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Butterfly in the Wind

**The life of "Tojin" Okichi,
concubine against her will
of the first American
Consul in Japan**



BUTTERFLY IN THE WIND

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Chapter: 1

It is December 1841 in Shimoda. Ichibei Saito knew that soon his heavily pregnant wife must go through the throes of another agonising childbirth. He shivered as he thought about the last one just two years ago that had nearly cost Mako her life.

The cold, wintry wind lashed viciously at Saito's small wooden house by the sea. But he was a fine ship carpenter and had built his family a good house. So it stood now, sturdy and unmoved by the fury of the unfriendly tidal waves and winds that the latest typhoon was stirring up.

Saito sighed and wondered when the driving rain was going to end. He would not be able to work for the next few days and that meant less money for the family. With another mouth to feed, he needed to work harder.

He was not used to the temporary idleness that the typhoon had forced him into and was uneasy about it. Humble folks like them could not afford this kind of luxury and had to toil all their lives for their families.

Then he brightened as a thought occurred to him

“This typhoon will wreck some ships and boats for sure so it'll mean more repair and building work for me later,” he told himself.

For a moment, he felt a pang of guilt at profiting from someone else's tragedy, then he shrugged. This was Nature's way of recycling life and death and it had nothing to do with him.

The wooden floorboard behind him creaked and his sister appeared.

“Saito, Mako's birthpains have started,” she announced, looking worriedly at the driving squall outside. “It's a bad day to go into labour. What if something goes wrong?”

Saito did not answer. Birth and death were things man did not have any control over so he could only pray that all would be well with his wife and that this time, God would give him a son.

The Shogun had recently passed a law permitting peasants like Saito to have a surname, a privilege that none of them dreamed would ever be possible in feudal Japan. Saito was extremely proud of his coveted surname and desperately wanted a son to carry it on.

But God was not on his side this time and on the 10th of December, Saito's wife was delivered of a pale, sickly looking little girl. They called her Okichi and after he had resigned himself to having to feed

and cloth another daughter, Saito looked at the unusually beautiful child with great sadness.

These were bad times for a girl to be born. They already had a daughter and, apart from the matter of carrying on the family name, what he needed were strong strapping sons to help him in his work as a carpenter.

Another daughter meant another mouth to feed and another life to worry about. Peasants like them could not afford the luxury of too many daughters.

Saito sighed, God had decided not to answer his prayers for some strange illogical reason. As he gazed at the squirming bundle and the apologetic face of his wife, neither of them knew that the daughter they did not want would one day make the family name more famous and enduring in Japan than any son could have done. They did not, for one moment, dream that the tiny baby thrust so unwillingly at them was destined to become one of the most unforgettable legends of Japan. She would be intimately woven into the historical opening of Japan to foreign interaction in the 1860s in Shimoda.

His daughter, oblivious to the perils of being born the wrong sex and the great destiny awaiting her, yawned and Saito's heart contracted, despite himself for she was still his flesh and blood and he couldn't discard her. He vowed to make life as safe for her as their humble circumstances could afford.

As the days passed, they were amazed at how beautiful the baby Okichi became. Her skin was milky white, her hair black and lustrous and her features delicate and refined. There was not a flaw to mar her physical perfection.

"She's exquisite!" Saito's sister exclaimed.

"Yes," Saito agreed and he began to laugh derisively.

"How did a wizened, sun browned ship carpenter and his heavy, round faced, slit eyed wife come by a child of such beauty and grace?" he wondered.

If he did not know Mako any better and had made fun of her tight moral values more times than he could remember, he might even have thought that he was not the father of the exquisite baby girl.

But although apologetic for having given him a child of the wrong sex, Make's eyes had shone with innocent pride. Yes, Saito was sure he was the father of the baby Okichi, Mako would never be able to keep a thing like that from him.

God had given them a beautiful baby and they were expected to be happy about it.

But Saito was sad because he knew that such beauty would be an invaluable asset only in the rich and noble families as a bartering tool to enhance family fortunes and power.

Among the poor and humble fishing folk of Shimoda, what use was beauty? Better for a girl to be plain and ordinary and stay out of the attention of the powerful who took what they wanted.

They needed muscles more than beauty in Shimoda and Saito wondered what life would be like for little Okichi.

The years passed swiftly and Okichi soon grew into a lovely precocious child. She was of a sunny disposition and gave no trouble to anyone. It was as if she felt that she had to make up for being a girl by trying to please everyone.

She loved her family and the village she lived in. Although they would never have any of the riches and splendour that some of the girls who had been sold into the households of the nobility spoke about, they had peace happiness and contentment.

The Saito home was the last of a row of neatly arranged identical houses with walls of striking black and mouldings of white arranged in contrasting diagonal lines over the surface. These were the “nameko” houses that the people of Shimoda were so proud of.

Most of all, Okichi loved the Shimoda Bay. On good days, the waters of the bay were calm and tranquil and she would sit on her favourite rocky outcrop gazing out into the sea and the distant horizon. She often thought about the world beyond the bay and sometimes she made up stories about the people who lived there.

