

# The Insignificant One

Kristina Akova 2020

*To all those who lost their lives in past and current wars  
To all those who witnessed the sheer horror of the atrocities*

## Prologue

BAM! THWACK!

Jolted awake from a sudden strike, my eyes - still swollen with sleep - flare open, just as the ground beneath me vibrates. I freeze. Tentatively standing up, pressing my weight against the frigid floor, my ears become extra-sensitive. Darting my almond-shaped eyes around the room: I frantically search for a dent, a vibration, a clue towards the cause for the blow. I catch a twinkle in the corner of my eye. Staring into a puddle of water that I must have spilt when I got up, I watch the reflection search my bottomless and meaningless soul, packed to the brim with emptiness. Salvaging my focus, I continue to scan the room. Ears, eyes and nose all alert. As the thump of my heart gradually ebbs away, so does the efficiency of my inspection. Giving the air a final sniff, and finding traces of a bad omen negative, I dismiss myself and turn around to go back into bed.

BAM! THWACK! BAM!

Freeze. Heartbeats pass. Danger stretches its hand, centimetres, millimetres closer. Natural instinct takes over: run!

All I can hear is the thunder of my heart; the lightning is a frequent reminder of my will to live. Scampering along the floor, my steps hit the ground at a rhythm irregular to the pummels of my heart. I reach the end of my home. A small flap of fabric separates me from a certain death. Yet, I'm safer in Heaven than in Hell. A surge of rejuvenation sends me under the cloth. I weave in and out of slippers, over and under cushions, left and right of table legs. BAM! Careful not to disturb the flailing particles of dust. Careful still not to trip on a strand of tatami. I dive under the coffee table; finally some cover. Carbonated oxygen escapes me in staccato and sporadic wheezes. I dare not channel the breath into my voicebox - one sound and it's game over. Swirling strands of air gush out of my nose and engulf my body in mist. I look like a crashed car or train, the fire burning strong, the smoke high and rising. To the left of me, a broom is being slammed against the floor. To my right, squeals of unmistakable human discomfort. Descending once more, the broom explodes much closer, leaving me jittering in the gale; with a wind force strong enough to part my sweat-packed fur behind me, it propels my sails forwards to a cranny, enveloped in the shadows of the wall. I'll choose my next move from the shade - if I can get there alive. Floor. Light. Broom. Wall. Shadow. Safe - for now. Elated by the excitement of my

successful dash, my rationality evaporates and I scamper forwards without thorough analysis. I see an open window in the corner of my eye. If I can launch myself from the coat hanger, I'll have a soft landing in the thick snow of the garden. Changing direction, I take a leap -

BAM!

A raging fire blooms within my chest, burning my organs with flames. I curl up tight to loosen the suffering, as I fight the unstoppable current carrying me away. I skid, skittering along the floor, further and further each time as my will to stay strong fades away into the penumbra I once thought would save me. A final slam of the broom and I am launched in the opposite direction to my window of flight. I shut my eyes. No point in hoping for the best when I deserve the worst. Colliding into the wall back first, I slide down the wall. Once I reach the bottom, I'll see Izanami for sure. However, once I reach the floor once more, the deity of death does not welcome me with open arms. She sends me down a hole instead. A hole to Hell. I swirl down, spinning and swivelling. I try to open my eyes but am met with a darkness deeper than when they are closed. Downwards into the tunnel of twilight, I spiral maniacally. Confusion; this is what death feels like. Confusion. How ironic. We are confused about death when it itself is the essence of confusion. A soft glow comes from the end of the underpass, it must be the angel which chooses my path of Heaven or Hell. Strong and bright as ever, the hole draws to an end.

I fall out of the tunnel and tumble into an abyss of darkness: soft, tangible and smelling of cleanliness. But somehow the gloom does not cover here.

## Chapter 1

'Hello, guinea pig. Wake-up, please,' a euphonious voice whispers a melody into my ears. Fluttering open, my eyelids reveal a pallid human face hanging over me. The frying pan is my end now. I frantically crawl out from under the handkerchief of a blanket when a syringe of pain injects itself into my hip. I fall onto the ground, almost passing out from the trauma as yesterday's memories gush into my mind like a river held back by a dam obliterating its keeper and rejuvenating the droughted valley. Pressure on my head passes down through my body, rubbing my fur in all directions before it goes back up and then down again. I try to channel my panicked breathing into a pattern that matches the force. After a while, it becomes relaxing. Once more attempting to swivel around, this time I do it painlessly. Going down on all fours to examine my entire body, I conclude that my only injuries consist of a bruise to the hip, a scratch to my ankle and a slightly dented whisker. I look at Jurojin, the almighty saviour and feel my jaw drop to the ground when I do not see the deity of longevity standing in front of me. A young boy takes his form instead.

Floppy dark brown hair dangles down into his chocolate eyes: pure with passion but cloudy with concern. As I move closer towards him to get a better look, the clouds fly away into his sclera, revealing a spirit of benevolence humbly shining in his pupils. A slim body with a hollow face, amplified by a pasty white skin tone completes my liberator.

“Children! Come to dinner please - and don't forget to wash your hands!”

A woman's voice shrill, yet soothing seems to have an effect on the boy before me. Scooping me up and placing me in a fold in his cardigan, I peek out as much as I can as I observe the change in surroundings. A contrast to my knight in shining armour's dark room, this one is well-lit with miniature suns spreading light and warmth throughout the albeit small room hanging in the ceiling. Smells of cooked rice and miso soup waft through the air, into my nostrils and out with each inhalation and exhalation I take. The leftover pickled vegetable I found on the floor and ate just before I fell asleep some time ago seems like aeons away and it is only now I realise how hungry I am. I paw at the lining of my saviour's pocket, hoping he'll notice. Unlike hail, the warm snow plopping from his chopsticks onto my head is welcome, especially when I find out it is edible. So this is rice, I tell myself, committing its texture and essence to memory. As I chew, a conversation among the people at the table emerges.

“Mother, when will Father come home?” a voice, not my saviours but similar to it, echoes out from the left side.

“He only left yesterday, Tadashi, and he told you. He will come home when we have conquered all of Asia”, the woman's melodious voice who beckoned asked them to come to dinner rings out from the right side.

“How long will it take?” Tadashi enquires sincerely.

