Opening extract from

Across the Nightingale Floor

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Published by

Picador

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One

MY MOTHER used to threaten to tear me into eight pieces if I knocked over the water bucket, or pretended not to hear her calling me to come home as the dusk thickened and the cicadas' shrilling increased. I would hear her voice, rough and fierce, echoing through the lonely valley. 'Where's that wretched boy? I'll tear him apart when he gets back.'

But when I did get back, muddy from sliding down the hillside, bruised from fighting, once bleeding great spouts of blood from a stone wound to the head (I still have the scar, like a silvered thumbnail), there would be the fire, and the smell of soup, and my mother's arms not tearing me apart but trying to hold me, clean my face, or straighten my hair, while I twisted like a lizard to get away from her. She was strong from endless hard work, and not old: she'd given birth to me before she was seventeen, and when she held me I could see we had the same skin, although in other ways we were not much alike, she having broad, placid features, while mine, I'd been told (for we had no mirrors in the remote mountain village of Mino), were finer, like a hawk's. The wrestling usually ended with her winning, her prize being the hug I could not escape from. And her voice would whisper in my ears the words of blessing of the Hidden, while my

stepfather grumbled mildly that she spoiled me, and the little girls, my half-sisters, jumped around us for their share of the hug and the blessing.

So I thought it was a manner of speaking. Mino was a peaceful place, too isolated to be touched by the savage battles of the clans. I had never imagined men and women could actually be torn into eight pieces, their strong, honey-coloured limbs wrenched from their sockets and thrown down to the waiting dogs. Raised among the Hidden, with all their gentleness, I did not know men did such things to each other.

I turned fifteen and my mother began to lose our wrestling matches. I grew six inches in a year, and by the time I was sixteen I was taller than my stepfather. He grumbled more often – that I should settle down, stop roaming the mountain like a wild monkey, marry into one of the village families. I did not mind the idea of marriage to one of the girls I'd grown up with, and that summer I worked harder alongside him, ready to take my place among the men of the village. But every now and then I could not resist the lure of the mountain, and at the end of the day I slipped away, through the bamboo grove with its tall, smooth trunks and green slanting light, up the rocky path past the shrine of the mountain god, where the villagers left offerings of millet and oranges, into the forest of birch and cedar, where the cuckoo and the nightingale called enticingly, where I watched foxes and deer and heard the melancholy cry of kites overhead.

That evening I'd been right over the mountain to a place where the best mushrooms grew. I had a cloth full of them, the little white ones like threads, and the dark orange ones like fans. I was thinking how pleased my mother would be, and how the mushrooms would still

my stepfather's scolding. I could already taste them on my tongue. As I ran through the bamboo and out into the rice fields where the red autumn lilies were already in flower, I thought I could smell cooking on the wind.

The village dogs were barking, as they often did at the end of the day. The smell grew stronger and turned acrid. I was not frightened, not then, but some premonition made my heart start to beat more quickly. There was a fire ahead of me.

Fires often broke out in the village: almost everything we owned was made of wood or straw. But I could hear no shouting, no sounds of the buckets being passed from hand to hand, none of the usual cries and curses. The cicadas shrilled as loudly as ever; frogs were calling from the paddies. In the distance thunder echoed round the mountains. The air was heavy and humid.

I was sweating, but the sweat was turning cold on my forehead. I jumped across the ditch of the last terraced field and looked down to where my home had always been. The house was gone.

I went closer. Flames still crept and licked at the blackened beams. There was no sign of my mother or my sisters. I tried to call out, but my tongue had suddenly become too big for my mouth and the smoke was choking me and making my eyes stream. The whole village was on fire, but where was everyone?

Then the screaming began.

It came from the direction of the shrine, around which most of the houses clustered. It was like the sound of a dog howling in pain, except the dog could speak human words, scream them in agony. I thought I recognized the prayers of the Hidden, and all the hair stood up on my neck and arms. Slipping like a ghost between the burning houses, I went towards the sound.

