



*Vampires in the  
Lemon Grove*

*Stories*

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knocked around by the wind with a force that feels personal. I struggle to hold the door shut and look for the green speck of our grove.

The box is plunging now, far too quickly. It swings wide, and the igneous surface of the mountain fills the left window. The tufa shines like water, like a black, heat-bubbled river. For a dizzying instant I expect the rock to seep through the glass.

Each swing takes me higher than the last, a grinding pendulum that approaches a full revolution around the cable. I'm on my hands and knees on the car floor, seasick in the high air, pressing my face against the floor grate. I can see stars or boats burning there, and also a ribbon of white, a widening fissure. Air gushes through the cracks in the glass box. With a lurch of surprise, I realize that I could die.

WHAT DOES MAGREB SEE, if she is watching? Is she waking from a nightmare to see the line snap, the glass box plummet? From her inverted vantage, dangling from the roof of the cave, does the car seem to be sucked upward, rushing not toward the sea but into another sort of sky? To a black mouth open and foaming with stars?

I like to picture my wife like this: Magreb shuts her thin eyelids tighter. She digs her claws into the rock. Little clouds of dust plume around her toes as she swings upside down. She feels something growing inside her, a dreadful suspicion. It is solid, this new thing, it is the opposite of hunger. She's emerging from a dream of distant thunder, rumbling and loose. Something has happened tonight that she thought impossible. In the morning, she will want to tell me about it.

## *Reeling for the Empire*



Several of us claim to have been the daughters of samurai, but of course there is no way for anyone to verify that now. It's a relief, in its way, the new anonymity. We come here tall and thin, noblewomen from Yamaguchi, graceful as calligraphy; short and poor, Hida girls with bloody feet, crow-voiced and vulgar; entrusted to the Model Mill by our teary mothers; rented out by our destitute uncles—but within a day or two the drink the Recruitment Agent gave us begins to take effect. And the more our *kaiko*-bodies begin to resemble one another, the more frantically each factory girl works to reinvent her past. One of the consequences of our captivity here in Nowhere Mill, and of the darkness that pools on the factory floor, and of the polar fur that covers our faces, blanking us all into sisters, is that anybody can be anyone she likes in the past. Some of our lies are quite bold: Yuna says that her great-uncle has a scrap of sailcloth from the Black Ships. Dai claims that she knelt alongside her samurai father at the Battle of Shiroyama. Nishi fibs that she once stowed away in the imperial caboose from Shimbashi Station to Yokohama, and saw Emperor Meiji eating pink cake. Back in Gifu I had tangly hair

like a donkey's tail, a mouth like a small red bean, but I tell the others that I was very beautiful.

"Where are you from?" they ask me.

"The castle in Gifu, perhaps you know it from the famous woodblocks? My great-grandfather was a warrior."

"Oh! But Kitsune, we thought you said your father was the one who printed the woodblocks? The famous *ukiyo-e* artist, Utagawa Kuniyoshi . . ."

"Yes. He was, yesterday."

I'll put it bluntly: we are all becoming reelers. Some kind of hybrid creature, part *kaiko*, silkworm caterpillar, and part human female. Some of the older workers' faces are already quite covered with a coarse white fur, but my face and thighs stayed smooth for twenty days. In fact I've only just begun to grow the white hair on my belly. During my first nights and days in the silk-reeling factory I was always shaking. I have never been a hysterical person, and so at first I misread these tremors as mere mood; I was in the clutches of a giddy sort of terror, I thought. Then the roiling feeling became solid. It was the thread: a color purling invisibly in my belly. Silk. Yards and yards of thin color would soon be extracted from me by the Machine.



Today, the Agent drops off two new recruits, sisters from the Yamagata Prefecture, a blue village called Sakegawa, which none of us have visited. They are the daughters of a salmon fisherman and their names are Tooka and Etsuyo. They are twelve and nineteen. Tooka has a waist-length braid and baby fat; Etsuyo looks like a forest doe, with her long neck and watchful brown eyes. We step into the light and Etsuyo swallows her scream. Tooka starts wailing—"Who are you? What's happened to you? What is this place?"

Dai crosses the room to them, and despite their terror the Sakegawa sisters are too sleepy and too shocked to recoil from her embrace. They appear to have drunk the tea very recently, because they're quaking on their feet. Etsuyo's eyes cross as if she is about to faint. Dai unrolls two tatami mats in a dark corner, helps them to stretch out. "Sleep a little," she whispers. "Dream."

"Is this the silk-reeling factory?" slurs Tooka, half-conscious on her bedroll.

"Oh, yes," Dai says. Her furry face hovers like a moon above them.

Tooka nods, satisfied, as if willing to dismiss all of her terror to continue believing in the Agent's promises, and shuts her eyes.

Sometimes when the new recruits confide the hopes that brought them to our factory, I have to suppress a bitter laugh. Long before the *kaiko* change turned us into mirror images of one another, we were sisters already, spinning identical dreams in beds thousands of miles apart, fantasizing about gold silks and an "imperial vocation." We envisioned our future dowries, our families' miraculous freedom from debt. We thrilled to the same tales of women working in the grand textile mills, where steel machines from Europe gleamed in the light of the Meiji sunrise. Our world had changed so rapidly in the wake of the Black Ships that the poets could barely keep pace with the scenes outside their own windows. Industry, trade, unstoppable growth: years before the Agent came to find us, our dreams anticipated his promises.

Since my arrival here, my own fantasies have grown as dark as the room. In them I snip a new girl's thread midair, or yank all the silk out of her at once, so that she falls lifelessly forward like a *Bunraku* puppet. I haven't been able to cry since my first night here—but often I feel a water pushing at my skull. "Can the thread migrate to your brain?" I've asked Dai nervously. Silk starts as a liquid. Right now I can feel it traveling below my navel, my thread. Foaming icily along the lining of my stomach. Under

the blankets I watch it rise in a hard lump. There are twenty workers sleeping on twelve tatami, two rows of us, our heads ten centimeters apart, our earlobes curled like snails on adjacent leaves, and though we are always hungry, every one of us has a round belly. Most nights I can barely sleep, moaning for dawn and the Machine.