“Our army is strong and tough, but the warriors of the south are said to be advanced in weaponry”, Mother sounds exasperated but adds with a forceful tone, “when Father comes home, he does.”

Tadashi drops the matter, leaving the atmosphere quite sullen. I squeal in hilarity at his stubbornness, but the noise, intended only for my ears, reaches my saviour's and his mother's too. My liberator stiffens, but keeps silent.

“Is that a mouse? This afternoon, I heard old Mrs Watanabe from upstairs smack her floors with the broom again. I'd hate to think that she drove the vermin into our home,” shuddering, Mother concludes, “if any of you boys see a creature, even if it's a cockroach tell me immediately”.

“Yes Mother,” Tadashi replies, loudly and proudly, leaving my saviour emptily echoing his brother's words.

“Ki-ki, please stop dropping your rice on your lap. I am uncertain for the future and we must save every grain possible”.

“Yes Mother, I am sorry.” I could feel the vibrations of my rescuer as he spoke.

“After dinner may I go to watch a movie in town with my friends please?”

“No Tadashi. And you know why.”

“Can I at least run out to buy a newspaper? Everyone else at school will be talking about it.”

“OK, fine. But tomorrow after school you must work in Uncle Shigero’s restaurant for at least an hour and a half.”

“Of course, anything!”

After clearing both his and his brother’s plate (who slammed the door on his way out), my saviour and I went back upstairs where he set me on his desk. Quietly humming he stroked, petted and brushed me, with a touch as supple as a feather. I relaxed in the muscles of his hand, playing a rhythm alike to that of waves, crashing feelings of sleepiness and contentment as the foam disperses. With the mist of the sea settling over lightly, his words cascaded stronger.

“Your name is Ryo, meaning excellence. I know you will live up to it, little Ryo”.

Footsteps approached the room and I got slipped into a drawer of some sort. Among my inmates in the prison of wood are several sorts of stationery: pens, erasers, rulers, paper clips and the like. I peak out from a small opening at the top, having decided that my fellow prisoners won’t keep me as nice a company as I should like. Moving around the room like a sparrow, no sooner arriving at one place before taking off for the next, he collected books and papers from around the room, as meticulous as a bird building its nest when packing it into a bag. The doorway fills with a silhouette, and as it glides over, I realise it is the woman from dinner - Mother.

“Talking to yourself again... how are you, my darling?” She sits down on the straw mattress, her simple clothes even more drab against the threadbare blanket. He shrugs, leaving his bag at the door and sitting down beside her.

“Is something bothering you? Is it Father?”

“No, it’s really nothing.”

“I love you.”

Sitting down next to her, he took her hand and gently began to fold it, moving each slender finger individually, slowly but surely drawing the stress from her hand into a needle of fine finger work, before turning the sharp end and plunging it into his wrist; injecting the sorrow into himself. She did not notice his change in psyche, but I knew that he had swapped her morose

energy with his serene one. Opening her eyes, she sighed and embraced him, placing her head on his shoulder.

“I gave Tadashi money for his newspaper, so I’m going to give you money too. Maybe you can buy a toy.”

“You know I don’t need it. Take it back.”

“No, I insist.”

“I can’t accept this. Buy something nice for yourself.”

“I’ll leave it in your bag in case you change your mind.” She bent over and placed the money into a scuffed-up navy school bag, zipping it carefully after standing up and shadowing the room with the grace of her umbra from the doorway.

“You have school tomorrow, it’s best if you go to bed now.”

Having already changed into his pyjamas, he bowed deeply to her before sandwiching himself between the straw floor and the cover. Seeing him enveloped deep within the cold berth, she flicked off the only light in the room; a small yellow lamp by the door extinguished its warm glow before closing the door. As the last sliver of light got swollen by the starving darkness, her melodious voice floated through once more. A beacon of day in the suffocating night: “Good night, Kiyoshi, my quiet son.”

Kiyoshi. So that is the name of my saviour.

## **Chapter 2**

The next morning, I awake to the gentle alarm of charred gold filtering in through the restored but tattered curtains, like angels descending from the Heavens above, dancing, twirling and fluttering on my face, promising me a beautiful day ahead. It certainly starts that way, with Kiyoshi and I venturing out of the basement flat while most of the city sleeps. From my haven under his hood, I observe the city of Shizuoka come to life. As we first step out into the day, a slither of the sun still remains hidden on the Eastern horizon, with the rest of the sky a pale pink with splashes of artistically painted turquoise and lilac. As our trapeze leads us out of the residential district and into the suburbs of the business one, more and more apartments begin to turn on lights, like a sea of lanterns glowing stronger and stronger with each step taken; Kiyoshi, digging his talons into a small paper bag of onigiri - seaweed wrapped rice in a triangular shape - afraid of the big, black crows notorious for snatching lunch and babies from the unwary. Attending the neighbouring school, Tadashi walks “with” us - I mean to say he is just shy of running away from us. When we turn the corner, however, my disappointment melts away with my heart as he embraces his girlfriend. Without looking back at us, he slows down his pace

considerably to match hers. Both being in the top ten scorers of their middle school tests, they were given a place at the best public high-school in the district - the only one with conditional spots, Kiyoshi whispers to me.

It is barely half seven when we bump into a large crowd of students, Kiyoshi's classmates. Like a mob of turtles, bearing blue and black shells upon their backs, the students cheerfully walk through the ever-broadening roads, raising a cloud of chatter so cacophonous that women with hair wrapped in towels and foam-bearded men open their windows, lean out and shake their fists, pattering a drizzle of half-hearted shushes upon the children, knowing fully well that nothing could stop their exuberant aura on a crisp, Monday morning in the late spring of 1936. The atmosphere is thick with anxiety and nervousness, because, Kiyoshi whispers to me, today they will get their results from their final exams before their holiday, starting next week.

With only fifteen minutes before their lessons begin, a toy man in his gleaming white suit, a mockery of the student's uniform, comes out of his shop, bearing upon his back an extensive stall of toys. Balanced along a ledge, teetering dangerously from a string top and emitting a euphonious ringing noise from the bells in the bottom crates, the toys, predominantly handcrafted from wood, come in all shapes and sizes for all ages and all genders. I had thought that the children were so relieved with their exams finished, nothing could spark their spirits into blossoming fireworks, but the toy man proved me wrong. With his broad smile revealing crooked but clean teeth - matching the sparkle in his eyes - it was hard not to feel even more mirthful than just seconds before when he'd scuttled out of his workshop.