The village was deserted. I could not imagine where everyone had gone. I told myself they had run away: my mother had taken my sisters to the safety of the forest. I would go and find them just as soon as I had found out who was screaming. But as I stepped out of the alley into the main street I saw two men lying on the ground. A soft evening rain was beginning to fall and they looked surprised, as though they had no idea why they were lying there in the rain. They would never get up again, and it did not matter that their clothes were getting wet.

One of them was my stepfather.

At that moment the world changed for me. A kind of fog rose before my eyes and when it cleared nothing seemed real. I felt I had crossed over to the other world, the one that lies alongside our own, that we visit in dreams. My stepfather was wearing his best clothes. The indigo cloth was dark with rain and blood. I was sorry they were spoiled: he had been so proud of them.

I stepped past the bodies, through the gates and into the shrine. The rain was cool on my face. The screaming stopped abruptly.

Inside the grounds were men I did not know. They looked as if they were carrying out some ritual for a festival. They had cloths tied round their heads; they had taken off their jackets and their arms gleamed with sweat and rain. They were panting and grunting, grinning with white teeth, as though killing were as hard work as bringing in the rice harvest.

Water trickled from the cistern where you washed your hands and mouth to purify yourself on entering the shrine. Earlier, when the world was normal, someone must have lit incense in the great cauldron. The last of it drifted across the courtyard, masking the bitter smell of blood and death.

The man who had been torn apart lay on the wet stones. I could just make out the features on the severed head. It was Isao, the leader of the Hidden. His mouth was still open, frozen in a last contortion of pain.

The murderers had left their jackets in a neat pile against a pillar. I could see clearly the crest of the triple oak leaf. These were Tohan men, from the clan capital of Inuyama. I remembered a traveller who had passed through the village at the end of the seventh month. He'd stayed the night at our house, and when my mother had prayed before the meal, he had tried to silence her. 'Don't you know that the Tohan hate the Hidden, and plan to move against us? Lord Iida has vowed to wipe us out,' he whispered. My parents had gone to Isao the next day to tell him, but no one had believed them. We were far from the capital, and the power struggles of the clans had never concerned us. In our village the Hidden lived alongside everyone else, looking the same, acting the same, except for our prayers. Why would anyone want to harm us? It seemed unthinkable.

And so it still seemed to me as I stood frozen by the cistern. The water trickled and trickled, and I wanted to take some and wipe the blood from Isao's face and gently close his mouth, but I could not move. I knew at any moment the men from the Tohan clan would turn, and their gaze would fall on me, and they would tear me apart. They would have neither pity nor mercy. They were already polluted by death, having killed a man within the shrine itself.

In the distance I could hear with acute clarity the drumming sound of a galloping horse. As the hoof beats drew nearer I had the sense of forward memory that comes to you in dreams. I knew who I was going to see,

framed between the shrine gates. I had never seen him before in my life, but my mother had held him up to us as a sort of ogre with which to frighten us into obedience: *don't stray on the mountain, don't play by the river, or Iida will get you!* I recognized him at once. Iida Sadamu, lord of the Tohan clan.

The horse reared and whinnied at the smell of blood. Iida sat as still as if he were cast in iron. He was clad from head to foot in black armour, his helmet crowned with antlers. He wore a short black beard beneath his cruel mouth. His eyes were bright, like a man hunting deer.

Those bright eyes met mine. I knew at once two things about him: first, that he was afraid of nothing in heaven or on earth; second, that he loved to kill for the sake of killing. Now that he had seen me there was no hope.