Every aspect of our new lives, from working to sleeping, eating and shitting, bathing when we can get wastewater from the Machine, is conducted in one brick room. The far wall has a single oval window, set high in its center. Too high for us to see much besides scraps of cloud and a woodpecker that is like a celebrity to us, provoking gasps and applause every time he appears. *Kaiko-joko*, we call ourselves. Silkworm-workers. Unlike regular *joko*, we have no foreman or men. We are all alone in the box of this room. Dai says that she's the dormitory supervisor, but that's Dai's game.

We were all brought here by the same man, the factory Recruitment Agent. A representative, endorsed by Emperor Meiji himself, from the new Ministry for the Promotion of Industry.

We were all told slightly different versions of the same story.

Our fathers or guardians signed contracts that varied only slightly in their terms, most promising a five-yen advance for one year of our lives.

The Recruitment Agent travels the countryside to recruit female workers willing to travel far from their home prefectures to a new European-style silk-reeling mill. Presumably, he is out recruiting now. He makes his pitch not to the woman herself but to her father or guardian, or in some few cases, where single women cannot be procured, her husband. I am here on behalf of

the nation, he begins. In the spirit of *Shokusan-Kōgyō*. *Increase production, encourage industry*. We are recruiting only the most skillful and loyal mill workers, he continues. Not just peasant girls—like your offspring, he might say with his silver tongue to men in the Gifu and Mie prefectures—but the well-bred daughters of noblemen. Samurai and aristocrats. City-born governors have begged me to train their daughters on the Western technologies. Last week, the Medical General of the Imperial Army sent his nineteen-year-old twins, by train! Sometimes there is resistance from the father or guardian, especially among the hicks, those stony-faced men from distant centuries who still make bean paste, wade into rice paddies, brew sake using thousand-year-old methods; but the Agent waves all qualms away—Ah, you've heard about x-Mill or y-Factory? No, the French *yatoi* engineers don't drink girls' blood, haha, that is what they call *red wine*. Yes, there *was* a fire at Aichi Factory, a little trouble with tuberculosis in Suwa. But our factory is quite different—it is a national secret. Yes, a place that makes even the French filature in the backwoods of Gunma, with its brick walls and steam engines, look antiquated! This phantom factory he presents to her father or guardian with great cheerfulness and urgency, for he says we have awoken to dawn, the Enlightened Era of the Meiji, and we must all play our role now. Japan's silk is her world export. The Blight in Europe, the pébrine virus, has killed every silkworm, forever halted the Westerners' cocoon production. The demand is as vast as the ocean. This is the moment to seize. Silk-reeling is a sacred vocation—she will be reeling for the empire.

The fathers and guardians nearly always sign the contract. Publicly, the *joko's* family will share a cup of hot tea with the Agent. They celebrate her new career and the five-yen advance against her legally mortgaged future. Privately, an hour or so later, the Agent will share a special toast with the girl herself.

The Agent improvises his tearooms: an attic in a forest inn or a locked changing room in a bathhouse or, in the case of Iku, an abandoned cowshed.



After sunset, the old blind woman arrives. "The zookeeper," we call her. She hauls our food to the grated door, unbars the lower panel. We pass her that day's skeins of reeled silk, and she pushes two sacks of mulberry leaves through the panel with a long stick. The woman never speaks to us, no matter what questions we shout at her. She simply waits, patiently, for our skeins, and so long as they are acceptable in quality and weight, she slides in our leaves. Tonight she has also slid in a tray of steaming human food for the new recruits. Tooka and Etsuyo get cups of rice and miso soup with floating carrots. Hunks of real ginger are unraveling in the broth, like hair. We all sit on the opposite side of the room and watch them chew with a dewy nostalgia that disgusts me even as I find myself ogling their long white fingers on their chopsticks, the balls of rice. The salt and fat smells of their food make my eyes ache. When we eat the mulberry leaves, we lower our new faces to the floor.

They drink down the soup in silence. "Are we dreaming?" I hear one whisper.

"The tea drugged us!" the younger sister, Tooka, cries at last. Her gaze darts here and there, as if she's hoping to be contradicted. They traveled nine days by riverboat and oxcart, Etsuyo tells us, wearing blindfolds the entire time. So we could be that far north of Yamagata, or west. Or east, the younger sister says. We collect facts from every new *kaiko-joko* and use them to draw thread maps of Japan on the factory floor. But not even Tsuki the Apt can guess our whereabouts.

Nowhere Mill, we call this place.

Dai crosses the room and speaks soothingly to the sisters; then she leads them right to me. Oh, happy day. I glare at her through an unchewed mouthful of leaves.

"Kitsune is quite a veteran now," says smiling Dai, leading the fishy sisters to me, "she will show you around—"

I hate this part. But you have to tell the new ones what's in store for them. Minds have been spoiled by the surprise.

"Will the manager of this factory be coming soon?" Etsuyo asks, in a grave voice. "I think there has been a mistake."

"We don't belong here!" Tooka breathes.

There's nowhere else for you now, I say, staring at the floor. That tea he poured into you back in Sakegawa? The Agent's drink is remaking your insides. Your intestines, your secret organs. Soon your stomachs will bloat. You will manufacture silk in your gut with the same helpless skill that you digest food, exhale. The *kaiko*-change, he calls it. A revolutionary process. Not even Chiyo, who knows sericulture, has ever heard of a tea that turns girls into silkworms. We think the tea may have been created abroad, by French chemists or British engineers. *Yatoi*-tea. Unless it's the Agent's own technology.

I try to smile at them now.

In the cup it was so lovely to look at, wasn't it? An orange hue, like something out of the princess's floating world woodblocks.

Etsuyo is shaking. "But we can't undo it? Surely there's a cure. A way to reverse it, before it's . . . too late."

*Before we look like you*, she means.

"The only cure is a temporary one, and it comes from the Machine. When your thread begins, you'll understand . . ."

It takes thirteen to fourteen hours for the Machine to empty a *kaiko-joko* of her thread. The relief of being rid of it is indescribable.

