

TOKYO NO HANA



ROBERT ALLEN

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**For my Japanese friends past and present. With thanks
to Viki Wright for her generous guidance.**

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1

PROLOGUE

NAKAJIMA-SENSEI

When Andrew Paton first saw Nakajima-sensei coming across the room towards him with the shuffling gait of a woman in kimono, bowing almost as she came, a small, plump old lady with brightly hennaed hair, quick eyes behind thick glasses and a wide, grinning mouth, she was so exactly like a caricature that his first impulse, unkind and misjudged, was to laugh.

He had not wanted to leave Kuala Lumpur and come to Japan but the transfer had been decided by his company, Radonics Ltd of Sydney, and all his arguments against it had been rejected. After five years in Kuala Lumpur he had become acclimatised to both the weather and the way of living and that was exactly the argument the Sydney office had used against him. He was only just over thirty years of age, they had reminded him, he was unmarried and mobile, he had the best part of his career before him and the Japanese operations of Radonics were expanding. This was his big opportunity. He should take it before he went completely native and merged into the Malaysian landscape. Unless of course, it was hinted darkly, he preferred to seek his fortune beyond the protective arms of the Radonics group.

It was true that he had become too well assimilated into Malaysian life; he had mastered the Malay language and spoke it fluently. He was unusually adaptable and felt at home wherever he found himself. But once ensconced in a new culture he had a great reluctance to pull up his roots and start again in another one. He thought of it in terms of writing-off a sound investment.

In Japan he found himself starting again from the bottom of the cultural ladder in a society which was almost as different from that of Malaysia as it was from that of his native Australia.

One of his first decisions had been to arrange for Japanese lessons, as the language barrier was immense, much greater than in Kuala Lumpur where, as the capital of a former British colony, English was ubiquitous.

His study of the Japanese language and culture soon became an all-consuming interest for him and he carried it into every aspect of his daily and nightly life. He eschewed the Press Club and the American Club, the haunts of the *gaijin* (foreigners) and avoided business lunches in such places. He had lunch every day in one or other of the small sushi restaurants in Tsukiji, near the fish market, or in Shimbashi, not far from the Ginza, and practised his Japanese on those around him. He eventually became quite a judge of sashimi and sushi, and acquired an extensive knowledge of the types of fish and seafood and the best places and seasons for them. *Gaijin* at that time almost universally avoided raw fish and it was extremely rare for him ever to encounter another non-Japanese in a sushi shop. It was to be many years before sushi, always the most expensive of all Japanese cuisine, was to sweep America by storm.

Andrew always carried in his coat pocket a small dictionary and a notebook in which he drew thumbnail sketches of places and people and wrote the words and expressions he had been unable to understand. With Nakajima he would later solve these puzzles and they would discuss his impressions. Nakajima was his willing accomplice, his guide in absentia.

She was a highly respectable person to the outside world and undoubtedly virtuous in her personal life as well. She was a Christian and a pillar of her church; she was cultivated; she played the koto with professional skill; she regularly sat through the entire season of Kabuki theatre and much of the Noh drama. Her ancestry was impeccable. But inside Nakajima was a joyful pagan with a hearty, bawdy lust for life which seemed never to have been gratified in practice and which she could enjoy vicariously in her conspiracy with Andrew to lay before him the treasures and mysteries of her language.

When Andrew first began to study Japanese he felt that he

was separated from the life around him by a barrier of incomprehension, as if an impenetrable wall surrounded him. Then, gradually, under Nakajima's instruction chinks of light appeared here and there and tiny doors seemed to open.

In a literal sense she did open the door for him. She would help him on with his coat, refusing to allow him to help her, and, if they were going out at the same time, open the door of his office and stand back to allow him to pass first. She would insist on carrying his briefcase and on walking behind him. At the elevator she would wait for him to enter, murmur her little phrase '*Dōzo o saki ni*' (please go ahead), and follow behind. When Andrew objected that this was not the way things were done in Australia, she replied firmly that this was not Australia. He finally gave up protesting.

She came to his office twice a week for lessons lasting from 12 noon until 2 p.m. After the first few months of oral lessons they began on the written language, and Andrew would walk around Tokyo translating everything he could read. It soon became clear from Nakajima's comments that she was encouraging him to have romantic involvements with Japanese girls who, she assured him, had a soft spot for gaijin, even if it were a '*hen na gaijin*' (a strange foreigner) like Andrew. This term was frequently disparaging but often indulgent, depending on the tone of voice, and reflected the ambivalent attitude of many Japanese towards foreigners who adapted themselves too well to Japanese ways and who professed a healthy interest in the country.