Immediately, all the children, middle and high schoolers, form an orderly queue in front of the toy man, digging into pockets for any spare change, swinging bags over in front of their chests to retrieve wallets. The well-kept roads emitted no dust or dirt, even with students jumping up and down to get a good look at the selection and the prices, yelling updates to friends in the back of the line of which toys are left. Tadashi, far at the front of the line, is secured a spot by his friends and he stands with a protective arm around his girlfriend as they laugh with their friends. In all the jostling, Kiyoshi is filtered through like a stubborn lone coffee grain separated from the rest of the dissolved powder to the very back of the fifty-strong queue. To avoid getting my head caught on someone's swaying backpack (thankfully it's bright blue) I shuffle into his breast pocket, where I get an even better look. Tucking his lunch under his arm, he digs out the folded cash his mother gave him yesterday. A group of late-comers barge into the back of the line, making their appearance known as they begin to scream the names of friends at the front. Ignored, they turn to Kiyoshi.

"Hey Kiyoshi, my man!"

"Hi Seiichi. How are you?" Kiyoshi's soft clipped voice seemed even more subdued in contrast to Seiichi's obnoxious projection.

“Good, thanks. What are you gonna buy?” He separates his reply from his question, and his question with the silence that follows with lighthearted, encouraging laughter.

“A yo-yo, maybe. Depends on what is left by the time we get there.” Kiyoshi replied, shyly smiling in response to Seiichi’s coax.

“A yo-yo? Why do you want one of those for? They are so old-fashioned! And cheap too, you know I have too many! How much money do you even have?” Seiichi shrieks, snatching the folded paper money in Kiyoshi’s careful grasp that weakens with as he recoils in embarrassment, cheeks flaring as red as the paint on his desired toy.

“Only half a yen? Such a poor boy.” Sneering, Seiichi’s group imitate a pack of hyenas, howling with laughter as Kiyoshi hangs his head even lower, wishing for a shell he can hide his face in. Returning his money, Seiichi cuts in front, bringing his wolves along with him, leaving Kiyoshi in their dust of hilarity.

Pretending to fidget with the buckles of his bag, tears as bitter as my feelings for Seiichi beg to be escape the wall of eyelashes, but Kiyoshi kills them instead, smearing them against the sleeve of his white shirt. Ticking to five to eight, the town clock warns the students of their remaining freetime, however, with the line for the toyman even longer than ten minutes ago and desperate to be alone, Kiyoshi leaves the queue. Making a left turn, he fades right into the swarming crowds tapping out incongruent tessellations of rhythm onto the pavement. A rushing businessman with an unusually large briefcase excuses his way through the crowd, his head bent in a permanent bow of apology as he elbows his way through shoulders. Hitting Kiyoshi’s arm, we are launched to the edge of the sidewalk, next to a bundle of blankets on threadbare newspapers. A small, shallow and ceramic bowl - typically used for rice - lies discarded and hopeless at the head of the heap. Smudged with streaks of dirt on the outside, the bowl contains a small coin, like a hurricane, with a strong and detrimental shell, but calm and promising on the inside. Watching all the people go by, most without barely a glance in the beggar’s direction springs tears from Kiyoshi’s eyes once more. In a fit of acceptance, he opens his bag and places a still-warm lunch of onigiri beside the coin in the bowl.

By the time we’ve settled into the classroom, the pauper has already woken up to the delicious comfort of hot rice and tuna, wrapped in salted seaweed.

### **Chapter 3**

After school, the teacher hands out the results of their most recent assessments in an envelope with their test and mark inside. Having to bring it home and have their parents sign it, Kiyoshi slips it inside his bag, squashed snugly between his two largest textbooks, yanking the zipper loudly to hide his rumbling stomach. Waiting for the most students to have left the school so that he doesn’t run into them on his way home, he hangs around near a corner of a courtyard where a big group is gathering. If he stands close enough to be a part, but far enough not to engage

with them, no-one should ask him questions. Watching the seemingly never-ending student body sporadically rush out of the school as the pale green tree of education squeezes out all of its lemons - bright and cheerful students - and begins to pick out the unripe clumps of lime that won't leave. Overhearing the large group's conversation beginning to blend into the topic of going home, Kiyoshi leaves before the end of it. Taking the now empty regular route home, he notices the toy-man just packing up as the last of the students leave the school. Remembering how he still has some money, he goes up and asks the man if he had any toys left. However bleached his white outfit was this morning, the toy-man's clothing now has streaks of black oil and brown mud strewn across his shirt as if it was a canvas and the nature of his job the paintbrush.

"You're in luck, young man - I have one left." Annoyed, but trying to hide it, the toy-man reaches into a cabinet of his moveable stand and pulls out a wooden red yo-yo. Although America was producing plastic and other polymers at this time, it was still expensive to ship it to Japan, let alone produce it.

"Thank you so much!" Kiyoshi's smile was full of genuinity as he paid the 0.4 yen fee that the yo-yo was worth.

Leaving the toy-stand playing with the yo-yo, he walks home with an great skip in his step, undaunted by the burden of a grade he carries on his back. From my place in his breast-pocket, the yo-yo is a beautiful vermillion shade, catching the sun's wink in its reflection everytime he swings it up.

Government officials hurriedly walk around the street, pasting posters asking for military help on the lampposts, asking for recruits that they could begin to train. Putting it in the school district where two primary schools, four secondary schools and a university are located was a smart choice, I had to agree with what Kiyoshi was whispering to me under his breath; if they were looking for people to train, graduating students were by far the best recruits (those with office jobs would not leave the comfort of stability without urge).

Passing by the pauper's street on their way home - alone - as the afternoon never had the business of the morning or the evening, Kiyoshi - looking to see if the beggar was still there - tripped on his shoelace, sending me flying out of his pocket and tumbling in tight circles around on the pavement. He himself fell flat on his face, but remained stationary unlike the yo-yo which decided to mimic me by also cascading down onto the pavement and rolling down, miraculously not shattering into two. Quick to stand up back on his feet despite his heavy backpack, his hands and knees presenting a beige and white background respectively to a series of scrapes and dirt while his face shines with embarrassment, a deep tinge of pale red. The yo-yo, now matching his face colour was now held by a young girl, she couldn't have been more than three years old. Scooping me up and placing me back into his pocket in a single sweep with his back turned to the young girl and her mother, he puts on a brave smile and rotates to face them.