His sword was in his hand. The only thing that saved me was the horse's reluctance to pass beneath the gate. It reared again, prancing backwards. Iida shouted. The men already inside the shrine turned and saw me, crying out in their rough Tohan accents. I grabbed the last of the incense, hardly noticing as it seared my hand, and ran out through the gates. As the horse shied towards me I thrust the incense against its flank. It reared over me, its huge feet flailing past my cheeks. I heard the hiss of the sword descending through the air. I was aware of the Tohan all around me. It did not seem possible that they could miss me, but I felt as if I had split in two. I saw Iida's sword fall on me, yet I was untouched by it. I lunged at the horse again. It gave a snort of pain and a savage series of bucks. Iida, unbalanced by the sword thrust that had somehow missed its target, fell forward over its neck and slid heavily to the ground.

Horror gripped me, and in its wake panic. I had unhorsed the lord of the Tohan. There would be no limit to the torture and pain to atone for such an act. I should have thrown myself to the ground and demanded death. But I knew I did not want to die. Something stirred in my blood, telling me I would not die before Iida. I would see him dead first.

I knew nothing of the wars of the clans, nothing of their rigid codes and their feuds. I had spent my whole life among the Hidden, who are forbidden to kill and taught to forgive each other. But at that moment Revenge took me as a pupil. I recognized her at once and learned her lessons instantly. She was what I desired; she would save me from the feeling that I was a living ghost. In that split second I took her into my heart. I kicked out at the man closest to me, getting him between the legs, sank my teeth into a hand that grabbed my wrist, broke away from them and ran towards the forest.

Three of them came after me. They were bigger than I was and could run faster, but I knew the ground, and darkness was falling. So was the rain, heavier now, making the steep tracks of the mountain slippery and treacherous. Two of the men kept calling out to me, telling me what they would take great pleasure in doing to me, swearing at me in words whose meaning I could only guess, but the third ran silently, and he was the one I was afraid of. The other two might turn back after a while, get back to their maize liquor or whatever foul brew the Tohan got drunk on, and claim to have lost me on the mountain, but this other one would never give up. He would pursue me for ever until he had killed me.

As the track steepened near the waterfall the two noisy ones dropped back a bit, but the third quickened his pace

as an animal will when it runs uphill. We passed by the shrine; a bird was pecking at the millet and it flew off with a flash of green and white in its wings. The track curved a little round the trunk of a huge cedar and as I ran with stone legs and sobbing breath past the tree someone rose out of its shadow and blocked the path in front of me.

I ran straight into him. He grunted as though I had winded him, but he held me immediately. He looked in my face and I saw something flicker in his eyes: surprise, recognition. Whatever it was, it made him grip me more tightly. There was no getting away this time. I heard the Tohan man stop, then the heavy footfalls of the other two coming up behind him.

'Excuse me, sir,' said the man I feared, his voice steady. 'You have apprehended the criminal we were chasing. Thank you.'

The man holding me turned me round to face my pursuers. I wanted to cry out to him, to plead with him, but I knew it was no use. I could feel the soft fabric of his clothes, the smoothness of his hands. He was some sort of lord, no doubt, just like Iida. They were all of the same cut. He would do nothing to help me. I kept silent, thought of the prayers my mother had taught me, thought fleetingly of the bird.

'What has this criminal done?' the lord asked.

The man in front of me had a long face, like a wolf's. 'Excuse me,' he said again, less politely, 'that is no concern of yours. It is purely the business of Iida Sadamu and the Tohan clan.'

'Unnh!' the lord grunted. 'Is that so? And who might you be to tell me what is and what is not my concern?'

'Just hand him over!' the wolf man snarled, all politeness gone. As he stepped forward, I knew suddenly that

the lord was not going to hand me over. With one neat movement he twisted me behind his back and let go of me. I heard for the second time in my life the hiss of the warrior's sword as it is brought to life. The wolf man drew out a knife. The other two had poles. The lord raised the sword with both hands, sidestepped under one of the poles, lopped off the head of the man holding it, came back at the wolf man, and took off the right arm, still holding the knife.

It happened in a moment, yet took an eternity. It happened in the last of the light, in the rain, but when I close my eyes I can still see every detail.