Nakajima took delight in Andrew's romances, real or imagined. Andrew also discovered that, in spite of her ingrained habits of deference to superiors and tolerance to inferiors, in reality Nakajima had little respect for anybody or anything, for any system or man-made institution. She was at heart a wayward hedonist, hemmed in from all sides by history, customs, traditions and her impecunious circumstances. Andrew recognised this and loved her for it and she loved him for his understanding of her. It was a platonic, intellectual friendship, seasoned with humour and sexual innuendo. She often said that she wished she were

forty years younger; and there was no doubt that if she had been, their relationship would have developed differently.

Nakajima was married to a man whom she had followed to Manchuria when that country was ruled by the Japanese. After Japan's defeat in the war the couple had straggled back to their own country as penniless refugees and had settled in Osaka for some years before moving to Tokyo. Nakajima often spoke disparagingly of her husband—she resented his failure to provide for them both; she resented the total failure of his life. And yet she clung to him and deferred to his opinions and went home at night to tell him every detail of what she had found interesting during the day. He was a frail, thin person, bent with age, with a hawk nose and false teeth that joggled up and down when he spoke. He was very well educated and his failures had not been of his own doing but the result of turmoil and upheaval beyond his control. He had four or five different jobs during the years Andrew knew him, the last one being a sort of *mâitre d'hôtel* in a restaurant. Although old, he could not afford to stop work.

Nakajima's life had spread across the old and the new in Japan, from the strict, traditional upbringing and the tight network of obligation and counter-obligation which regulated almost every waking moment of the day, to the present time when many traditions, customs and thought patterns were being questioned, modified or abandoned. Nakajima explained many of these changes with regret and nostalgia. Others she applauded; and sometimes Andrew caught her out regretting and applauding the same thing.

She told him many stories and recounted many anecdotes to illustrate the meaning of words. She had an earthy sense of humour and would, with the air of a conspirator, tell Andrew the most scabrous carryings-on of her neighbours and friends.

Some of the stories that follow originate from Nakajima's gossip or from events in her own life; two of them were recounted to Andrew by a Japanese friend, Obata-sensei, and others reflect his own experience. All of them touch on some aspect of Japanese life.

2

THE EXODUS FROM MANCHURIA

When Nakajima first married, her husband was working with the South Manchuria Railway Company in its hotel division. She went back to Manchuria with him after the wedding and they lived in the various towns where the hotels were situated—places from a lost era, with evocative names like Port Arthur, Mukden, Dairen and Hsinking.

Manchuria, then called Manchukuo, was governed by Japan under a puppet régime, glossed over with the pomp of high-sounding institutions and with a public relations policy that seems to have been more convincing and comforting to the Japanese themselves than to the world at large.

The spirit of the Rule was said to be Wang-tao, literally meaning the Ways of the King, implying benevolence, justice and humanity. Under the rule of Wang-tao there was to be no tyranny, no calamity of party strife, and all men were to become brothers, enjoying peace and happiness in perfect security.

While this desirable state of affairs prevailed, the country could be developed and its rich natural resources opened up. Nakajima had married late for a Japanese woman and had reached middle age in 1945 when the war ended and the Russians liberated Manchuria. There was a state of confusion at this time, she told Andrew, and many Japanese families living in Manchuria had already been evacuated to country towns, often leaving the husband at his job in the city. In Nakajima's case her husband had been evacuated with her, since his work in a tourist hotel had suddenly lost its importance.

It was during the hiatus between the imminence of invasion and the actual liberation of the country that the Nakajimas found themselves beginning to understand their fellow countrymen as

real people, reduced to the elementary problem of living or dying, shorn of the politeness of social intercourse. They were in a small village, sharing a farmhouse with two other families. In the same village were some 250 Japanese, mainly women and children. There was limited food, the authority of the puppet régime was beginning to crumble into anarchy and the Chinese were becoming bolder and more intrusive.

