

A NOTE

FROM

ICHIYO

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## CHAPTER: 1

22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1896

The comforting rays of late afternoon sunshine had started to fade, plunging the whole room into a kind of hushed and melancholic deference to the young woman inside who lay dying on a white futon that had obviously seen better times. The windows in the room were tightly sealed against the cold November air outside even as burning fevers by day and deadly chills by night assaulted her ravaged body mercilessly.

“Ichiyo..Ichiyo...,” someone kept calling her name. It was her sister, Kuniko who was trying desperately to keep the dying young woman alive. Even when her coughing threw up more blood, Kuniko forced chicken soup down her sister’s throat, no longer bothered to stop the flow of tears that ran down her face and fell into the soup in tiny splashes which both fascinated and horrified her.

“Germs..I will pass more germs to Natsu...,” she thought, as if that mattered any more.

It was no use, Ichiyo’s fever kept climbing up and her incessant coughing had turned raspy and labored within the last few hours. That night, Kuniko sat by her sister’s futon, calm and composed for the first time in days because she had accepted at last that Ichiyo was dying and was prepared for the worst.

A couple of the Bungakkai writers, Baba Kocho and Hirata Tokuboku, Ichiyo’s favorite young followers from the nearby university, were still hanging around, reluctant to leave her side. Kuniko told them to go home because it was late and there was really nothing more they could do for their beloved mentor that night.

“All right, we’ll leave now if you’re very sure we’re not needed for anything. Good night, oya suminasai!” they agreed eventually, bowing themselves somberly out of the house. The opening of the front door let in a crisply cold November breeze and it refreshed and cleansed the stale air in the room. Kuniko breathed deeply and let the power of the invigorating fresh air flow into her.

“Oh God,” she thought. “I’d almost forgotten how good the air outside is!”

“Go inside and don’t catch a chill, it’s freezing out here,” Baba shouted out to her. “We’ll be back first thing tomorrow!”

Kuniko didn’t know how long she stood at the door, watching the

brilliant half moon moving slowly across the sky, carrying with it a whole galaxy of glittering stars. The night was so calm and full of happy stars it was hard to remember that just a few yards away, the end was near for her famous sister and a dark, heavy cloud hung like a shroud over the whole house. A light breeze sprang up, running through the leaves of the solitary bamboo plant in the tiny garden and its little whispers raised the hairs at the back of Kuniko's neck.

"What am I to do without Natsu to live for, to care for and to hope for?" she moaned and shivered violently as a sudden bone chilling weariness washed over her and the bitter cold of the frosty air outside seeped into her body. With a deep, ragged sigh, Kuniko closed the door and hurried inside, Ichiyo needed her now more than ever and it wouldn't do for her to catch a chill.

She made herself a cup of piping hot green tea and luxuriated for a moment in its cleansing and soothing effect and a while later, feeling much better, Kuniko looked in on Ichiyo. Her spirits lifted a little because for the first time in days, her sister was sleeping peacefully, no tortured coughing or labored breathing, just a quiet heaving of the chest. Kuniko touched Ichiyo's brow, it was dry and cool and the fever seemed to have subsided! Did she dare hope that perhaps the blast of cold fresh air from outside had done Ichiyo a world of good?

"I wish there is someone other than Mother with whom I can share this hope that maybe, just maybe, Ichiyo will wake up tomorrow with that small watery smile on her dear face and there will be another bout of remission," Kuniko cried softly. "Even a week, a month, it's enough if that's all we can ask for!"

But there was no one that she could lean on for comfort, she was all alone and the only sound in the room was the old clock ticking in the genkan. Kuniko drew the futon up to Ichiyo's chin and tucked it firmly in, that night promised to be more peaceful and she just might be able to catch some sleep. It had been so many nights of making do with a few minutes of dozing off here and there and Kuniko was so exhausted and drained that she was fast asleep even before her head touched the pillow of rustling beans on the small thin futon next to Ichiyo.