“Careful, are you alright?” the woman asks with a smile only a mother can muster: sympathetic and understanding.

“Yes, I’m fine thank you. I should tie my shoe-lace.” Kiyoshi responds, quickly bending down again to tie the black ribbon, before the woman can reprimand him.

“I believe this is yours” the woman says, gently prying her daughters’ fingers off the yo-yo. A small wail escapes the girl and once Kiyoshi stood up, I saw the particles of dense cloud beginning to accumulate in her eyes, hinting it was going to rain soon.

“Miyoko - please. It’s not yours.” the woman speaks with a knife’s edge at the back of her voice.

“But mama - I don’t have any toys” and boy, when the rain came, did it come. Tears of sadness typhooned out of her eyes, the saltiness fogging up the entire retina so it was all a grey blur; you couldn’t tell the white from the dark pupil.

“You know what, she can keep it. I have another one at home. Goodbye and enjoy your day.” Kiyoshi lied to the woman through a stiff smile, knowing perfectly well he hadn’t had a toy since his seventh birthday. Now quite hungry and not really having the energy to deal with a crying child and an equally annoying insisting mother, he quickly walked past the pair before the woman could protest.

“Thank you, say thank you, Miyoko” the woman nudged her child as she stroked her shoulder.

“Thank you” in a high voice broken up by hiccups is the last thing Kiyoshi heard before he turned the corner.

As soon as he unlocked the front door and repocketed the key, he got a pan and began to reheat yesterday’s leftover rice. Although they were not rich, they had electricity. Spreading wildly across America and subsequently the world throughout the 1920s, by halfway through the next decade a large proportion of Japanese homes had electricity, particularly those in the cities and their suburbs. After five minutes of frying, he couldn’t stand it anymore and dumped it on a plate, careful to turn off the gas. He had set me upon the tabletop and sat in the chair to my left, pushing the bowl between us.

“Eat.” Obeying his simple command, I crawled up and began to nibble at the warm rice, taking a grain at a time. Once he had seen I’d had my fill, which I’d shown by lying down, ready to sleep off the effects of a delicious meal, he tucked in with wooden chopsticks. Once he finished, he washed the dish, pan, and chopsticks and dried them, replacing them exactly where he’d found them. Then, he took me - drunk on the effects of eating enough - and his backpack and moved us into his room where he placed me on his pillow and covered me with his handkerchief of a blanket. Before I succumbed to the waves of sleep and drifted away with the current, I watched him take out his books and begin to do homework, or study or both.

Slipping in and out of consciousness, I vaguely remember the front door being obnoxiously opened and slammed closed and then some time later repeated but with much more grace.

“Kiyoshi, Tadashi - I’m home!” Their mother’s shrill voice wakes me up from my peaceful nap and Kiyoshi quickly places me in his pocket before heading out from his room into the living, clutching the envelope with his grades.

“Hello Mother, how are you?” Kiyoshi asks, giving her the envelope in exchange for her bag of groceries which he begins to unload in the cabinets.

“Good, thank you dear son”. She carefully picks along the sealed segment until she opens it. Watching it get pulled out, Kiyoshi sucks his breath in a little.

“Come here” she tells him, holding her arms half as wide open as her smile .

He goes to her as her arms wrapped around him tightly. His own arms firm by his side, he can feel the stress in her shoulders; just as he carries around a burden of books that could be removed, she carries a burden of constant depression and anxiety.

“Look.” After an eternity, she lets go and hands him the paper.

A 99 in Japanese and History and a 100 in Maths and Science, his overall ranking in the school and the district was first, in the entire nation, third. Having one more year of middle school before he graduates to high school, the seventh grade was arguably the most important pre-teen year. The students’ results from this year would determine which high-school they would go to, and being third in the nation guaranteed scholarships from the best high-schools in the country.

“Well done, well done, Ki-ki! I’m so proud of you! Ta! Tadashi! Your brother came third!”

Tadashi emerged out of his room, dressed in his best clothes with his coat draped among his shoulders, hands in pockets.

“In the school?”

“No, in the nation! This is incredible, quickly get a piece of paper to write about the good news to Father - he must know how well Kiyoshi has done!”

“Great job, Ki-ki. That’s amazing.” Patting Kiyoshi on the shoulder, his eyes and smile say otherwise.

Kiyoshi smiled and shrugged, simply glad he had passed. He was thankful for all the hours he spent studying, he told me later, and pleased that they had paid off.

“Now, Tadashi - for your results.” Their mother had just signed her letter to their father and looks up at him expectantly.

“Here they are”. He reaches into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper.

“Tadashi - you know you aren't meant to -” she stopped mid sentence as she finished smoothing out the creases of shame.

“Tadashi, how could you?” tears fill her eyes, but not from excitement. Signing the line for parent signature, she looks him in the eyes with a heavy heart and but gossamer voice, shaking her head, “with grades like this, it's only a matter of time before you get kicked out of your good school and get sent to a bad one”.

The previous elated atmosphere of their small kitchen immediately dies, being reincarnated by one of shock. Tadashi steps forward with an initially concerned face, speaking quietly before gradually gaining confidence.

“But Mother, I'm not going to school next year,” taking her hands in his he admits: “I'm going to join the Army. I don't belong in the classroom, I am not the kind of person who can just pour knowledge into their brain. For me, it all comes out my nose in a huff. I want to be free, I want to travel the world. I want to be active, to be strong. I want to serve my nation and to fight for it. I want to give back to the country that gave me so much and make her proud! But most of all, I want to find Father.”

She looks at him incredulously, disbelieving every word coming out of his mouth, except for his final sentence. In fact, that is the only part she accepts as true.

He lets go of her hands, now as white as the paper she signed. Finally relieved his secret is out, he goes to his room where he emerges clutching their only suitcase, a duffle bag and a backpack.

“I already signed up and they accepted me. My training starts tomorrow and within the next five years, I will be travelling around the globe. I'll write to you of course and send postcards. I love you, Mother. I'm doing this for the family.”

“You know how I felt when Father was recruited. If you really want to do something for the family, you'd stay here with Kiyoshi and I.” Their mother, with a raging typhoon of silent tears flooding her face turned her back on him and went to her room, where she slammed the door firmly.