The people of that imaginary world became her friends and as she grew older, she was drawn deeper and deeper into that life of make believe where there were many beautiful things and so much music that every day was a “summer festival.”

The only cloud in her life was her father. She knew he loved her in his own way but he always kept her at arm’s length. It was as if he was afraid to become close to her because of the plans he must make for her future.

Okichi knew that every day, the mysterious question of her future loomed ominously nearer. She wished that time would stand still and she would not grow older so that her life in the safe embrace of her family need not end.

For Ichibei Saito too, the question of his daughter's future posed a problem, one he did not like to think about. Somehow, her extraordinary beauty did not make her a suitable candidate for marriage with one of the village boys so he had to find an alternative solution to this awkward question of Okichi's future.

But with her mother, it was different. Her mother openly loved her so she desperately soothed the troubled cries and tantrums of Okichi's childhood and kept her out of her father's way.

Okichi was a beautiful child, with a clear, translucent skin and perfect features. She didn't have the tiny eyes and puffy cheeks of her other siblings and her mother was extremely proud of her.

For Okichi had the beauty and grace that Mako Saito had secretly longed for all her life before the harsh demands and toils of fifteen years of marriage to Ichibei Saito had taken all her dreams away? And now she could relive those dreams again in her beautiful daughter.

Down the road, lived the Kojima family in similar "nameko" house two doors from Okichi's family and their eldest daughter, Naoko, became Okichi's inseparable friend and soul mate.

On warm summer evenings, Okichi and Naoko would climb the slight incline to their favourite spot, a flat rocky outcrop which hung over the sea in a gentle drop, to watch the famous Shimoda sunsets.

One evening in the summer of 1853, the two girls made the climb to their favourite spot. The glorious day had given promises of a beautiful sunset and they wanted to watch the sun dipping into the sea.

It should have been a happy day for them but for some strange reason, the girl Okichi was sad.

She was almost twelve years old and she knew that soon, she would have to face the problem of her future. She didn't want to leave the safe, warm enclave of her family and she wished for the first time that she had not been born a girl. Boys did not have to worry about a future which was usually resolved by marriage to a person of one's parents' choice. They could stay in the safe shelter of their families for as long as they wanted.

As the sun began to sink into the sea, a lone fishing boat appeared in the horizon. It was a stark and black image and it seemed to be bearing down on them, menacing and grim.

Suddenly, Okichi covered her eyes with her hands and gave a soft moan.

Her friend, Naoko, rushed over and tapped her shoulders anxiously.

“Okichi, Okichi!” she said. “What’s the matter? Are you feeling sick?”

Okichi came out of her momentary trance and shook her head as if to clear away some unseen cobwebs.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she said. “I saw a black menacing shape in the distance, out in the bay and it seemed to be coming to get me! Isn’t that silly?”

“Yes, it is,” her friend agreed. “Why, look, there’s nothing out there but a fishing boat!”

Okichi shivered, “For a moment, I thought I saw a black ship! And it was not the ship of our people!”

Naoko had never felt comfortable about Okichi’s occasional bursts of “premonitions” and “sightings”.

Their lives in 19th century Shimoda were hard enough so Naoko only wanted to fantasise about happy things and people.

“Look,” she said brightly, trying to steer Okichi away from her strange, black mood. “The fishing boats are coming in. Let’s go watch them bringing in their catches.”

The two girls clambered down the rocky incline, their wooden geitas (Japanese clogs) clattering noisily. The moment of heaviness was forgotten as they raced each other to the edge of the water, waving in the fishing boats.

It would be the last happy and carefree summer for young Okichi.

The next day was the annual summer festival in Shimoda. It was Okichi’s favourite time of the year for on this day, the women of the village could put aside their harsh, drab lives, dress up in their best summer yukatas and sing, dance and drink in the village square all through the long summer night.

It was a day when no one seemed to have a care in the world and even her father’s face would lose its pinched, weary look. And Okichi could have a glimpse of the gay, spirited woman that her mother had been in the long forgotten days of her youth.

Everybody in the town infected each other with happiness and no one could harbour a sad thought for long. It was like an epidemic spreading the germs of euphoria and reckless abundance to everyone.

But this summer, Okichi had felt a vague uneasiness because her father’s face had continued to look pinched and worried. As he looked at Okichi twirling on her geitas with her sister, Saito decided he would break the news of what he had planned for her after the summer festivities

were over. Let the child enjoy the last days of her childhood for she would have the rest of her life to grow up in.

Later, Okichi would look back on this summer and say, "It was a very special summer for me. I couldn't get enough of all the festivities that went on. It was as if I knew that I would never be happy again."

The day after the summer festival, Saito broke the news to her.

"Okichi," he said. "Come, there's something important you must know."

"Yes, father," the young girl had replied calmly but her heart was full of dread. Her father never spoke to her directly and alone unless he had bad news for her.

Was it then the day he was going to bring up the dreaded question of her future?