These seashore girls know next to nothing about silkworm cultivation. In the mountains of Chichibu, Chiyo tells them, everyone in her village was involved. Seventy families worked

together in a web: planting and watering the mulberry trees, raising the *kaiko* eggs to pupa, feeding the silkworm caterpillars. The art of silk production was very, very inefficient, I tell the sisters. Slow and costly. Until us.

I try to weed the pride from my voice, but it's difficult. In spite of everything, I can't help but admire the quantity of silk that we *kaiko-joko* can produce in a single day. The Agent boasts that he has made us the most productive machines in the empire, surpassing even those steel zithers and cast-iron belchers at Tomioka Model Mill.

Eliminated: mechanical famine. Supply problems caused by the cocoons' tiny size and irregular quality.

Eliminated: waste silk.

Eliminated: the cultivation of the *kaiko*. The harvesting of their eggs. The laborious collection and separation of the silk cocoons. We silkworm-girls combine all these processes in the single factory of our bodies. Ceaselessly, even while we dream, we are generating thread. Every droplet of our energy, every moment of our time flows into the silk.

I guide the sisters to the first of the three workbenches. "Here are the basins," I say, "steam heated, quite modern, eh, where we boil the water."

I plunge my left hand under the boiling water for as long as I can bear it. Soon the skin of my fingertips softens and bursts, and fine waggling fibers rise from them. Green thread lifts right out of my veins. With my right hand I pluck up the thread from my left fingertips and wrist.

"See? Easy."

A single strand is too fine to reel. So you have to draw several out, wind six or eight around your finger, rub them together, to get the right denier; when they are thick enough, you feed them to the Machine.

Dai is drawing red thread onto her reeler, watching me approvingly.

"Are we monsters now?" Tooka wants to know.

I give Dai a helpless look; that's a question I won't answer.

Dai considers.

In the end she tells the new reelers about the *juhyou*, the "snow monsters," snow-and-ice-covered trees in Zao Onsen, her home. "The snow monsters"—Dai smiles, brushing her white whiskers—"are very beautiful. Their disguises make them beautiful. But they are still trees, you see, under all that frost."



While the sisters drink in this news, I steer them to the Machine.

The Machine looks like a great steel-and-wood beast with a dozen rotating eyes and steaming mouths—it's twenty meters long and takes up nearly half the room. The central reeler is a huge and ever-spinning O, capped with rows of flashing metal teeth. Pulleys swing our damp thread left to right across it, refining it into finished silk. Tooka shivers and says it looks as if the Machine is smiling at us. *Kaiko-joko* sit at the workbenches that face the giant wheel, pulling glowing threads from their own fingers, stretching threads across their reeling frames like zither strings. A stinging music.

No *tebiki* cranks to turn, I show them. Steam power has freed both our hands.

"'Freed,' I suppose, isn't quite the right word, is it?" says Iku drily. Lotus-colored thread is flooding out of her left palm and reeling around her dowel. With her right hand she adjusts the outflow.

Here is the final miracle, I say: our silk comes out of us in colors. There is no longer any need to dye it. There is no other

silk like it on the world market, boasts the Agent. If you look at it from the right angle, a pollen seems to rise up and swirl into your eyes. Words can't exaggerate the joy of this effect.

Nobody has ever guessed her own color correctly—Hoshi predicted hers would be peach and it was blue; Nishi thought pink, got hazel. I would have bet my entire five-yen advance that mine would be light gray, like my cat's fur. But then I woke and pushed the swollen webbing of my thumb and a sprig of green came out. On my day zero, in the middle of my terror, I was surprised into a laugh: here was a translucent green I swore I'd never seen before anywhere in nature, and yet I knew it as my own on sight.

"It's as if the surface is charged with our aura," says Hoshi, counting syllables on her knuckles for her next haiku.

About this I don't tease her. I'm no poet, but I'd swear to the silks' strange glow. The sisters seem to agree with me; one looks like she's about to faint.

"Courage, sisters!" sings Hoshi. Hoshi is our haiku laureate. She came from a school for young noblewomen and pretends to have read every book in the world. We all agree that she is generally insufferable.

"Our silks are sold in Paris and America—they are worn by Emperor Meiji himself. The Agent tells me we are the treasures of the realm." Hoshi's white whiskers extend nearly to her ears now. Hoshi's optimism is indefatigable.

"That girl was hairy when she got here," I whisper to the sisters, "if you want to know the truth."

The old blind woman comes again, takes our silks, pushes the leaves in with a stick, and we fall upon them. If you think we

*kaiko-joko* leave even one trampled stem behind, you underestimate the deep, death-thwarting taste of the mulberry. Vital green, as if sunlight is zipping up your spinal column.

In other factories, we've heard, there are foremen and managers and whistles to announce and regulate the breaks. Here the clocks and whistles are in our bodies. The thread itself is our boss. There is a fifteen-minute period between the mulberry orgy—"call it *the evening meal*, please, don't be disgusting," Dai pleads, her saliva still gleaming on the floor—and the regeneration of the thread. During this period, we sit in a circle in the center of the room, an equal distance from our bedding and the Machine. Stubbornly we reel backward: Takayama town. Oyaka village. Toku. Kiyo. Nara. Fudai. Sho. Radishes and pickles. Laurel and camphor smells of Shikoku. Father. Mother. Mount Fuji. The Inland Sea.

All Japan is undergoing a transformation—we *kaiko-joko* are not alone in that respect. I watched my grandfather become a share-cropper on his own property. A dependent. He was a young man when the Black Ships came to Edo. He grew foxtail millet and red buckwheat. Half his crop he paid in rent; then two-thirds; finally, after two bad harvests, he owed his entire yield. That year, our capital moved in a ceremonial, and real, procession from Kyoto to Edo, now Tokyo, the world shedding names under the carriage wheels, and the teenage emperor in his palanquin traveling over the mountains like an imperial worm.

In the first decade of the Meiji government, my grandfather was forced into bankruptcy by the land tax. In 1873, he joined the farmer's revolt in Chūbu. Along with hundreds of others of the newly bankrupted and dispossessed from Chūbu, Gifā,

Aichi, he set fire to the creditor's offices where his debts were recorded. After the rebellion failed, he hanged himself in our barn. The gesture was meaningless. The debt still existed, of course.

