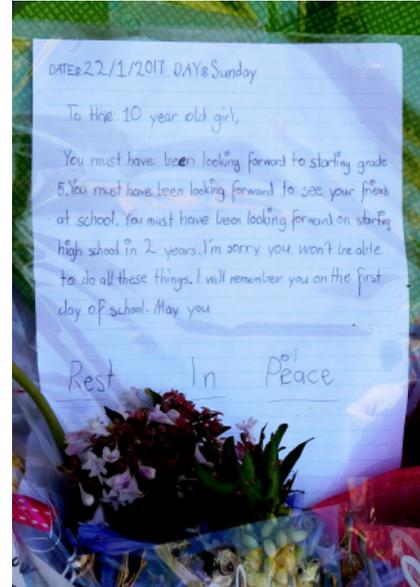




## **Bourke Street massacre January 2017:**

Remembering the tragic slaughter of six people, including a three-month old boy, Zachary Matthew Bryant, who was hurled 58 metres from his pram by the car driven by Dimitrious Gargasoulas. 27 people were injured. Hundreds of tributes were left at the steps of the old GPO, including one to 10-year-old Thalia Harin, from another child: *“You must have been looking forward to starting Grade 5. You must have been looking forward to seeing your friends at school. You must have been looking forward to starting High School in 2 years. I’m sorry you won’t be able to do all these things. I will remember you on the first day of school. May you Rest In Peace.”*



# **The rice broker’s daughter**

**A short story by Graham Price**

**Makato and his wife Aki, lived in the town of Uji near Kyoto, Japan. Makato was a minor Japanese rice broker with three children — the boy Yamato thirteen years old, followed by two daughters Mai 10 years and Suki 9. It was the year 1934 and the troops in Manchuria, combined with the world-wide depression, had drawn upon provisions so vast that there was a profound shortage of rice.**

It was winter and early snows had fallen. Makato had grieved long over his lessening fortune; things were very difficult; how was he to feed his own family with shortages as bad as this? He had come to a hard decision. The girls had to be sent away from the family to a better life for them, otherwise they would all starve. He would contact the assessor, Furuta, to see what could be done.

The bulky man came to the house within three days, smiling and nodding with supposed graciousness. He tipped his hat to Makato and Aki and looked steadily at the girls.

“The two of them is it? And what about the boy?”

Makato said “No, the boy is strong. He can help. He will stay to work in the sheds.”

The assessor grinned, “And there is no problem with the girls? You are certain about this?”

“Give me the papers, I will sign,” said Makato. Aki opened her mouth to say something, but then shrank back as her husband raised his fist. Her face filled with tears.

“The papers!”

He signed the two sheets somewhat hesitatingly, clutched the small bag of notes and coins from Furuta, then turned his back and walked inside the house. Aki stood there in the fallen snow, watching helpless as Furuta called his male assistant who grasped the girls by their arms.

“Time to go, little ones, your new life begins.”

They were bundled into a cart, protesting and crying as the two horses pulled away with a jerk, nostrils sending plumes of vapours into the early morning air. Above the girls sat the man they had now come to know as Furuta, an assessor or as it turned out, a man who was to change their lives.

Upon arrival in Kyoto, the cart with its children huddled together on the floor, turned into a narrow lane. The sun had almost set and darkening shadows embraced the houses and inns. People were beginning to settle for the night and those with the financial means still at their disposal were entering the tea houses for a night of pleasant amusement. The horses stomped and whinnied and Furuta jumped down. “Come along, my little darlings. Your future awaits.”



The girls sat huddled together, barely moving. Furuta rapped on the side of the cart with a heavy cane. “Come along, little princesses. Time to move. Get out.”

They entered the steps of the brown timber building with rooms divided by rice-paper walls. “When the lady comes, you will bow down on the floor, is that clear?” He tapped each child lightly on the shoulders with his cane.

Mai turned to look at him. “Why are we here? What is happening?”

“You will not speak until asked. That is final. No questions.”

“But . . .” She could not express the rest of her sentence as the cane came down heavily on her head.”

“You will not speak . . . understand that!”

The sliding door in front of them opened with a sudden rush and warm air coiled into the entrance parlour. Two women stepped down and into the room. Several candles cast a low light with flickering shadows on the thin rice-paper walls and Suki felt her heart racing as she looked at the two women. One, a short older person with grey hair fashioned into a bun and dressed in robes of a tawny colour, the other a younger sharp faced, dark-haired woman dressed in a black robe with flecks of gold and green woven into the fabric. She held a short painted bamboo cane, which she twirled around and finally let rest at her side.

“Down!” said Furuta. “Bow down!”

The girls flattened themselves on the floor, noses scenting the teak timber boards; eyes penetrating the grain in the wood and hearts pumping wildly. There was a silence that they could not bear. They heard nothing, except the rustling of stockinged feet in front of them.

“You may kneel,” said the younger of the two women.

“Obey!” said Furuta, tapping the girls lightly on their backs with his cane. “And be respectful.”

“I am mother Ayana,” said the dark-haired one, “You are welcome to my home, but there is only one of you who will live here, who will be instructed into a wonderful new life after a time of apprenticeship. So then, which one of you would I choose? Stand up, let me look at you.”