The headless body fell with a thud and a gush of blood, the head rolling down the slope. The third man dropped his stick and ran backwards, calling for help. The wolf man was on his knees, trying to staunch the blood from the stump at his elbow. He did not groan or speak.

The lord wiped the sword and returned it to its sheath in his belt. 'Come on,' he said to me.

I stood shaking, unable to move. This man had appeared from nowhere. He had killed in front of my eyes to save my life. I dropped to the ground before him, trying to find the words to thank him.

'Get up,' he said. 'The rest of them will be after us in a moment.'

'I can't leave,' I managed to say. 'I must find my mother.'

'Not now. Now is the time for us to run!' He pulled me to my feet, and began to hurry me up the slope. 'What happened down there?'

'They burned the village, and killed . . .' The memory of my stepfather came back to me and I could not go on.

'Hidden?'

'Yes,' I whispered.

'It's happening all over the fief. Iida is stirring up hatred against them everywhere. I suppose you're one of them?'

'Yes.' I was shivering. Although it was still late summer and the rain was warm, I had never felt so cold. 'But that wasn't only why they were after me. I caused Lord Iida to fall from his horse.'

To my amazement the lord began to snort with laughter. 'That would have been worth seeing! But it places you doubly in danger. It's an insult he'll have to wipe out. Still, you are under my protection now. I won't let Iida take you from me.'

'You saved my life,' I said. 'It belongs to you from this day on.'

For some reason that made him laugh again. 'We have a long walk, on empty stomachs and with wet garments. We must be over the range before daybreak, when they will come after us.' He strode off at great speed, and I ran after him, willing my legs not to shake, my teeth not to chatter. I didn't even know his name, but I wanted him to be proud of me, never to regret that he had saved my life.

'I am Otori Shigeru,' he said as we began the climb to the pass. 'Of the Otori clan, from Hagi. But while I'm on the road I don't use that name, so don't you use it either.'

Hagi was as distant as the moon to me, and although I had heard of the Otori, I knew nothing about them, except that they had been defeated by the Tohan at a great battle ten years earlier on the plain of Yaegahara.

'What's your name, boy?'

'Tomasu.'

'That's a common name among the Hidden. Better get rid of it.' He said nothing for a while, and then spoke briefly out of the darkness. 'You can be called Takeo.'

And so between the waterfall and the top of the mountain I lost my name, became someone new, and joined my destiny with the Otori.

Dawn found us, cold and hungry, in the village of Hinode, famous for its hot springs. I was already farther from my own house than I had ever been in my life. All I knew of Hinode was what the boys in my village said: that the men were cheats and the women were as hot as the springs and would lie down with you for the price of a cup of wine. I didn't have the chance to find out if either was true. No one dared to cheat Lord Otori, and the only woman I saw was the innkeeper's wife who served our meals.

I was ashamed of how I looked, in the old clothes my mother had patched so often it was impossible to tell what colour they'd been to start with, filthy, blood-stained. I couldn't believe that the lord expected me to sleep in the inn with him. I thought I would stay in the stables. But he seemed not to want to let me too often out of his sight. He told the woman to wash my clothes and sent me to the hot spring to scrub myself. When I came back, almost asleep from the effect of the hot water after the sleepless night, the morning meal was laid out in the room, and he was already eating. He gestured to me to join him. I knelt on the floor and said the prayers we always used before the first meal of the day.

'You can't do that,' Lord Otori said through a mouthful of rice and pickles. 'Not even alone. If you want to live, you have to forget that part of your life. It is over for ever.' He swallowed and took another mouthful. 'There are better things to die for.'

I suppose a true believer would have insisted on the prayers anyway. I wondered if that was what the dead

men of my village would have done. I remembered the way their eyes had looked blank and surprised at the same time. I stopped praying. My appetite left me.

'Eat,' the lord said, not unkindly. 'I don't want to carry you all the way to Hagi.'