My father inherited the debts of his father.

There was no dowry for me.

In my twenty-third year, my mother died, and my father turned white, lay flat. Death seeded in him and began to grow tall, like grain, and my brothers carried Father to the Inoba shrine for the mountain cure.

It was at precisely this moment that the Recruitment Agent arrived at our door.

The Agent visited after a thundershower. He had a parasol from London. I had never seen such a handsome person in my life, man or woman. He had blue eyelids, a birth defect, he said, but it had worked out to his extraordinary advantage. He let me sniff at his vial of French cologne. It was as if a rumor had materialized inside the dark interior of our farmhouse. He wore Western dress. He also had—and I found this incredibly appealing—mid-ear sideburns and a mustache.

"My father is sick," I told him. I was alone in the house. "He is in the other room, sleeping."

"Well, let's not disturb him." The Agent smiled and stood to go.

"I can read," I said. For years I'd worked as a servant in the summer retreat of a Kobe family. "I can write my name."

Show me the contract, I begged him.

And he did. I couldn't run away from the factory and I couldn't die, either, explained the Recruitment Agent—and perhaps I looked at him a little dreamily, because I remember that he repeated this injunction in a hard voice, tightening up the grammar: "If you die, your father will pay." He was peering deeply into my face; it was April, and I could see the rain in his mustache. I met his gaze and giggled, embarrassing myself.

"Look at you, blinking like a firefly! Only it's very serious—"

He lunged forward and grabbed playfully at my waist, causing my entire face to darken in what I hoped was a womanly blush. The Agent, perhaps fearful that I was choking on a radish, thumped my back.

"There, there, Kitsune! You will come with me to the model factory? You will reel for the realm, for your emperor? For me, too," he added softly, with a smile.

I nodded, very serious myself now. He let his fingers brush softly against my knuckles as he drew out the contract.

"Let me bring it to Father," I told the Agent. "Stand back. Stay here. His disease is contagious."

The Agent laughed. He said he wasn't used to being bossed by a *joko*. But he waited. Who knows if he believed me?

My father would never have signed the document. He would not have agreed to let me go. He blamed the new government for my grandfather's death. He was suspicious of foreigners. He would have demanded to know, certainly, where the factory was located. But I could work whereas he could not. I saw my father coming home, cured, and finding the five-yen advance. I had never used an ink pen before. In my life as a daughter and a sister, I had never felt so powerful. No woman in Gifu had ever brokered such a deal on her own. KITSUNE TAJIMA, I wrote in the slot for the future worker's name, my heart pounding in my ears. When I returned it, I apologized for my father's unsteady hand.

On our way to the *kaiko*-tea ceremony, I was so excited that I could barely make my questions about the factory intelligible. He took me to a summer guesthouse in the woods behind the Miya River, which he told me was owned by a Takayama merchant family and, at the moment, empty.

*Something is wrong*, I knew then. This knowledge sounded with such clarity that it seemed almost independent of my body, like a bird calling once over the trees. But I proceeded, follow-



ing the Agent toward a dim staircase. The first room I glimpsed was elegantly furnished, and I felt my spirits lift again, along with my caution. I counted fourteen steps to the first landing, where he opened the door onto a room that reflected none of the downstairs refinement. There was a table with two stools, a bed; otherwise the room was bare. I was surprised to see a large brown blot on the mattress. One porcelain teapot. One cup. The Agent lifted the tea with an unreadable expression, frowning into the pot; as he poured, I thought I heard a little splash; then he cursed, excused himself, said he needed a fresh ingredient. I heard him continuing up the staircase. I peered into the cup and saw that there was something alive inside it—writhing, dying—a fat white *kaiko*. I shuddered but I didn't fish it out. What sort of tea ceremony was this? Maybe, I thought, the Agent is testing me, to see if I am squeamish, weak. Something bad was coming—the stench of a bad and thickening future was everywhere in that room. The bad thing was right under my nose, crinkling its little legs at me.

I pinched my nostrils shut, just as if I were standing in the mud a heartbeat from jumping into the Miya River. Without so much as consulting the Agent, I squinched my eyes shut and gulped.

The other workers cannot believe I did this willingly. Apparently, one sip of the *kaiko*-tea is so venomous that most bodies go into convulsions. Only through the Agent's intervention were they able to get the tea down. It took his hands around their throats.

I arranged my hands in my lap and sat on the cot. Already I was feeling a little dizzy. I remember smiling with a sweet vacancy at the door when he returned.

"You—drank it."

I nodded proudly.

Then I saw pure amazement pass over his face—I passed the test, I thought happily. Only it wasn't that, quite. He began to laugh.

"No *joko*," he sputtered, "not one of you, ever—" He was roll-

ing his eyes at the room's corners, as if he regretted that the hilarity of this moment was wasted on me. "No girl has ever gulped a pot of it!"

Already the narcolepsy was buzzing through me, like a hive of bees stinging me to sleep. I lay guiltily on the mat—why couldn't I sit up? Now the Agent would think I was worthless for work. I opened my mouth to explain that I was feeling ill but only a smacking sound came out. I held my eyes open for as long as I could stand it.

Even then, I was still dreaming of my prestigious new career as a factory reeler. Under the Meiji government, the hereditary classes had been abolished, and I even let myself imagine that the Agent might marry me, pay off my family's debts. As I watched, the Agent's genteel expression underwent a complete transformation; suddenly it was as blank as a stump. The last thing I saw, before shutting my eyes, was his face.

I slept for two days and woke on a dirty tatami in this factory with Dai applauding me; the green thread had erupted through my palms in my sleep—the metamorphosis unusually accelerated. I was lucky, as Chiyo says. Unlike Tooka and Etsuyo and so many of the others I had no limbo period, no cramps from my guts unwinding, changing; no time at all to meditate on what I was becoming—a secret, a furred and fleshy silk factory.