But she was a dutiful Japanese daughter so she waited patiently for him to speak.

"My dear child," he began. "I have made a decision about your future, one I believe is the best and most suitable for you in the circumstances. After your twelfth birthday, you are to leave this family and enter the Sen Murayama family. There, you will go through the necessary training to become a professional geisha."

Okichi's heart sank. A geisha girl! Was that what she was to become? Weren't they the girls who danced and sang for the pleasure of men? Did her father really believe that it was the best future for her?

But her father's word was law in the family so she did not argue with him. She had to accept everything he decreed even though her heart cried out against it.

That night, she cried herself to sleep. She barely noticed the comforting arms of her mother and the soothing voice, which said, "It's because you're beautiful and such great beauty would be wasted in the life of toil you must lead if you remain here. Your father believed that a life of singing and dancing would be far better for you than a life of toil and hardship. You must thus see the wisdom of your father's decision for he cannot give you all the beautiful things that only a wealthy and powerful family like the Sen Murayamas can afford."

"I wish I wasn't beautiful," she had cried. "I feel it, this beauty will give me no peace and in the end, my life will be destroyed by it. Please, mother, please help me change his mind. I will cover up my beauty and work as a maid if I have to."

But her mother shook her head slowly and Okichi knew that she could never go against her husband's decision no matter what she thought of it.

"It is a cruel end to the most beautiful summer I have ever had," was her last thought as she drifted into an uneasy sleep plagued by demons?

On her twelfth birthday, her mother made her the auspicious osekihan, red rice with beans and longevity noodles. A few days later, her meagre possessions were packed into a cloth bundle and she entered into the rich and noble household of the Sen Murayama family.

At just twelve years old, her childhood was over and she had to learn to become a woman of the geisha-entertaining world.

The house of the Sen Murayamas was an alien world of wealth and culture. Okichi never imagined that such beautiful people and their lives of ease and plentiful existed in a world beyond hers. Almost, she felt that she had died and entered another world.

Brought up to live a frugal life of bare necessities where meat was eaten only on special occasions once or twice a year, Okichi was uneasy about the opulence of her new life.

The household was presided over by the Lady Sen-Murayama, the adored mistress of the powerful Shogun Mukai, the Lord of Kawazu. She was the most gorgeous and regal lady Okichi had ever seen in her life and she could understand completely how a powerful man like the Shogun could be so enamoured of the vivacious Lady Sen Murayama.

Almost immediately, Okichi discovered that she enjoyed the harp and dancing lessons given by a formidable lady with blackened teeth. The other girls whispered that she had been a raging beauty and the most favoured geisha in her time. Okichi was terrified of her.

She tried not to think of the purpose of this rigorous training or of the many important men she would have to entertain and keep happy. She tried not to see the other geisha girls who donned on their white powder and heavy make up and laughed when the men playfully touched them.

The following year, they sent her out for "field training" and night after night, she sat with the other geishas watching them at work.

It was a strange decadent world that shocked the innocence out of the young Okichi.

"The thing to do," said Reiko, an up and coming geisha, "is to drink sake. When I'm just a little tipsy, that's when I excel in my duties, if you know what I mean." She slanted Okichi a sly knowing look which made her flinch.

They fitted her up in the finest kimonos. She buried her face in the beautifully patterned and embroidered materials and reverently touched the elaborate obis or sashes with their opulent splashes of gold that took hours to put on.

Okichi was confused by the conflicting emotions that assailed her and often felt guilty about enjoying the comforts her new life brought her.

“The dancing, the singing, the music and oh, the clothes,” she wrote to her friend, Naoko, “I never knew that life could be so wickedly indulgent.”

Above all, she loved the speech lessons that taught her to speak beautiful and classy Japanese. She felt like a real lady and not the daughter of a ship carpenter from Shimoda.

But in the still of the night, as she lay in her futon, Okichi would think about her life. She was a romantic at heart and often dreamed about love and the children she did not know she would never have.

“Children,” she told herself firmly in the dark, “I will have them three, maybe four.”

But often, unwelcome questions danced before her, taunting her.

What happened to geisha girls when they grew old? Did anyone want to marry them?

Six months later, Okichi was pronounced ready to be launched as a fully trained geisha girl.

Her face was so naturally fair that she didn't need much of the white powder that masked the faces and often the hearts of the geishas. But she had to paint her face heavily like the other girls.

Her first assignment was to assist a more experienced geisha to entertain a group of noble sumaris passing through from the neighbouring prefecture.

They teased and flirted with her good-naturedly.

“New geisha, eh?” said one of them, a normally stern prominent samurai now rendered congenial by the sake Okichi had been taught to pour freely into his sake cup. He was old enough to be her grandfather and she flinched inwardly as he rubbed an appreciative finger over her tender young hands.

“Remember what Reiko san said,” she told herself. “The geisha's heart must always be masked, like her face.”

She forced a demure downcast of her eyes and a soft musical laugh as she had been taught. She pretended that she was a stage actress in some