Then invasion occurred and the Russians, having at least temporarily inherited the Japanese position, began to institute a puppet régime of their own. The new Chinese authorities sent an army squad into the town to round up all the able-bodied men for labour on the roads. No one knew if these men would ever return and so Nakajima, fearing for her husband's life, hid him in a hollow space between the ceiling of the farmhouse and the floor of the loft. He stayed there, coming out only briefly at night, for nearly three weeks. The house was searched several times but, as the Chinese did not know which Japanese wives had been evacuated alone and which had come accompanied, they did not suspect her unduly. Nevertheless, Nakajima lived those three weeks in dread lest one of the other Japanese women, seeking an advantage for herself, should betray her.

Then, as suddenly as the road-labour recruiting squad had arrived, it disappeared. The Japanese recruits did not come back and their wives and mothers heard no more of them until months later when some of them found each other again on ships leaving the country. Some of them never found each other again.

The order for total evacuation came. The Japanese in the village, now reduced to about 200 people, were to walk to Mukden. They set off early one summer morning. Nakajima said they were a sorry crew; some of the women whose men had disappeared were periodically hysterical, the children became tired, the grandmothers cried silently as they walked and one young woman gave birth to a baby by the side of the road. Only the presence of the Chinese coolies comforted them. Unconcerned as coolies are with politics and power, they carried the evacuees' bags and bundles in return for a small sum of money and in emergencies

THE EXODUS FROM MANCHURIA

also carried the children and the elderly.

As they walked, they had to buy what little food was available. They slept where they could find shelter. They straggled forlornly into Mukden.

Mukden was a city situated on a vast plain looking out over the river Hung-ho. It consisted in those days of three parts: the Walled City, surrounded by a wall thirty-five feet high and broken by four towered gates; the International Settlement and the South Manchuria Railway Town. The evacuees were put in the International Settlement, along with several thousand others, to await shipment by rail to the coast.

There were delays and false starts, while they suffered hunger and sickness, the bitterness of defeat and the tragedy of loss.

They were told that they could take out of the country no more than a nominal amount of money and neither valuables nor jewellery. There was to be no compensation for loss of their possessions, their businesses, their careers. Every garment, bag and bundle was examined and valuables were confiscated. Both men and women had to strip and each body cavity was searched.

Those of the Japanese who had foreseen these events had converted whatever money they could raise into jewellery and precious stones. Nakajima and her husband had put everything they had into one large diamond. They had been late doing it, however, and the market was already disorganised. They knew they had paid many times more for it than they would have if they had bought it a year or so earlier. But there it was, their diamond, their one possession.

Nakajima was plump with rolls of fat around her waist and she conceived the idea of keeping the diamond in her navel, strapped in with a little adhesive plaster. This had proven a satisfactory storage place during the long trek to Mukden, but when she heard of the body searches she was seized with panic. They then kept the stone taped into the point of one of her husband's shoes.

Finally the day came when the Nakajimas and others were put on a train for the long trip to Hsinking and Dairen. They

found themselves in cattle trucks. So many people were crammed into these trucks that there was only enough room for half of them to sit down. There were no toilets; they had no food except what they had carried with them or were able to buy from the ever-decreasing supplies along the route. Men, women and children were all together, fifty persons to a truck designed to carry ten head of cattle.

The train lumbered on by an indirect route, heading north-east from Mukden, before descending south again to the seaport of Dairen. With stops to let ordinary rail traffic through, with breakdowns in the engine, with delays to pick up more evacuees or to search again and again through belongings, the trip took five days and nights.

Nakajima and her husband had had no food at all for the last two days before they arrived at Dairen, where the ship was waiting. It was a Japanese ship and even though it was without comforts and the evacuees slept where they stood, on the decks, in the holds, anywhere, it was still the hand of salvation stretched out to them. And there was a little, a very little, rice to eat.

It was not a triumphant return to Japan. In some ways the pain only really began to be felt when they realised that, safe as they were, their world had been shattered. And in Japan itself there was the bitter resignation to defeat and the first steps to be taken on a long road into an unknown future.

In the midst of this despairing appraisal of what had happened and what might happen, the Nakajimas received a blow which was so much the last sting of the whip that Nakajima said she both laughed and cried. Their diamond was examined by a jeweller and pronounced valueless.

3

THE SECOND WIFE

From their state of destitution after the war Nakajima and her husband gradually made their way back up the steep slope to an adequate, if modest, standard of living. This they achieved by sheer hard work, he toiling at two and sometimes three jobs at the same time and she teaching both Japanese to foreigners and the koto to her fellow countrywomen.