Kneeling over by the door to tie his boots, he gave a cheerful wave despite his eyes also welling with tears. He couldn't help himself. Rushing over, he gave Kiyoshi a hug lasting a second, but the second was long enough for a single tear to drop from Tadashi's face onto Kiyoshi's shoulder, staining his uniform with the bitter saltiness.

"I love you, brother."

"I love you, Tadashi. Stay safe and come back soon."

"Of course, I will! Obviously you'll see me in the paper, alongside articles about my heroism and medals - don't forget to attend the ceremonies!"

A loud strong yes boomed from Kiyoshi's heart, rattling all the particles in air until it reached Tadashi. The two brothers stared at their reflections in each other's eyes as the world stopped revolving, extending their goodbye as it hung suspended in the moment.

Neither of them could have suspected it would be their final one.

#### **Chapter 4**

Some five years later, Kiyoshi was Tadashi's age when he left home for the army. In those five years he had grown twice as tall but was half as slim, hiding his sadness that tore a hole in his heart, each day getting larger and larger until one day, it would consume him whole. He filled the hole of broken love with studying, he got 100s in all his subjects for the past four academic years consecutively and his mother approached her loss with the same attitude. Working 11 hours a day before Tadashi left, she started slaving away for 13 hours, with the intensity twice as high. Distracting herself from the loss of her son, she often volunteered to work through weekends and brought home her projects to work on. Sleep was her enemy and she avoided it like a criminal avoided the police. I never left Kiyoshi's side because he wouldn't let me, although he never showed me to his mother. I became the second half of his soul.

Five years beforehand he was in the penultimate year of middle school and when he came third in the nation for exam results, he was offered multiple placings from schools all across the country. But he didn't leave the district and ended up going to the best school in the next neighbourhood. Going to Tadashi's would have left him in tears at the end of every day and it helped that Seiichi wouldn't be there to make it worse. Now at the beginning of his final year of school, by the end of the next academic year he would be off to university. His typical day in the autumn of 1941 consisted of school, working in Uncle Shigoru's restaurant which used to be Tadashi's responsibility, coming home and studying, well into the dawn before repeating the process. But that was just in his personal bubble. The bubble that consumed the world spelled war. The decade-long war that waged in East-Asia from 1941 had nothing to do with the war that started in 1939 in Europe, even though the Japanese army signed the Tripartite pact with Germany and Italy, confirming the Axis alliance. Rumours within the neighbourhood and the

local papers had it that the only reason the Europeans had signed was because they had a weak Navy and didn't want Japan (with arguably the strongest Navy in the world) to attack them. It seemed almost everyday too that the Japanese newspaper reported a new segment of Asia that the army had seized, although there were never any mentions of Tadashi or their father, which was the only reason both mother and son scoured the papers.

The Japanese school year starts in April and ends in March with two one-month holidays of vacation, making September the beginning of the second term. With exams at the end of the second term drawing closer with each second, Kiyoshi came home as soon as his shift at the restaurant ended and no sooner had he fed us both rice (that became our ritual), he started reading.

Knock knock knock.

Startled, Kiyoshi sweeps me off his bed and into his pocket as he has done for the past five years. No-ones knocked at the front door in a very long time, the only people that want to get in all have their own key. Reluctantly, he undoes the hatch and opens the door to reveal two dressed members of the Imperial Japanese Army, guns in belts and buttons gleaming. After a long awkward pause in which the two identical men eye Kiyoshi's knife-slim build and then each other, one of them speaks in a deep but clear voice.

"Is this the home of Tadashi Tanaka?" he asks.

"Yes, sir, but he left for the army five years ago, deported to Kweilin in China some months ago and has not set foot in this house since late March 1939." Kiyoshi replied thinking back to Tadashi's last letter before the summer, his high and mellow voice a sharp contrast to the man's.

"I am afraid he'll never step in this house again." The other one said, passing Kiyoshi a letter.

**It is with deep regret that we inform the family members of Mr. Tadashi Tanaka of his death in Kweilin, China due to disease on August 12th 1941.**

**Condolences,  
Imperial Japanese Army (IJA)**

Tadashi had been dead for over a month, and everyday Kiyoshi and his mother had prayed for his survival. They had no idea that he'd even fallen ill. His eyes sprung with tears that didn't spill over; they froze of sadness before they even reached his eyelashes.

There are two kinds of sadness, the type that is lukewarm and slowly consumes you, starting from your heart and spreading to your feet, fingertips and ends of your hair until you are nothing but it. You don't feel it consuming you, for it is a numb, almost invisible emotion and you only

realise what has happened when you feel a hollow type of full and a lifetime has passed. Full of sadness, you float on a single thread of vitality that urges you to live. And then, there is the type that is colder than a Siberian winter. That kind claws at you and rips you apart almost as soon as you hear the words spelling your fate. Once the realisation kicks it and the words settle in your mind, they as soon send shards of icicles straight to your heart, piercing and wrenching it apart. Determined to drag you down with it. Determined to swallow you up in glacial anger and watch you drown in scalding remorse. Determined to oversee your throbbing death and to feel happiness when your heart beats no more.

There is no in between.

Closing his eyes, the searing blood bursting his veins melted the ice at his retina and a paint stroke of saturated red liquid brushed down both his cheeks simultaneously; evaporating into steam as they slid, leaving a trail of smoke in their wake, rising from his face into the atmosphere above (which hung low to the Earth with its weight of accumulated sadness that ascended from below).

“But Mr. Tanaka, you know the army’s job is not to deliver letters,” the man who handed him the letter is clearly in a rush or is uncomfortable and wants to change the subject, “your brother speaks - well, spoke - so highly of you and always urged the higher commanders to recruit you. But there was never no need as we always had a fluid trickle of applicants. Now, however, that’s a different story. There is an island we want to invade, but we are not sure who the enemy will send to defend it as it is quite important. And we need to be prepared for the worst. We need numbers. Numbers that we no longer have. The disease that took your brother also took thousands of other soldiers. And they were the regiment we were planning to send. Now, with almost a tenth gone, we need replacements and we’ve run out of trained applicants. We need you to fill Tadashi’s spot, do you understand?”

“What about my mother?” Kiyoshi retorted. He knew this was what they came for as soon as he read the letter. An aggressiveness that hadn’t been there before now underlined every one of his words.