What would Chiyo think of me, if she knew how much I envy her initiation story? That what befell her—her struggle, her screams—I long for? That I would exchange my memory for Chiyo's in a heartbeat? Surely this must be the final, inarguable proof that I am, indeed, a monster.

Many workers here have a proof of their innocence, some physical trace, on the body: scar tissue, a brave spot. A sign of

struggle that is ineradicable. Some girls will push their white fuzz aside to show you: Dai's pocked hands, Mitsuki's rope burns around her neck. Gin has wiggly lines around her mouth, like lightning, where she was scalded by the tea that she spat out.

And me?

There was a moment, at the bottom of the stairwell, and a door that I could easily have opened back into the woods of Gifu. I alone, it seems, out of twenty-two workers, signed my own contract.

"Why did you drink it, Kitsune?"

I shrug.

"I was thirsty," I say.



Roosters begin to crow outside the walls of Nowhere Mill at five a.m. They make a sound like gargled light, very beautiful, which I picture as Dai's red and Gin's orange and Yoshi's pink thread singing on the world's largest reeler. Dawn. I've been lying awake in the dark for hours.

"Kitsune, you never sleep. I hear the way you breathe," Dai says.

"I sleep a little."

"What stops you?" Dai rubs her belly sadly. "Too much thread?"

"Up here." I knock on my head. "I can't stop reliving it: the Agent walking through our fields under his parasol, in the rain . . ."

"You should sleep," says Dai, peering into my eyeball. "Yellowish. You don't look well."

Midmorning, there is a malfunction. Some hitch in the Machine causes my reeler to spin backward, pulling the thread from my fingers so quickly that I am jerked onto my knees; then

I'm dragged along the floor toward the Machine's central wheel like an enormous, flopping fish. The room fills with my howls. With surprising calm, I become aware that my right arm is on the point of being wrenched from its socket. I lift my chin and begin, with a naturalness that belongs entirely to my terror, to swivel my head around and bite blindly at the air; at last I snap the threads with my *kaiko*-jaws and fall sideways. Under my wrist, more thread kinks and scrag. There is a terrible stinging in my hands and my head. I let my eyes close: for some reason I see the space beneath my mother's cedar chest, where the moonlight lay in green splashes on our floor. I used to hide there as a child and sleep so soundly that no one in our one-room house could ever find me. No such luck today: hands latch onto my shoulders. Voices are calling my name—"Kitsune! Are you awake? Are you okay?"

"I'm just clumsy," I laugh nervously. But then I look down at my hand. Short threads extrude from the bruised skin of my knuckles. They are the wrong color. Not my green. Ash.

Suddenly I feel short of breath again.

It gets worse when I look up. The silk that I reeled this morning is bright green. But the more recent thread drying on the bottom of my reeler is black. Black as the sea, as the forest at night, says Hoshi euphemistically. She is too courteous to make the more sinister comparisons.

I swallow a cry. Am I sick? It occurs to me that five or six of these black threads dragged my entire weight. It had felt as though my bones would snap in two before my thread did.

"Oh no!" gasp Tooka and Etsuyo. Not exactly sensitive, these sisters from Sakegawa. "Oh, poor Kitsune! Is that going to happen to us, too?"

"Anything you want to tell us?" Dai prods. "About how you are feeling?"

"I feel about as well as you all look today," I growl.

"I'm not worried," says Dai in a too-friendly way, clapping my shoulder. "Kitsune just needs sleep."

But everybody is staring at the spot midway up the reel where the green silk shades into black.



My next mornings are spent splashing through the hot water basin, looking for fresh fibers. I pull out yards of the greenish-black thread. Soiled silk. Hideous. Useless for kimonos. I sit and reel for my sixteen hours, until the Machine gets the last bit out of me with a shudder.

My thread is green three days out of seven. After that, I'm lucky to get two green outflows in a row. This transformation happens to me alone. None of the other workers report a change in their colors. It must be my own illness then, not *kaiko*-evolution. If we had a foreman here, he would quarantine me. He might destroy me, the way silkworms infected with the blight are burned up in Katamura.

And in Gifu? Perhaps my father has died at the base of Mount Inaba. Or has he made a full recovery, journeyed home with my brothers, and cried out with joyful astonishment to find my five-yen advance? Let it be that, I pray. My afterlife will be whatever he chooses to do with that money.



Today marks the forty-second day since we last saw the Agent. In the past he has reliably surprised us with visits, once or twice per month. Factory inspections, he calls them, scribbling notes about the progress of our transformations, the changes in our weight and shape, the quality of our silk production. He's never stayed

away so long before. The thought of the Agent, either coming or not coming, makes me want to retch. Water sloshes in my head. I lie on the mat with my eyes shut tight and watch the orange tea splash into my cup . . .

"I hear you in there, Kitsune. I know what you're doing. You didn't sleep."

Dai's voice. I keep my eyes shut.

"Kitsune, stop thinking about it. You are making yourself sick."

"Dai, I can't."

Today my stomach is so full of thread that I'm not sure I'll be able to stand. I'm afraid that it will all be black. Some of us are now forced to crawl on our hands and knees to the Machine, toppled by our ungainly bellies. I can smell the basins heating. A thick, greasy steam fills the room. I peek up at Dai's face, then let my eyes flutter shut again.

"Smell that?" I say, more nastily than I intend to. "In here we're dead already. At least on the stairwell I can breathe forest air."

"Unwinding one cocoon for an eternity," she snarls. "As if you had only a single memory. Reeling in the wrong direction."

Dai looks ready to slap me. She's angrier than I've ever seen her. Dai is the Big Mother but she's also a samurai's daughter, and sometimes that combination gives rise to a ferocious kind of caring. She's tender with the little ones, but if an older *joko* plummets into a mood or ill health, she'll scream at us until our ears split. Furious, I suppose, at her inability to defend us from ourselves.

"The others also suffered in their pasts," she says. "But we sleep, we get up, we go to work, some crawl forward if there is no other way . . ."

"I'm not like the others," I insist, hating the baleful note in my voice but desperate to make Dai understand this. Is Dai blind to the contrast? Can she not see that the innocent recruits—the

ones who were signed over to the Agent by their fathers and their brothers—produce pure colors, in radiant hues? Whereas my thread looks rotten, greeny-black.