The front door was vibrating and someone seemed to be outside trying to get in, probably one of the bungakkai writers because the publishers never came so early. Kuniko groaned, the front door didn't have any locks, like almost every house in the neighborhood, surely their visitor knew

that and could let himself in! But of course, what was she thinking of, no one in Japan would dream of entering someone else's house without permission, even if it was unlocked.

Reluctant to leave the warmth of her futon, Kuniko lingered for a while, but as the soft, increasingly insistent knocking continued, she knew that their visitor wasn't going to leave till she opened the door for him. With a start, Kuniko saw the first slivers of light lightening up the sky and she sat up in a great panic.

"What time is it? Oh, Lord Buddha, did I sleep right through the night?" she moaned. "I have to see how Ichiyo is!"

With the effort of a body still heavy with sleep, Kuniko pushed the futon cover aside and scrambled over to where Ichiyo lay, sleeping quietly, and in the first light of dawn that was streaming into the room, her face looked peaceful, beautiful and relaxed.

"The coughing has stopped and after such a good sleep, Ichiyo will wake up soon with more energy and feeling much better," Kuniko told herself as she hurried out to open the door to their insistent visitor.

As she had predicted, it was a writer, Goro, another one of her sister's ardent protégées and he tiptoed over the worn tatami mats to Ichiyo's side. He had been in the northern city of Aomori when he heard the news of his adored mentor's illness and had traveled all night to be with her. Travel worn and bone weary, there were tears in Goro's eyes as he reached out to take Ichiyo's limp, lifeless hand. Then his face turned a pasty white and he wailed, "Kuniko! Kuniko, come quick! Higuchi san has no pulse, I think she's passed on!"

Kuniko rushed out from the kitchen where she was about to make a pot of green tea for them and sank down on her sister's futon next to Goro. She too began to wail and cry in loud choking sobs, frantically shaking the cold, lifeless body that was beginning to turn stiff.

"Wake up, Ichiyo, wake up," she screamed. "You can't go just like this! We didn't even have the chance to say good bye to you! Natsu... Natsu...." she wailed reverting to Ichiyo's old given birth name instinctively.

But it was no use, she was gone, her sister, the brilliant and feisty writer who had calmly taken in her stride all the challenges of gender prejudice, extreme poverty, ill health, rejection and humiliation and continue to write with such great passion, depth and honesty that in the end, she touched the hearts and minds of even the most critical member

of the bunggakai. And now, at just 24 years old, that brilliant flame had been cruelly extinguished and Ichiyo Higuchi would never write again.

“Oh God, why didn’t you take me instead?” Kuniko cried. “Ichiyo had so much to offer to the world, why didn’t you spare her and take me instead?”

She didn’t know how long she sat there, holding her sister’s cold lifeless hand and massaging those fingers which, until they were defeated by her punishing sickness, had filled page after page with beautiful words and poems which had struck a chord in the hearts, minds and conscience of her many readers.

As soon as he had recovered some composure, Goro rushed out to break the news to Ichiyo’s inner circle of writers, poets and publishers and they started arriving in solemn groups to crowd round her futon and grieve for her. Despite her own grief, Kuniko was glad to see her sister surrounded by all the people she loved, giving her respect and recognition for the years of struggle against poverty and a system that did not value the talent of a woman. She was sure Ichiyo’s spirit was hovering over them, smiling benevolently and pleased with the way she was being honored.

The past few weeks had taken their toll on Kuniko and she lost the usual calm efficiency which had seen her through years of organizing her eccentric sister’s life and work and putting some order into her chaotic work table at the end of each day. Kuniko could not bring herself to undertake all the arrangements and rituals that had to be done when someone passed away, neither could she bear to organize Ichiyo’s funeral. She just stayed frozen in the immediate days after Ichiyo’s death, as if in a trance.

Someone must have called the doctor because he arrived to examine Ichiyo and certify her death. Even though he was a doctor and death was a natural event for him, Kuniko could see that this time, he too was affected by the untimely and wasteful passing of such a young and talented woman.

Some of the writers wanted an elaborate send off for Ichiyo, suggesting that her coffin be accompanied by horseback as befitting a writer of such standing, but eventually, Kuniko and the rest of the family declined this offer.