I forced myself to eat a little so he would not despise me. Then he sent me to tell the woman to spread out the beds. I felt uncomfortable giving orders to her, not only because I thought she would laugh at me and ask me if I'd lost the use of my hands, but also because something was happening to my voice. I could feel it draining away from me, as though words were too weak to frame what my eyes had seen. Anyway, once she'd grasped what I meant, she bowed almost as low as she had to Lord Otori, and bustled along to obey.

Lord Otori lay down and closed his eyes. He seemed to fall asleep immediately.

I thought I, too, would sleep at once, but my mind kept jumping around, shocked and exhausted. My burned hand was throbbing and I could hear everything around me with an unusual and slightly alarming clarity – every word that was spoken in the kitchens, every sound from the town. Over and over my thoughts kept returning to my mother and the little girls. I told myself I had not actually seen them dead. They had probably run away; they would be safe. Everyone liked my mother in our village. She would not have chosen death. Although she had been born into the Hidden she was not a fanatic. She lit incense in the shrine and took offerings to the god of the mountain. Surely my mother, with her broad face, her rough hands and her honey-coloured skin, was not dead, was not lying somewhere under the sky, her sharp eyes empty and surprised, her daughters next to her!

My own eyes were not empty: they were shamefully full of tears. I buried my face in the mattress and tried to will the tears away. I could not keep my shoulders from shaking or my breath from coming in rough sobs. After a few moments I felt a hand on my shoulder and Lord Otori said quietly, 'Death comes suddenly and life is fragile and brief. No one can alter this, either by prayers or spells. Children cry about it, but men and women do not cry. They have to endure.'

His own voice broke on this last word. Lord Otori was as grief-stricken as I was. His face was clenched but the tears still trickled from his eyes. I knew who I wept for, but I did not dare question him.

I must have fallen asleep, for I was dreaming I was at home eating supper out of a bowl as familiar to me as my own hands. There was a black crab in the soup, and it jumped out of the bowl and ran away into the forest. I ran after it, and after a while I didn't know where I was. I tried to cry out 'I'm lost!' but the crab had taken away my voice.

I woke to find Lord Otori shaking me.

'Get up!'

I could hear that it had stopped raining. The light told me it was the middle of the day. The room seemed close and sticky, the air heavy and still. The straw matting smelled slightly sour.

'I don't want Iida coming after me with a hundred warriors just because a boy made him fall off his horse,' Lord Otori grumbled good-naturedly. 'We must move on quickly.'

I didn't say anything. My clothes, washed and dried, lay on the floor. I put them on silently.

'Though how you dared stand up to Sadamu when you're too scared to say a word to me . . .'

I wasn't exactly scared of him – more like in complete awe. It was as if one of God's angels, or one of the spirits of the forest, or a hero from the old days, had suddenly appeared in front of me and taken me under his protection. I could hardly have told you then what he looked like, for I did not dare look at him directly. When I did sneak a glance at him, his face in repose was calm – not exactly stern, but expressionless. I did not then know the way it was transformed by his smile. He was perhaps thirty years old, or a little younger, well above medium height, broad-shouldered. His hands were light-skinned, almost white, well formed, and with long, restless fingers that seemed made to shape themselves around the sword's handle.

They did that now, lifting the sword from where it lay on the matting. The sight of it sent a shudder through me. I imagined it had known the intimate flesh, the life blood, of many men, had heard their last cries. It terrified and fascinated me.

'Jato,' Lord Otori said, noticing my gaze. He laughed and patted the shabby black sheath. 'In travelling clothes, like me. At home we both dress more elegantly!'

Jato, I repeated under my breath. The snake sword, which had saved my life by taking life.

We left the inn and resumed our journey past the sulphur-smelling hot springs of Hinode and up another mountain. The rice paddies gave way to bamboo groves, just like the ones around my village, then came chestnuts, maples and cedars. The forest steamed from the warmth of the sun, although it was so dense that little sunlight penetrated to us below. Twice snakes slithered out of our