“Tadashi did always say his ears were his brain,” one nudged the other before quickly adding, “that’s all been taken care of. We’ll give you fifteen minutes, from now, to pack your things in this bag”, he chucked a large backpack at him that they’d left in the hall, “and then you’re coming with us.”

“No. No! My mother lost so much. I can’t leave her.” Kiyoshi shook his head out of desperation that echoed in his voice.

“Mr Tanaka, we won’t ask you again. Besides, don’t you want to avenge Tadashi’s death?”

“Tadashi is dead. And I couldn’t do anything about it. I didn’t even know about it! But my mother is alive, although she doesn’t wish to be. She is dying of sadness. I can still protect her from death. I know she is at the top of his victim list, purely because she never deserved it. How can I leave her? How can I leave her knowing she won’t be alive when I return? Tell me!” I’d never seen him like this before. He dropped the bag and shook the officer who asked him the question, juddering the non-existent answers out of the man. He was an insane kind of angry, shivering with sadness.

Retaliating with a simple movement, the officer wriggled himself out of Kiyoshi’s grasp and grabbed his shoulders, pinning him against the wall with his feet at least ten centimetres off the floor, his shoes dangling.

“Your mother is Japanese, she is the one who provided you with your creators and kept you alive. She is the only one who matters. Her survival and your future are intertwined. Do you know what the penalty for not being loyal to your home country is, Mr Tanaka?” The officer spat into his face.

Kiyoshi nodded and was released. Collapsing to the floor, he lay there, panting to force air into his lungs as he wheezed his shock out, only to gasp it back in. The officer threw the bag on top of him.

“Uniform is in the bag. Put that on and fill the backpack with things you think you’ll need. You now have ten minutes, thanks to your uncooperation.” The officer barked at him.

“And if you try to escape,” said the other before cocking his head towards his gun, “. . .”

Kiyoshi scrambled to his feet, snatched the bag off the floor and rushed to his room. Changing into the uniform, which consisted of brown cargo pants with pockets twenty centimetres long, shiny warm black boots that went up half his shin and a puttee (a long strip of cloth that was wrapped around the outside of your pants) for each leg. Slipping into the white cotton button-up shirt, he put the brown jacket on top and buttoned it up, securing it with the brown and yellow horizontally striped belt. The jacket had his Division number, 38, on the collar and the red and yellow stripes upon it detailed his squad, the infantry. Next, he put on a steel helmet before covering the helmet, placing a field cap of the same brown shade as the jacket and pants, making sure the star aligned with his nose. He also had a belt-pack-sling - even I didn’t know what it was called. It was similar to black belt around his waist, but had a thread that went over his shoulder and linked the front to the back. A gun was supposed to be slung in one way and the sword in the other, which he found when he nearly cut himself on it while thrusting his hands inside the bag to see if there was anything else. The gun was an Arisaka, which had replaced the previous army gun (Murata) in 1897. He stuffed the clothes he’d been wearing and all his other ones in his bag, before filling the rest with the contents of his room, which wasn’t much. His books and my handkerchief went inside among other miscellaneous items and while his eyes darted around the room, pinpointing useless necessities that he was going to leave

behind, he laid his eyes on his folder containing his perfect streak of scores. He closed the bag and swung it on his shoulder, seizing the baby blue folder at the last minute. He came out into the corridor and placed it on the dining table where the officers had left the letter for his mother.

He joined the pair outside in the hall and closed the door, making sure to lock it before placing the key in his pocket, next to me.

That door was opened once more later that evening and then never again.

## **Chapter 5**

From September to early November of 1941, Kiyoshi was sent to the training centre in Kyoto where he, alongside the brothers and fathers of other men who had been killed alongside Tadashi learnt how to use a gun and what rules to follow and under which circumstances, and which rules to follow under all circumstances, as well as the possible punishments for not adhering to them. They ran laps around the facility, did push and pull-ups and ate minimally; everything was monitored, from the time they woke up to when they fell asleep in the bunkers. The thing they spent the most time on was memorising logistics. Everyday, they would be drilled on all kinds of tactics in all kinds of situations and those that didn't remember repeated until they couldn't talk.

Told they would be heading to British-occupied Hong Kong some time in December, an island off China's South-Eastern coast, they were warned of its potentially heavy defence, especially since it was a harbour and was marine-wise very significant. In order to prepare the men for every possible scenario, they were also taught English, with an emphasis on pronunciation as opposed to known-words. Singled out as intellectuals, Kiyoshi and some other men skipped out tactic-review lessons which they already knew off by heart and instead developed their English skills, each trying to master a certain denomination such as British English, Canadian English or Australian English and learnt its slang, culture and accent alongside it.

In total, Kiyoshi was one of a around one hundred men who were given a crash course on war and they were all placed in the 38th Division (out of 51) because of the one thing they had in common: their region of recruitment, Central Japan. Within this Division, there were three regiments that were going to be sent to Hong Kong: the 228th, the 229th and the 230th. Out of the hundred men, there were give or take thirty assigned to each regiment, with Kiyoshi placed in the 230th due to his last name. The head of the Division, Major General T. Sato was in charge of a grand total 8086 officers and men, including the 66th Infantry Regiment and 38th Engineer Regiment. The 228th regiment was the largest, consisting of 3038 officers and men spread between two battalions. Recruited from Nagoya, some 200 kilometers west of Shizuoka, they were led by Colonel Tehichi Doi. Although it contained three battalions, the 229th regiment had a total of 2901 officers and men who were led by Colonel Tanaka Ryosaburo, all of which were from Gifu, a further 40 kilometers west of Nagoya. Finally, the smallest regiment of 230 contained two battalions sharing some 2890 men, all of who were from Shizuoka, including their



Colonel, Toshishige Shoji. These hundred men travelled to Kweilin where, once united with the rest of their regiment, journeyed out by the newly-built train system and then biked to Hong Kong in high spirits, fuelled by their most-recent victory over the Chinese.