She moved closer to the girls, raising each chin with her cane.” Lift your robes.” The children obeyed. Ayana tapped their legs lightly. “Turn around, walk in a circle. Walk back and forth.” The children obeyed.

“Back on your knees.”

Ayana stood in silence for a time longer than seemed necessary. She brought the cane slowly to her lips, then looked at the elder woman, Kanoko, who nodded slowly towards Mai.

“This one,” said Ayana, pointing to Mai, “will stay. The other will go back with you Furuta.”

Furuta seemed to hesitate. “I . . . I thought the two of them . . . for the price, which is low enough . . . surely there is room for both? You are so generous Ayana. You have always been generous.”

Ayana snapped “My generosity is of times past when there was much rice, when there was much yen. Now, today, it is difficult. The other girl has to go. You are a man of great means, you will find a way.”

Kanoko moved forward and grasped Mai, while Furuta took hold of Suki. The girls screamed and struggled but it was no use. Soon they were parted — Mai bundled into an inner room and Suki out into the darkness of the evening mist. The cold enveloped her as Furuta pushed her into the cart. The driver snapped the reins, and horses and cart with its three occupants, turned out of the dark winding lane into a muddy thoroughfare leading out of Kyoto. A light rain fell and Suki, lying in the back of the cart, shivered. There was no cover and she was thankful when at last the rain had stopped after what had seemed a long journey in the dark. Somehow, she had fallen asleep, despite the lurching and bumping of the cart as it wound its way out of Kyoto, heading north. When she awoke she found that the cart was stationary.

They had arrived at an inn where they would spend the night. Furuta and his driver had taken a room; Furuta wondered what to do about the girl.

“She could sleep in the cart,” ventured the driver.

“I wouldn’t trust her to try and find her way back to Kyoto. No, I’ll make arrangements with the madam to have her locked in with the servants.”

The morning broke with wind and sleet whipping at the buildings. Suki woke with the rattling of the shutters. For a moment she did not know where she was. Then she realised — she was lying on a tatami mat in an outhouse connected to the inn by a raised timber walk-way. There were three female servants in the room and they were moving about, rolling up their mats and





preparing themselves for another work day. The younger one, who was about sixteen turned to Suki. “Come on little one. There’s work to be done . . . you can help.”

Suki was put to work scrubbing floors. She was on her hands and knees when Furuta found her. He tugged at her robe. “Leave that. It’s time to go.”

“Where are you taking me? I have to see my sister and you need to take me there.”

Furuta heaved her to her feet. She could smell his bad breath. He shook her roughly. “You’re a fiery little one, aren’t you? Well, there is a change of plan. I have remembered someone who may be in need of a servant girl as strong as you. It’s back to Kyoto and I shall be very glad to be rid of you.”

Suki slipped on her clogs. “I don’t like you. You’re a bad man, and you smell.”

He laughed. “Ha, before you’re much older you’ll meet men much worse than me. Suck it up, little one.”

The cart moved off the cobblestones into a muddy road; Suki sheltered under a piece of canvas that Furuta had thrown to her. It barely covered her, but was some protection from the sleet that was falling. Furuta’s driver was cursing and slapping the horses backs with a long whip — the cart’s wheels straining in the mud. The dark sky promised an uneasy journey. Suki fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamt she was walking in a wood where sunlight pieced through the trees and birds sang. She saw a Nightingale pecking at it’s feathers. It turned it’s eyes on her and began to sing and as it’s notes reached the highest pitch, it called “Mai . . . Mai!” The bird flew off, down between the trees, and Suki followed, knowing that the bird would lead her to her sister. The cart hit a large pothole and she jerked awake. The sleet had stopped and the horses had turned into a driveway enclosed by a high wall with strong iron gates. Beyond sat a castle of four storeys with traditional curved upturned roofs. What was this? Furuta dismounted and talked to the gatekeeper. The man swung open the gates and the horses and cart entered. Suki sat up. It certainly wasn’t a workhouse, that’s for sure. Too grand.

A grey-haired male servant met them at the front and ushered them to a side door. Suki was guided through a dark passage into a room of light. The furnishings were rich. Golden tapestries hung from the walls and scenes of ancient Japan were encased in gilded frames.

“Let’s look at you,” said Furuta. “He began to brush her down and made an attempt to tidy her hair. “When the lady comes, you will bow so low as you have never bowed before, understand? And you will not speak, unless asked. Do you understand!”

Suki nodded. Perhaps things might work out after all. If she was a servant in this illustrious house, she could discover a way, given time, to find her sister Mai. She would be silent this time, but only for a little time. They waited, Suki admiring the gilded seats and couches and the shiny black piano in one corner. Whoever owned this place, she thought, would be immensely rich. They had been waiting well over ten minutes and Suki was becoming restless.

“Be still!” said Furuta, “If the lady employs you, you will be eternally grateful.”

Suki considered retorting *and you will be well paid, won’t you, you filthy old man*, but thought better of it.

