first he walked about one meter in front of her, but when he turned around, she was lagging three meters behind, walking slowly, looking out the windows, as if to say that the man in front of her was not her husband.

When Shunsuke arrived at the entrance, he only saw the men's room. He rushed to the information desk for directions only to learn that the ladies' room was next to the men's room after all. By then Tokiko was near him, having no doubt seen him hurry over to the information desk. Before he could say anything, she angrily slapped him on the hand and walked into the ladies' room; this interchange caused the American at the information desk to stare at them.

Shunsuke waited there for Tokiko, and when she emerged, he started back down the long corridor, again several meters ahead of her.

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Late at night, a few days after their visit to Henry, the telephone in Shunsuke's room rang. It was George. Tokiko burst in and snatched the receiver out of Shunsuke's hand. "That call is for Ryoichi. Ask the caller to wait," she said, giving Shunsuke a sharp look. "Ryoichi, Ryoichi!" she screamed through the open door.

"It doesn't matter if I answer, does it?"

"You needn't trouble yourself."

Shocked at the tone of her voice, Shunsuke said nothing. Tokiko hung up the phone when Ryoichi picked up. It didn't seem to be an important call. Why was she so upset, especially when he was about to go away again?

## *One*

*P*rofessor Miwa Shunsuke had just returned from a two-week lecture tour. Michiyo and Tokiko were in the kitchen, Michiyo going on about how Shunsuke had completed his translation and so must be bringing home a lot of money.

Shunsuke was relaxing in the living room, where Tokiko's dresser was kept. She was preparing to go out, so she walked in, paying Shunsuke no attention, and started to change her clothes.

"I wonder whether this one looks better," she said vacantly.

"Hmm . . . I think so," he said.

She smoothed her slip over her thighs and, twisting her hips, pulled up the tight brown skirt.

"Yes, this does look better," she said softly to her reflection in the mirror.

Shunsuke went into the backyard to practice his golf swing, using a ball attached to the club with a string.

Michiyo observed him as she pushed a mop lazily around the floor. "It might seem like a good idea, Madam, but I've heard that hitting a ball on a string develops bad habits," Michiyo said. Tokiko didn't respond. Having finished changing, she now seemed to be debating whether to go out after all.

When Shunsuke came back indoors, Michiyo asked him about his practice.

"If you can hit a ball attached to string, you'll be able to hit any ball," Shunsuke replied, keeping his eyes on Tokiko as he spoke.

Tokiko went out to visit a friend, and Shunsuke began to unpack. Michiyo approached him, saying there was something he should know, although she wasn't sure if she should tell him. He stared at her, wondering how she wanted him to respond.

"I know, I know, I know!" he shouted a moment later. Since he already knew, she might as well go ahead and tell him, he told her.

"Your wife and George . . ." Michiyo started. Shunsuke listened for a while, dazed. She didn't need to say any more. Call Tokiko and tell her to come home right away . . . No, he would call himself. He picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"Hello?" Tokiko's voice was cheerful and calm when she came to the phone. This is the tone of voice she uses in front of other people, Shunsuke thought.



As Tokiko, her head slightly bowed, approached the front door, Shunsuke went up to her and said, "Get inside! Hurry up!"

Once in the house, he followed her into the living room and pushed her onto the couch. "What did you do?!" he demanded.

"What are you talking about?" Tokiko said, trying to sit up.

What should I say, Shunsuke wondered; there was no instruction book for what to do on an occasion like this. "I know all about you two . . ." he started, "how you wouldn't let him go for three hours . . . Is that true?"

Half-lying on the couch, Tokiko looked up at him. He grabbed her hair and pulled her toward him. Then he let her fall back, and he slapped her in the face, hard, twice, three times.

"Who told you?" Tokiko said, pressing her hands to her face.

"Michiyo."

"Michiyo?"

"Yes, Michiyo. I've never liked her from the beginning anyway."

"How did she . . . ?"

"George told her."

"George?"

"He told her he was afraid what you might do next," Shunsuke yelled.

"I was going to tell you," Tokiko said softly, as if talking to herself.

Shunsuke made a hollow laugh. "What are you going to do now? Leave?" he asked.

"This is my house. I worked hard to get it built."

"It's not yours anymore."

"Please don't shout. You shouldn't shout at a time like this."

Shunsuke left Tokiko on the couch and went to the back of the house.

"Mr. Miwa," Michiyo said, coming up to him, "why did you tell her? I only told you because I thought you'd keep it to yourself. Since you give lectures on marriage and couples and relationships, I thought you would be more understanding. Madam, too, thought you'd understand. That's why—"

"That's why she did what she did. Is that what you're saying?" Shunsuke was breathing hard. "Get out of here! Pack up and leave this house!"

"I beg your pardon?" Michiyo's words were polite as always, but she glared at him, her face flushed with anger.

"I bet you were in on this too. You two talked about it all day over tea." He knew he shouldn't have said this, but he had said it anyway.

"I quit."

"Quit if you like, but remember, I fired you. You're leaving because I told you to get out. It's got nothing to do with my wife. From



now on, I give the orders around here.” Shunsuke spoke loudly so that Tokiko would hear. He also hoped Michiyo would be somehow appeased.

“I don’t take orders from anyone,” said Michiyo, looking straight at Shunsuke. Curling her lips, she jerked her shoulders back and laughed.

“When you see Henry, I want you to ask him how he could send someone like that into our house,” Shunsuke said to her. He didn’t really think Henry had sent him.

Shunsuke walked back into the living room. Tokiko was still sitting there, absentmindedly, with a hand on her cheek.

“You’ve planned this the last three months,” Shunsuke said to her. “That’s why you let him into our house. I always thought you believed in honesty.” He felt a rush of sentimentality.

“It wasn’t planned.”

“Michiyo said it was.”

“What a fool you are,” Tokiko sighed. “You’re hopeless.”

“Michiyo said she suspected it for some time, but she thought I already knew it.”

“She couldn’t have.”

“You haven’t said anything. You wanted it to continue, didn’t you? How could you ask me which skirt to wear?”

“If you say such things, and Michiyo hears them, you’re proving what she said is true.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see? If both you and Michiyo say the same thing, that means I really did plan it. And that makes you a fool. After all, the thing that pushes a wife into something like this is her husband’s inability to satisfy her. We must look pathetic.”

“So that’s it . . .” Shunsuke mumbled.

“You just lost face, and you don’t even know it. I was going to tell you about George at the right time. But it’s your fault this happened, and if I stay with you, other things may happen too.” Tokiko was