On Sunday, December 7th 1941, Kiyoshi and the rest of the Japanese men crossed easily into Hong Kong territory, and quickly found where the British were stationed. With them on one foliage-smothered peak and the British on the one directly opposite, they started an artillery duel, sending bomb after bomb in cannon's operated by four or five men each. Throughout the entire process, the Japanese never stopped hurling bombs over into the opposite mountain, although the oncoming rain pelting them with sparks of fire threatening to blow them all up, was sporadic. It stopped and started and then stopped once more. Even in the periods of sunshine, however, the noise was atrocious. Somewhat safe in Kiyoshi's cargo pocket, even through the fabric I wasn't immune to the sound of a match being lit, the wick sizzling and the bomb going off; you could hear the grenade whistling in the air ferociously like a warning as it travelled at dangerous speeds. When you multiply this noise by 100 on our part and perhaps 50 on theirs, in addition to the occasional barrage of bombs exploding to the left and right of you - the noise was clamorous and horrific, almost to the point where I couldn't describe it.

Finally, the British sent a signal of retreat and backed off from the mountain, leaving it all to us. Leaving not a moment or a bomb to spare, the Japanese quickly packed up their cannons and walked some 40 kilometres east towards the Gin Drinkers' Line. Starting at Gin Drinkers' Bay in Kwai Chung, it was 18 kilometres of concrete ribbon passing through Kam Shan, Shing Mun Reservoir, Beacon Hill, Lion Rock and Tate's Cairn before finally finishing in at Port Shelter in Sai Kung. The middle of the line, around Shing Mun was the most important as it was the Shing Mun Redoubt that housed the headquarters of the Line. Told that the Gin Drinkers' Line was similar to the Great Wall of China and would take one hundred years to capture because of its supposedly impenetrable defence, many Japanese, including Kiyoshi, approached the Line knowing that he'd never exit. Fight for your emperor and your loyalty to your mother, Japan, was the last thing Colonel Shoji said to his men before they entered the line, expecting to be attacked by the trees and the sky. Tense with anticipation, the atmosphere didn't go away even when they were a third into the line and still had not been attacked.

Hiking through Shing Mun along Gin Drinkers' Line, from Kiyoshi's cargo pocket I noticed something odd against the sea of forest. A flash of red, a splash of yellow and a dot of blue waving around in the far distance. I jumped up and down in his pocket, certain I was not hallucinating despite having eaten almost nothing in the past few days. Pretending to look for something in his pocket, he scooped me up and placed me on his shoulders, where I pointed towards the waves of colour. Shocked that he hadn't noticed before, he quickly alerted the others, some of which started laughing at the sheer idiocy. Their warm laughter never broke the ice-cold tension. Loading their hands and pockets with grenades - some tucked them inside their jacket folds - they moved towards the laundry that screamed "come and get me!". Silently running across the mud-filled surface, careful not to step on the concrete for the noise was too loud, the closer they got to the bunker the more signs of human activity they had. Forming a

line, they each undid a grenade or two and then ran past the entrance of the bunker, dropping their bombs inside as they did. The screams that the enemy let out with the constant chucking of grenades echoed throughout the mountain range, alerting the other British soldiers hiding out in the bunkers of Gin Drinkers' Line and they all fled south as the Japanese ran east, capturing the rest of Gin Drinker's Line - the official entrance into Hong Kong.

The following day, December 10th, the Japanese hiked through the rest of Hong Kong, shooting any signs of the British or their Commonwealth counterparts, reaching Kowloon very quickly. By the time they arrived, many of the Allied soldiers had escaped to Hong Kong Island, taking almost all the ships with them. Deciding it was enough for the day, the three regiments of the Japanese army paraded through the streets of Kowloon before being told to do whatever they wanted as a reward for their hard-work. Kiyoshi, knowing what was going to happen in the next couple of hours and wanted no part, asked Colonel Seiji if there was anything he could do to help them prepare for the next day. Disbelieving Kiyoshi, Seiji laughed but upon realising he was serious handed Kiyoshi a series of pamphlets depicting a large Japanese soldier standing on the mainland part of Hong Kong with a small British soldier on the island with the sea bordered off with a series of the Japanese sword, a katana. With the words **SURRENDER NOW** in bold red in the corner, it was quite clear that the Japanese had the British surrounded.

"Make as many copies of this as you can. And also," he chucked Kiyoshi a white bedsheet and a bucket of red paint, "write peace mission in English on this. You can write English, right?"

"Yes, sir, thank you." With his newfound job, he wandered into the now-abandoned ferry terminal as the rape and massacre just five hundred metres away began. The entire city was a scream and it was impossible to drown out their song of despair as the black night descended. The faint light of dawn reflected the diminishing screams, until their pain was a whisper of help.

Emerging from his sanctuary with all his copies and the sheet, he lifted them high above his head as he stepped through the flood of blood, careful to step over the bodies that seeped the vermilion liquid. Absolutely horrified by what his fellow soldiers were capable of, he wanted to get off the island as soon as possible although the memory was now stitched into his mind. Thrusting what he'd done to Colonel Seiji, the soldiers capable of piloting a plane flew out to the island and dropped the pamphlets for the British soldiers to read and hopefully surrender. They also started a peace mission with Kiyoshi's sheet, but they'd hardly done it for fifteen minutes when the British governor sent his reply of two letters: no.

If that's the game they want to play, Colonel Seiji said, then we shall play it too.

Remember the fire exchange across the mountains at Hong Kong's unofficial entrance between the British and the Japanese? Well, that happened all over again except this time it was over Victoria harbour and the Allies didn't retaliate. It started on December 13th and ended on the 18th, at which point, Kiyoshi told me with a slight smile, General Major Sato was sick of playing the British game. As soon as darkness blanketed the island on the night of the 18th, the three

regiments sailed across Victoria Harbour into Hong Kong island. The full moon their only guide across the harbour, Colonel Seiji briefed his men on what would happen.

“Intelligence has told us the British are hiding in trenches and bunkers with doors in the middle of the island where there is a reservoir, at Wong Nai Chung Gap. We will go there, hopefully by midnight or 1 am at the latest and then in order for them to open up, the person with the best English will go up and say something along the lines of don't worry, it's me, let me in, in English of course and then when they open up, that person will stab their bayonet into the soldier who opened up the bunker and then will open fire. Then, the rest will follow. Who would like to be the leading soldier?”

The men cheered and raised their hands, drowning out each other's attempts at English with their own.

“Be quiet - do you want them to know we are coming?”, Seiji hissed, “Besides, I've already chosen. Kiyoshi Tanaka will say it.”