“Sleep can’t wipe me clean like them. I chose this fate. I can’t blame a greedy uncle, a gullible father. I drank the tea of my own free will.”

“Your free will,” says Dai, so slowly that I’m sure she’s about to mock me; then her eyes widen with something like joy. “Ah! So: use that to stop drinking it at night, in your memory. Use your will to stop thinking about the Agent.”

Dai is smiling down at me like she’s won the argument.

“Oh, yes, very simple!” I laugh angrily. “I’ll just stop. Why didn’t I think of that? Say, here’s one for you, Dai,” I snap. “Stop reeling for the Agent at your workbench. Stop making the thread in your gut. Try that, I’m sure you’ll feel better.”

Then we are shouting at each other, our first true fight; Dai doesn’t understand that this memory reassembles itself in me mechanically, just as the thread swells in our new bodies. It’s nothing I control. I see the Agent arrive; my hand trembling; the ink lacing my name across the contract. My regret: I know I’ll never get to the bottom of it. I’ll never escape either place, Nowhere Mill or Gifu. Every night, the cup refills in my mind.

“Go reel for the empire, Dai. Make more silk for him to sell. Go throw the little girls another party! Make believe we’re not slaves here.”

Dai storms off, and I feel a mean little pleasure.

For two days we don’t speak, until I worry that we never will again. But on the second night, Dai finds me. She leans in and whispers that she has accepted my challenge. At first I am so happy to hear her voice that I only laugh, take her hand. “What challenge? What are you talking about?”

“I thought about what you said,” she tells me. She talks about her samurai father’s last stand, the Satsuma Rebellion. In the

countryside, she says, there are peasant armies who protest “the blood tax,” refuse to sow new crops. I nod with my eyes shut, watching my grandfather’s hat floating through our fields in Gifu.

“And you’re right, Kitsune—we have to stop reeling. If we don’t, he’ll get every year of our futures. He’ll get our last breaths. The silk belongs to us, *we* make it. We can use that to bargain with the Agent.”

The following morning, Dai announces that she won’t move from her mat.

“I’m on strike,” she says. “No more reeling.”

By the second day, her belly has grown so bloated with thread that we are begging her to work. The mulberry leaves arrive, and she refuses to eat them.

“No more room for that.” She smiles.

Dai’s face is so swollen that she can’t open one eye. She lies with her arms crossed over her chest, her belly heaving.

By the fourth day, I can barely look at her.

“You’ll die,” I whisper.

She nods resolutely.

“I’m escaping. He might still stop me. But I’ll do my best.”

We send a note for the Agent with the blind woman. “Please tell him to come.”

“Join me,” Dai begs us, and our eyes dull and lower, we sway. For five days, Dai doesn’t reel. She never eats. Some of us, I’m sure, don’t mind the extra fistful of leaves. (A tiny voice I can’t gag begins to babble in the background: *If x-many others strike, Kitsune, there will be x-much more food for you . . .*)

Guiltily, I set her portion aside, pushing the leaves into a little triangle. *There*, I think. The flag of Dai’s resistance. Something flashes on one—a real silkworm. Inching along in its wet and stupid oblivion. My stomach flips to see all the little holes its hunger has punched into the green leaf.

During our break, I bring Dai my blanket. I try to squeeze

some of the water from the leaf-velvet onto her tongue, which she refuses. She doesn't make a sound, but I hiss—her belly is grotesquely distended and stippled with lumps, like a sow's pregnant with a litter of ten piglets. Her excess thread is packed in knots. Strangling Dai from within. Perhaps the Agent can call on a Western veterinarian, I find myself thinking. Whatever is happening to her seems beyond the ken of Emperor Meiji's own doctors.

"Start reeling again!" I gasp. "Dai, please."

"It looks worse than it is. It's easy enough to stop. You'll see for yourself, I hope."

Her skin has an unhealthy translucence. Her eyes are standing out in her shrunken face, as if every breath costs her. Soon I will be able to see the very thoughts in her skull, the way red thread fans into veiny view under her skin. Dai gives me her bravest smile. "Get some rest, Kitsune. Stop poisoning yourself on the stairwell of Gifu. If I can stop reeling, surely you can, too."



When she dies, all the silk is still stubbornly housed in her belly, "stolen from the factory," as the Agent alleges. "This girl died a thief."

Three days after her death, he finally shows up. He strides over to Dai and touches her belly with a stick. When a few of us grab for his legs, he makes a face and kicks us off.

"Perhaps we can still salvage some of it," he grumbles, rolling her into his sack.



A great sadness settles over our whole group and doesn't lift. What the Agent carried off with Dai was everything we had left:

Chiyo's clouds and mountains, my farmhouse in Gifu, Etsuyo's fiancé. It's clear to us now that we can never leave this room—we can never be away from the Machine for more than five days. Unless we live here, where the Machine can extract the thread from our bodies at speeds no human hand could match, the silk will build and build and kill us in the end. Dai's experiment has taught us that.

You never hear a peep in here about the New Year anymore.



I'm eating, I'm reeling, but I, too, appear to be dying. Thread almost totally black. The denier too uneven for any market. In my mind I talk to Dai about it, and she is very reassuring: "It's going to be fine, Kitsune. Only, please, you have to stop—"

*Stop thinking about it.* This was Dai's final entreaty to me.

I close my eyes. I watch my hand signing my father's name again. I am at the bottom of a stairwell in Gifu. The first time I made this ascent I felt weightless, but now the wood groans under my feet. Just as a single cocoon contains a thousand yards of silk, I can unreel a thousand miles from my memory of this one misstep.

Still, I'm not convinced that you were right, Dai—that it's such a bad thing, a useless enterprise, to reel and reel out my memory at night. Some part of me, the human part of me, is kept alive by this, I think. Like water flushing a wound, to prevent it from closing. I am a lucky one, like Chiyo says. I made a terrible mistake. In Gifu, in my raggedy clothes, I had an unreckonable power. I didn't know that at the time. But when I return to the stairwell now, I can feel them webbing around me: my choices, their infinite variety, spiraling out of my hands, my invisible thread. Regret is a pilgrimage back to the place where I was free to choose. It's become my sanctuary here in Nowhere Mill. A threshold where I still exist.