“We’re too poor to afford anything more than a very simple funeral for Ichiyo,” Kuniko said. “Anyway, an inexpensive and uncluttered funeral is what Ichiyo would have wanted, you know how frugal and

simple my sister was and she would never have wanted us or anyone of you to spend beyond our means.”

Ichiyo Higuchi’s funeral finally took place on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1896. The day dawned rainy and bitterly cold for that time of year as if the skies were weeping for her. The night before they had performed the enconfining rituals and Kuniko had cried her eyes out as she watched her sister being lowered into the coffin that was going to be her home for all eternity.

“Ichiyo, you always hated any form of confinement and darkness, you wanted always to be free and unrestrained,” she cried softly over sister’s body, for once clad in a white silk kimono instead of her trademark dark, masculine colors. “Oh, Ichiyo, please forgive us for putting you into this dark, narrow box!”

In the end, only a small crowd attended the funeral and with the drizzle sprinkling its melancholia over the mourners, it was a lonely end to a woman of great talent who had literally worked herself to death. Most of her admirers stayed away because they could not bear to witness the burial of a great writer they still did not want to believe was gone forever.

Kuniko carried Ichiyo’s faded photo in a black frame as she led the small funeral procession to the cemetery at the Honganji Buddhist temple. It was the same face that would be immortalized in Japan’s 5,000 yen notes, more than 200 years later and Ichiyo became the only woman in Japan to be ever accorded such a great honor.

Suddenly there was a rush and an errand boy delivered a big bunch of flowers and half a dozen lanterns from Ichiyo’s publishers, Hakubunkan. Their bright yellow glow added some color and warmth to the whole atmosphere of heaviness and Kuniko felt her spirits lift a little. It was a celebration of Ichiyo’s life, grey and heavy with responsibilities, poverty and struggling always to be accepted in a man’s world and then sudden bursts of joy and passion in the way Ichiyo crafted and produced beautiful pieces of literary work that no one could ignore.

That cold November morning, Ichiyo was laid to rest under the big spreading trees of the Honganji Temple where her father and his brothers were also buried.

After the funeral, as they were returning home, a piece of paper fell out of the book Kuniko was holding, the last novel Ichiyo had struggled to complete even as she battled with her illness. The note fluttered to the ground, to land on a dark, murky pool of rainwater but it stood out,

white, pure and undaunted, as Ichiyo had been.

“Look,” Kuniko whispered. “It’s a note from Ichiyo!”

## CHAPTER: 2

It was unusually hot and the young Noriyoshi Higuchi decided that morning to take a short cut across a bamboo field on his way to the temple school. He knew he shouldn’t because it was private property but the shade of the bamboo trees looked so cool and it would definitely cut his walking distance by almost half, so the teenage boy turned a deaf ear to his mother’s constant reminders to respect other people’s private space and plunged right into the cool, inviting bamboo clusters.

Noriyoshi had taken just a few steps when a sharp female voice coming from his left stopped him in his tracks.

“You know of course you are trespassing on our land?” it said. “Don’t you know what private property is?”

He spun round, red faced to be confronted by a girl and he could tell by her clothes, the disapproving curl in her mouth and her confident demeanor that she was no servant girl but probably a daughter of the owners of the bamboo field.

Noriyoshi was a smart, good looking young man and quite the toast among the young girls of the village and he was usually a confident and smooth talking ladies’ man but for some reason, he found himself tongue tied and awkward under the sharp, accusing scrutiny of this strange girl.

Then he resorted to what he always did when embarrassed, Noriyoshi pulled himself to his full height which was an impressive 5 feet 11 inches, very tall by Meiji era Japanese standards, and said loftily, “I’m sorry if I’ve done that but there is no sign or anything to suggest that this bamboo field belongs to anyone so can I be pardoned for making a mistake?”

The corners of the girl’s lips quivered as she struggled to control her smile and stay indignant at the sheer audacity of this young man, then she shrugged and replied, “All right, I’ll let you through this time but don’t trespass on our land again.”

Noriyoshi bowed, thanked her and hurried off but he was curious enough to turn round and found that she was still standing there, watching him and that put him into a strange flutter.