With suddenly all eyes on him, from my place in his pocket I could feel his entire skin burn from embarrassment. The heat emitted from his thigh was enough to warm me, so I could only imagine the redness of his face.

Reaching the end of the harbour, they all got off the boat and began their hike into Wong Nai Chung. Quickly finding the bunkers as they were not well concealed, Kiyoshi was pushed forward by the group to do it. And quickly. I felt the anxiety coursing through his veins as he trembled, lifting his hand to knock at the hatch.

“Don't worry - it's me, Joe”. Kiyoshi said in a perfect accent. The silence that followed echoed the emptiness of the wait, prolonging the moment from a second into a century.

The hatch opened. Driving his bayonet deep into something soft, he pulled it and gunned down the people in the bunker as more and more Japanese dropped down into it and opened their own fires. There was obviously a couple of exits as those still alive clamoured for either the left or the right of the bunker and once they were sure everyone was out, the few Japanese that had entered, including Kiyoshi, exited to aid their fellow men in the destruction of the soldiers. Spread around the entire Wong Nai Chung mountain range, Kiyoshi found himself near a concrete building as he took down soldier after soldier, his fellow Japanese men right behind him supporting him every step of the way. Hearing a muttering that sounded English coming from the building, he told his companions that he'd be heading in. They nodded and he went inside, hiding behind the folds of the building to make out the words.

“And so this Jap shoots me, right in the arm. I don't have an elbow anymore. But I don't care. When they find me and find me they will, I'll have this entire gun loaded with a new magazine. They are going down.” Kiyoshi heard someone, most likely talking to themselves, pant through a

self-pep talk. He decided to go outside and get support to destroy this man together, especially if what he said about the gun was true. He stepped from the fold in the wall.

“Stop,” the man barked, “I see you. Drop the weapon gently and turn around.”

Bending down, Kiyoshi placed the gun on the floor silently and, body convulsing in fear, he turned around to face the man. It was true, his entire right arm had been shot, blood drowning the flesh and bone. The gun in the man’s left arm, he tightened his grip around the trigger. Anger swollen in his eyes, the man’s icy blue retina showed no mercy, no feelings. Anger consumed him and controlled him. Anger was him.

“Ryo” Kiyoshi whispered and I looked up at him. Eyes trained on the wounded soldier before him, not another word came out of his mouth. But I understood. I understood everything he felt and wanted to say in that moment when he said my name.

The man pulled the trigger. Again. Again. Again. The hole in Kiyoshi’s chest was too empty to support and he flopped on the floor. I barely had time to escape the cargo pocket when I felt his thigh land on top of me, crushing my lower body. Wriggling out in time to spare myself suffocation, I kept myself close to his body and crawled up to his face.

As pale and pristine as ever, his paper-white hollowed-out face was the only part of him not doused in dried brown or wet red. Eyes still open wide, he hadn’t closed them before he was shot although he knew what was going to happen. This was bravery at its finest. He’d looked his killer in the eye and accepted his destiny.

Kiyoshi had transitioned from a cowardly but kind schoolboy waiting for his bullies to leave the school before he did into someone who put himself voluntarily in front of Satan’s face multiple times, completely aware that it could be his last. Life is all about overcoming a personal challenge, and now that he had done that he could be suspended in Purgatory knowing he had lived life to its absolute capacity.

Kiyoshi hadn’t died when he’d collapsed because a part of his soul was still in me. Although he’d never breathe again, his spirit was alive. Alive and flourishing in me. As long as I am conscious, his soul shall never leave the Earth.

### **Epilogue**

I let out a squeal of surprise, something I hadn’t done since Kiyoshi’s mother made the comment about their upstairs neighbour hitting mice. The man noticed me, a little ball of pale brown. A vermin of white against the angelic red.

He took aim.

But I ran. It took me a vast amount of self-control to leave Kiyoshi's side but in the end I did.

Scrambling to the fold of the room where Kiyoshi first eavesdropped on the soldier, I hide, surprised that my breath does not draw the man in closer; it's so loud I feel like it fills the room. Peeking out, I notice the man is still sitting, slumped over. His back and head against the cold wall, his eyes closed. He's probably sleeping, I thought and then left the room through the door.

Big mistake.

All around me people were stomping with large black boots. It was certain: if I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, I would be flattened under them. Dancing in and out between a certain pair of legs, I knew I had to get out of here and fast. Looking around while paying attention to where I was scurrying, I saw a little hole with a rock above it, perfect for hiding out the fight before reemerging to fold myself into a dead man's body. When they bring the passed and injured back into the city, I can jump out and find myself a home. I am a guinea pig, after all, and I belong with people. Running to the hole, I began to sniff out danger although I attributed it to the smell of blood and the sound of gunshots echoing throughout the atmosphere. Crawling my way in, I notice that at one point, the hole drops down vertically. Unsure of how deep it is, I decide it's better if I remain near the entrance, especially since my danger receptors overload the deeper I go in.

Suddenly, I hear a hiss I am all too familiar with behind me. Slowly turning around I see a slithering ribbon of brown swerve at me, leaving me intact but with two small red dots next to each other on my neck. I realise too late I've wandered into a snake burrow. Turning around another 180°, I run for the entrance before I trip and fall. Getting up is too hard as the door begins to spin and flashes multiple different colours. Like a drunken man, I stagger to stand up as the poison from the serpent's fangs pollutes my veins. Flopping onto my back, I see a wide stretch of pink dotted with white before the sunset speeds up ten-fold and becomes black almost instantaneously. Consuming me with dusk, I descend down a tunnel with a strong sense of déjà vu. Bringing me back to the time where I fell down a hole and landed in Kiyoshi's world. Does history repeat itself? I wondered as I remembered how at the end of the tunnel before Kiyoshi I saw light. Looking for it here, I saw none, only darkness.

Man kills man when provoked.

Nature kills nature to survive.

Nature is always at war.

### **Author's Note**

This was only the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong; the occupation itself is a whole other story. I've left it out on purpose, as after finding what really happened to the expats and locals living in

the colony and the fate of the British, Indian but especially Canadian soldiers, I felt my words could not do them justice. Words will never make up for the sheer horrors they witnessed and experienced, and most certainly not for the bravery and valour they demonstrated in retaliation to the human version of Hell. Society's recognition, remembrance and empathy for the atrocities of all wars are vital in honouring those who sacrificed their lives and those who were prepared to do so.