One morning, two weeks after Dai's strike, I start talking to Chiyo about her family's cottage business in Chichibu. Chiyo complains about the smells in her dry attic, where they destroy the silkworm larvae in vinegary solutions. Why do they do that? I want to know. I've never heard this part before. Oh, to stop them from undergoing the transformation, Chiyo says. First, the silkworms stop eating. Then they spin their cocoons. Once inside, they molt several times. They grow wings and teeth. If the caterpillars are allowed to evolve, they change into moths. Then these moths bite through the silk and fly off, ruining it for the market.

Teeth and wings, wings and teeth, I keep hearing all day under the whine of the cables.

That night, I try an experiment. I let myself think the black thoughts all evening. Great wheels inside me turn backward at fantastic, groaning velocities. What I focus on is my shadow in the stairwell, falling slantwise behind me, like silk. I see the ink spilling onto the contract, my name bloating monstrously.

And when dawn comes, and I slug my way over to the workbench and plunge my hands into the boiling vat, I see that the experiment was a success. My new threads are stronger and blacker than ever; silk of some nameless variety we have never belly-spun before. I crank them out of my wrist and onto the dowel. There's not a fleck of green left, not a single frayed strand. "Moonless," says Hoshi, shrinking from them. Opaque. Midnight at Nowhere Mill pales in comparison. Looking down into the basin, I feel a wild excitement. I made it that color. So I'm no mere carrier, no diseased *kaiko*—I can channel these dyes from my mind into the tough new fiber. I can change my thread's denier, control its production. Seized by a second inspiration, I begin to unreel at speeds I would have just yesterday thought laughably impossible. Not even Yuna can produce as much thread in an hour. I ignore the whispers that pool around me on the workbench:

"Kitsune's fishing too deep—look at her finger slits!"

"They look like gills." Etsuyo shudders.

"Someone should stop her. She's fishing right down to the bone."

"What is she making?"

"What are you making?"

"What are you going to do with all that, Kitsune?" Tooka asks nervously.

"Oh, who knows? I'll just see what it comes to."

But I *do* know. Without my giving a thought to what step comes next, my hands begin to fly.

The weaving comes so naturally to me that I am barely aware I am doing it, humming as if in a dream. But this weaving is instinctual. What takes effort, what requires a special kind of concentration, is generating the right density of the thread. To do so, I have to keep forging my father's name in my mind, climbing those stairs, watching my mistake unfurl. I have to drink the toxic tea and feel it burn my throat, lie flat on the cot while my organs are remade by the Agent for the factory, thinking only, *Yes, I chose this*. When these memories send the fierce regret spiraling through me, I focus on my heartbeat, my throbbing palms. Fibers stiffen inside my fingers. Grow strong, I direct the thread. Go black. Lengthen. Stick. And then, when I return to the vats, what I've produced is exactly the necessary denier and darkness. I sit at the workbench, at my ordinary station. And I am so happy to discover that I can do all this myself: the silk-generation, the separation, the dyeing, the reeling. Out of the same intuition, I discover that I know how to alter the Machine. "Help me, Tsuki," I say, because I want her to watch what I am doing. I begin to explain, but she is already disassembling my reeler. "I know, Kitsune," she says, "I see what you have in mind." Words seem to be unnecessary now between me and Tsuki—we beam thoughts soundlessly across the room. Perhaps speech will be the next superfluity in Nowhere Mill. Another step we *kaiko*-girls can skip.

Together we adjust the feeder gears, so that the black thread travels in a loop; after getting wrung out and doubled on the Machine's great wheel, it shuttles back to my hands. I add fresh fibers, drape the long skein over my knees. It is going to be as tall as a man, six feet at least.

Many girls continue feeding the Machine as if nothing unusual is happening. Others, like Tsuki, are watching to see what my fingers are doing. For the past several months, every time I've reminisced about the Agent coming to Gifu, bile has risen in my throat. It seems to be composed of every bitterness: grief and rage, the acid regrets. But then, in the middle of my weaving, obeying a queer impulse, I spit some onto my hand. This bile glues my fingers to my fur. Another of nature's wonders. So even the nausea of regret can be converted to use. I grin to Dai in my head. With this dill-colored glue, I am at last able to rub a sealant over my new thread and complete my work.

It takes me ten hours to spin the black cocoon.

The first girls who see it take one look and run back to the tatami.

The second girls are cautiously admiring.

Hoshi waddles over with her bellyful of blue silk and screams.

I am halfway up the southern wall of Nowhere Mill before I realize what I am doing; then I'm parallel to the woodpecker's window. The gluey thread collected on my palms sticks me to the glass. For the first time I can see outside: from this angle, nothing but clouds and sky, a blue eternity. *We will have wings soon*, I think, and ten feet below me I hear Tsuki laugh out loud. Using my thread and the homemade glue, I attach the cocoon to a wooden beam; soon, I am floating in circles over the Machine, suspended by my own line. "Come down!" Hoshi yells, but she's the only one. I secure the cocoon and then I let myself fall, all my weight supported by one thread. Now the cocoon sways over the Machine, a furled black flag, creaking slightly. I

think of my grandfather hanging by the thick rope from our barn door.

More black thread spasms down my arms.

"Kitsune, please. You'll make the Agent angry! You shouldn't waste your silk that way—pretty soon they'll stop bringing you the leaves! Don't forget the trade, it's silk for leaves, Kitsune. What happens when he stops feeding us?"

But in the end I convince all of the workers to join me. Instinct obviates the need for a lesson—swiftly the others discover that they, too, can change their thread from within, drawing strength from the colors and seasons of their memories. Before we can begin to weave our cocoons, however, we first agree to work night and day to reel the ordinary silk, doubling our production, stockpiling the surplus skeins. Then we seize control of the machinery of Nowhere Mill. We spend the next six days dismantling and reassembling the Machine, using its gears and reels to speed the production of our own shimmering cocoons. Each dusk, we continue to deliver the regular number of skeins to the zookeeper, to avoid arousing the Agent's suspicions. When we are ready for the next stage of our revolution, only then will we invite him to tour our factory floor.