Later, at the temple school, he sought out Taki, his friend and known among the young men to have an unchallengeable knowledge and data

base of almost every girl between the ages of 14 to 18 in the village. He had made it his business to track down and accumulate information of as many girls of marriageable age in the village as he could and that made him very popular with the young men and aspiring suitors around town.

“I met or rather, was accosted by a girl in that bamboo field down the road, do you know who she is? She seems to be living around the area,” Noriyoshi asked. “Looks to be about 16 or 17 years old, nice looking but with a really sharp tongue!”

“Oh, you must mean Furuya Ayame! Her father owns the bamboo field and the adjoining farm,” Taki replied. “They are a strange lot, you know, aloof and uppity, think they are better than us but I personally think they are really not much better, just farming folk like everyone around here, that is all! And she is certainly not 16 or 17, more like 18 to 19.”

“Furuya Ayame, what an unusual name!” Noriyoshi thought, no longer paying attention to what Taki was saying.

To his own surprise, Noriyoshi could not stop thinking about the girl called Furuya Ayame and for the next few days, he deliberately went through the bamboo field several times hoping to catch her or be caught by her, but she did not appear.

On the fifth day, he told himself he would try one more day and if she didn't appear, he would forget about her. After all, there were many pretty girls in the village who were crazy about him and there was absolutely no need for him to be hanging around a bamboo field like a lovesick puppy. He nearly jumped out of his skin when a familiar voice behind him said, “It's you again! I thought I told you not to trespass on our land?”

Noriyoshi recovered himself and replied smoothly, “I know but to be honest, I have been doing that for the past few days in the hope of seeing you!”

His frank and open admission of attraction to her in conservative and inhibited Meiji era Japan threw Furuya off balance because she wasn't used to anyone, especially the bashful village boys, saying what he really thought, felt and wanted, especially when she herself appeared to be the subject of that declaration. She blushed a bright red and it was her turn to be tongue tied and that day, whether they liked it or not, the seeds of attraction were sown.

This development didn't suit Noriyoshi's ambitions at all, he hadn't planned on being tied down by any woman because he hated his family's lives as farmers in the village and dreamed about moving to the big city.

Being involved at such a young age and held back by a woman from the village wasn't part of that plan at all. In fact, Noriyoshi would much rather have found a woman from the city who could help further his ambitions.

But the pull of this powerful and irresistible emotion called love proved to be too strong and it was just a matter of time before they were meeting secretly in the bamboo grove, a decision that would eventually produce one of the greatest women in the history of Japan.

They tried to be discreet but in a small village without much to do, it was difficult to keep anything private for long and their secret trysts were soon discovered, bringing down the wrath and displeasure of Furuya's parents on her.

"We forbid you to see Noriyoshi Higuchi again," her mother said in that icy tone of hers that could bring the chills to anyone's bones. "He's not good enough for you."

"But why, mother, why?" Furuya cried. "Noriyoshi's family is not any worse than ours so why is he not good enough to court me? Besides, I'm already 18 years old and you are always saying I should be getting married and settling down."

"Yes, that's true but not with Noriyoshi Higuchi! Your young man's father, Hachizaemon, is a disgraced man, that is why," her father replied. "He is always fighting the authorities and has been thrown into prison for that, your mother and I don't want you to be associated with that family."

But Noriyoshi and Furuya continued to meet, their passion and need for each other growing with each passing month and it was inevitable that they eventually drifted into a physical relationship. It reached a point when it was impossible to hold back and Furuya was surprised at her own audacity to break all the rules of society as it was then and that of her family when she allowed Noriyoshi to make love to her.

She lived to regret it a few months later when she found herself, a young woman in Meiji Japan, pregnant and unmarried.

"My parents will kill me for disgracing them," she sobbed when Noriyoshi met her to discuss the situation.

"We have to get married right away," Noriyoshi said firmly, he was still reeling from the shock of having fatherhood thrust on him to further complicate and maybe stall his plans to move to the big city but he loved Furuya and had to stand by her.

"No, it's not that simple," Furuya continued sobbing. "My parents have forbidden me to even see you, let alone contemplate marriage! If