A noise! Something from the depths of the castle . . . the sound of footsteps. A door slid open and a woman entered, followed by a thin elderly maid. The first woman’s robes shone like silver . . she was wearing pure white socks, the sleeves of her robes were of gold and emerald and Suki saw what she thought was a gold watch on the lady’s left wrist. Suki flattened herself to the floor, while Furuta bowed steeply, further down than he was used to bowing. He was on his best behaviour.

The lady sat on one of the gilded sofas. The servant remained standing, staring at the head of Suki with her hair hanging on the floor. “You may stand.” said the lady, crossing her legs and leaning forward. “What is your name?”

“Her name is Suki, Countess, she is nine years old.”

The Countess sighed. “I didn’t ask you, Furuta, I asked the girl. Now, be quiet while I talk with her.”

Furuta blushed and fidgeted with his coat. “Thank you Highness.

“So, what is your name, girl?”

“Suki, ma’am. Are you a real live Countess? I have not met one before and thank you for receiving me, but I must find my sister. Please help me find my sister. She is all I have.”

The woman laughed. “I see you have spirit. Where are you from?”

“I don’t know . . . a village where my father and mother and elder brother live. I know I shall never see them again and now my sister has been taken away from me, at a house somewhere in this town. I have to find her. I must find her.”



The Countess raised her eyebrows slightly. “I see . . . we shall talk about that shortly. She turned her gaze to Furuta, “So, here you are again, and what is it you are proposing this time?”

Furuta hesitated. He bit his lower lip. “She is strong . . . very strong, your Highness . . . “

“Don’t call me that! I am a Countess, not a Princess. Mind your manners Furuta or I will have you thrown out. So, what is it you are proposing?”

The man struggled to speak. He was sure that she had changed somewhat since the death of her husband, Count Fushima, who had been killed in the Manchurian war. The last time Furuta had brought a young girl to her, she had accepted without haranguing him. He knew that the girl had died several months ago of tubersclerosis and had not been replaced. This was his opportunity to unload this smart ass of a girl onto the Countess. He’d better be careful with his answer.

“Apologies, Countess, apologies. I was only . . . well, only stating the obvious. You are so, so regent.”

“Enough of your contrary words, get on with it.”

“Well, for a servant girl these days, and with this one’s looks and alertness — a clever one . . . say one thousand yen? The okiya where her sister is, would not take her. I don’t know why, because not only is she pretty but she is intelligent, as you can see.”

“So, the other girl is in a Geisha training house, eh? How clever of you, assessor. How many is that now, twenty . . . thirty? Surely, you have enough funds to set yourself up for life! What if I offer you a price you cannot refuse?”

“And that would be?”

“Nothing!”

“But . . . but . . . !

“Come here, girl. Come and sit beside me.”

Furuta spluttered. “I don’t think . . .”

The Countess stared at him. “I didn’t ask for your opinion. Come here, Suki.”

Suki stepped forward and when she reached the sofa she hesitated, but Countess Fushima took her by the hand and helped lift the girl close beside her. Suki looked up at the lady — she did not know much about age but thought the woman was not quite middle-aged. She had very fine features, small rosy lips, tiny ears pierced with golden ear-rings. She smelt of lilac; she was not like Ayana back at the other house. She was like a younger version of Suki’s mother.

The Countess smiled at Suki. “We are living in troubled times, hard times indeed. You know that, don’t you? There is a war up north where many men are being killed, my husband the Count, included. There is famine in many parts of the country, food is short, but we manage. We will always manage if we have strength, Suki. I see that you have considerable strength and character. I see that you are a determined person, so my dear, how would you like to be . . . my daughter?”

It hit Furuta like a thunderbolt. He staggered slightly and found it difficult to hold his balance.

“Ah . . . ah, Countess! Are you certain of this? She is a servant girl, nothing else.”

The Countess laughed. “But you yourself, Furuta, have told me of her most serene qualities, and I am sure these qualities are far higher than that of being a servant in this house, or with you for that matter. For your troubles I will give you four hundred yen for I would not wish to see you out of pocket, but that, with what you no doubt received for this girl’s sister, will suit you very nicely. You are to know that this is not a payment and I do not ask for a receipt. It is simply a gift to you from me to help you on your way. The girl can now go back to her home — which, considering the present economic situation, may not be prudent — or she may stay with me as my daughter.” She turned to Suki. “What is your wish, my dear?”

Suki thought for a moment, her eyes beginning to glisten, then she looked up at the lady. “If it pleases you, I will stay as your daughter, but only if you will help me find my sister, Mai.”

The Countess hugged her tightly, ran her hand over Suki’s hair and wiped a smudge from her face. “Agreed, my little one. We will bring her here, but a nice warm bath for you and some new clothes to begin with, and . . . you must be hungry, my daughter.”

Furuta knew he was beaten. He bowed to the Countess who looked up and said: “I think that concludes your visit, Furuta. If you will wait out by the gate I will have someone hand you the money. You will bring the papers tomorrow without fail and you will leave me the address of the okiya house where the girl’s sister is. I shall visit as soon as possible with my dear friend, the Superintendent of Police.” Suki looked up at the Countess and smiled. •