They were not ignored by their peers. As a result of their traditional upbringing, their good education and the families from which they had sprung, both Nakajima and her husband were accepted socially by certain persons of wealth and position, in spite of their relative poverty.

Nakajima had a good friend, the legal wife of an enterprising and wealthy grain-dealer named Takamatsu. Takamatsu-san was a jovial man and enterprising in more ways than one—notably he had accumulated over the years two extra wives, not legally married wives but socially acceptable nonetheless. They were his *nigō-san* and his *sangō-san* (Wife Number Two and Wife Number Three). Each of these additions to his treasure had been made at moments of boredom or impatience or just frustration with the existing wife. Each was about fifteen years younger than her predecessor and each in turn had rekindled his ardour; but whereas his successive wives were younger, he himself was not and he had become an old man by the time the story began.

The first wife had had two children, the second wife four and the third two. The original family home, occupied by Madam Takamatsu, was in Azabu. The second wife had a house in Akasaka not far from the Okura Hotel and the third wife an apartment in Roppongi. These places are quite close to each other, so Takamatsu was able to minimise his travelling time and conserve his energies for where they were most needed.

For many years Madam Takamatsu had eaten her heart out over this arrangement and it seems that she never grew to accept it. She was jealous of the two others and would tell Nakajima joyfully of the mishaps that befell them. She particularly resented the second wife who, she said, was flighty and had had affairs with other men. These infidelities enraged Madam Takamatsu, who believed that such disloyalty to her husband was adding insult to injury. Nor was the situation made any better by the fact that she herself had grown too old and unattractive to emulate her rival. For her, as the real wife, to have had love affairs would have been a far more serious infringement of the social code than for the second and third *de factos*.

So Madam Takamatsu had lived out her life and learned to play the koto, had taken examinations in flower arranging and had gone away for weekend trips to the mountains with her women friends. She had told Nakajima how the children from the three families were doing at school and how those of the second wife were badly behaved, which was only to be expected, of course. Such information was supplied to Madam Takamatsu by the servants of the various houses, as she had never personally set eyes on her rivals.

Then one day Madam Takamatsu died. Her two children were grown up and presented no problem, but the matter of property and inheritance came up because old Takamatsu-san himself suddenly had a vision of his own mortality. He made suitable financial arrangements for the first wife's two children and he married the second wife.

Nakajima had never met the second wife but she lost no time in calling on her, paying her respects and leaving a present. The second wife who, in spite of her previously flighty ways, was at heart a traditionalist, immediately took to Nakajima and they became firm friends. The second wife also had some confidences she wished to share. It appeared that, while regarding old Madam Takamatsu as a tedious bore from whom she had taken her husband as an act of charity, she had never been able to reconcile herself to the presence of the third wife. This woman, Nakajima

THE SECOND WIFE

learned, was a hussy—a modern girl who had a university degree, loved Western music and had obviously seduced old man Takamatsu with a heady mixture of culture (to enchant his mind) and the performance of uninhibited sexual gymnastics on the futon (to delight his waning passions).

That these passions had indeed been revived was evidenced by the birth of two children in rapid succession after which no more appeared, and the second wife was often tortured by the thought that this was probably due more to contraception than to any diminution of old man Takamatsu's enthusiasm.

And so the second wife bore her cross, which did not become lighter when she was finally legally married, although she was happy to feel at last that firm provision had been made for her children.

Then, unexpectedly, after a long and productive life, old man Takamatsu's vision of mortality materialised. He died one night after a geisha party in Tsukiji, near the fish market of Tokyo.

After this mournful event the third wife seems to have gone off the rails and Nakajima would bring stories of the severe disapproval with which the second wife regarded the love affairs of this lonely young woman. Such behaviour was an insult to the memory of old man Takamatsu, she said, and was not to be tolerated. Of course, it must be remembered that by this time the second wife had lost her appeal to other men and, while this may not have mattered while she still had a husband, it did matter now that she did not.

It was Nakajima who suggested the solution to the problem and Nakajima's husband—frail, dignified and indefatigable—who carried it out. This solution was to find a suitable husband for the third wife. The second wife thought this a splendid idea but the third wife, who was modern and free, did not take kindly to it. However, Nakajima, who had never met the third wife before, called on her with a present, and after a short exchange of courtesies broached the subject of the marriage. There was an appropriate man in mind, a nephew of old man Takamatsu, whose own wife had died very young. Nakajima said that her husband