Silkworm moths develop long ivory wings, says Chiyo, bronzed with ancient designs. Do they have antennae, mouths? I ask her. Can they see? Who knows what the world will look like to us if our strike succeeds? I believe we will emerge from it entirely new creatures. In truth there is no model for what will happen to us next. We'll have to wait and learn what we've become when we get out.



The old blind woman really is blind, we decide. She squints directly at the wrecked and rerouted Machine and waits with her

arms extended for one of us to deposit the skeins. Instead, Hoshi pushes a letter through the grate.

"We don't have any silk today."

"Bring this to the Agent."

"Go. Tell. Him."

As usual, the old woman says nothing. The mulberry sacks sit on the wagon. After a moment she claps to show us that her hands are empty, kicks the wagon away. Signals: no silk, no food. Her face is slack. On our side of the grate, I hear girls smacking their jaws, swallowing saliva. Fresh forest smells rise off the sacks. But we won't beg, will we? We won't turn back. Dai lived without food for five days. Our faces press against the grate. Several of our longest whiskers tickle the zookeeper's withered cheeks; at last, a dark cloud passes over her face. She barks with surprise, swats the air. Her wrinkles tighten into a grimace of fear. She backs away from our voices, her fist closed around our invitation to the Agent.

"NO SILK," repeats Tsaiko slowly.



The Agent comes the very next night.

"Hello?"

He raps at our grated door with a stick, but he remains in the threshold. For a moment I am sure that he won't come in.

"They're gone, they're gone," I wail, rocking.

"What!"

The grate slides open and he steps onto the factory floor, into our shadows.

"Yes, they've all escaped, every one of them, all your *kaiko-joko*—"

Now my sisters drop down on their threads. They fall from the ceiling on whistling lines of silk, swinging into the light, and

I feel as though I am dreaming—it is a dreamlike repetition of our initiation, when the Agent dropped the infecting *kaiko* into the orange tea. Watching his eyes widen and his mouth stretch into a scream, I too am shocked. We have no mirrors here in Nowhere Mill, and I've spent the past few months convinced that we were still identifiable as girls, women—no beauty queens, certainly, shaggy and white and misshapen, but at least half human; it's only now, watching the Agent's reaction, that I realize what we've become in his absence. I see us as he must: white faces, with sunken noses that look partially erased. Eyes insect-huge. Spines and elbows incubating lace for wings. My muscles tense, and then I am airborne, launching myself onto the Agent's back—for a second I get a thrilling sense of what true flight will feel like, once we complete our transformation. I alight on his shoulders and hook my legs around him. The Agent grunts beneath my weight, staggers forward.

"These wings of ours are invisible to you," I say directly into the Agent's ear. I clasp my hands around his neck, lean into the whisper. "And in fact you will never see them, since they exist only in our future, where you are dead and we are living, flying."

I then turn the Agent's head so that he can admire our silk. For the past week every worker has used the altered Machine to spin her own cocoon—they hang from the far wall, coral and emerald and blue, ordered by hue, like a rainbow. While the rest of Japan changes outside the walls of Nowhere Mill, we'll hang side by side, hidden against the bricks. Paralyzed inside our silk, but spinning faster and faster. Passing into our next phase. Then, we'll escape. (Inside his cocoon, the Agent will turn blue and suffocate.)

"And look," I say, counting down the wall: twenty-one workers, and twenty-two cocoons. When he sees the black sac, I feel his neck stiffen. "We have spun one for you." I smile down at him. The Agent is stumbling around beneath me, babbling some-



thing that I admit I make no great effort to understand. The glue sticks my knees to his shoulders. Several of us busy ourselves with getting the gag in place, and this is accomplished before the Agent can scream once. Gin and Nishi bring down the cast-iron grate behind him.

The slender Agent is heavier than he looks. It takes four of us to stuff him into the socklike cocoon. I smile at the Agent and instruct the others to leave his eyes for last, thinking that he will be very impressed to see our skill at reeling up close. Behind me, even as this attack is under way, the other *kaiko-joko* are climbing into their cocoons. Already there are girls half swallowed by them, winding silk threads over their knees, sealing the outermost layer with glue.

Now our methods regress a bit, get a little old-fashioned. I reel the last of the black cocoon by hand. Several *kaiko-joko* have to hold the Agent steady so that I can orbit him with the thread. I spin around his chin and his cheekbones, his lips. To get over his mustache requires several revolutions. Bits of my white fur drift down and disappear into his nostrils. His eyes are huge and black and void of any recognition. I whisper my name to him, to see if I can jostle my old self loose from his memory: Kitsune Tajima, of Gifu Prefecture.

Nothing.

So then I continue reeling upward, naming the workers of Nowhere Mill all the while: "Nishi. Yoshi. Yuna. Uki. Etsuyo. Gin. Hoshi. Raku. Chiyoko. Mitsuko. Tsaiko. Tooka. Dai.

"Kitsune," I repeat, closing the circle. The last thing I see before shutting his eyes is the reflection of my shining new face.

## *The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979*



The gulls landed in Athertown on July 11, 1979. Clouds of them, in numbers unseen since the ornithologists began keeping records of such things. Scientists all over the country hypothesized about erratic weather patterns and redirected migratory routes. At first sullen Nal barely noticed them. Lost in his thoughts, he dribbled his basketball up the boardwalk, right past the hundreds of gulls on Strong Beach, gulls grouped so thickly that from a distance they looked like snowbanks. Their bodies capped the dunes. If Nal had looked up, he would have seen a thunderhead of seagulls in the well of the sky, rolling seaward. Instead, he ducked under the dirty turquoise umbrella of the Beach Grub cart and spent his last dollar on a hamburger; while he struggled to open a packet of yellow mustard, one giant gull swooped in and snatched the patty from its bun with a surgical jerk. Nal took two bites of bread and lettuce before he realized what had happened. The gull taunted him, wings akimbo, on the Beach Grub umbrella, glug-