



Historical Association

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The Wilting Lilies

By Sophia Clarke

Prologue

Dear Takao,

I remember the days when the air was sweet and crisp, don't you? Instead of cries for help, there were cries of joy. Children weaved through the cobbled streets in vibrant kimonos, a tapestry of life. I can still imagine the vivid red roof tiles and the heat of the afternoon sun on our necks, the way the dust kicked up under our feet as we raced toward the loving embrace of the ocean. Every day I returned home to mother peacefully humming in the kitchen and father beaming at his polished police badge. You could always hear a soft stream of laughter at home. Nobody had a care in the world, we played from dawn to dusk.

Now even the slightest reminder of my childhood is haunting, an unspoken curse.

Life isn't the same now. It won't ever be. I miss you Takao, it reassures me that you're in a better place now.

Love,

(Your sister) Kiyoko

Chapter 1

October 14th,

1940

Dear Takao,

Being late is not fun.

Sandals slapped against the earth, mirroring my pounding heart. “Come on, Hide!” I gasped, as my bag knocked painfully against my sweaty back. We couldn’t afford to pause for the squawking peddlers or the towering mounds of produce; we could only see the sun rising – the passing time. The arcade of the market's thatch roofs served as temporary shelter from the burning sun's rays. We darted around the last corner, choking from the air’s salty sting and exhaustion of running. At last, the tunnel of towering Ryukyu pines. Behind me, Hide followed at a lagging pace, with her cap crooked. We were late – very late. At the silent school of First Girls’ High School, every step felt as though I was being lectured.

“Hurry!” I hissed, beckoning her over. “We’re going to get caught by the new instructor!”

We quickly ran into the auditorium. The old school had been completely wiped out, its stale bookish smell gone and a medicinal one taking its place.

I lined up beside Tsuru and Miya. They looked at me in alarm as I showed a very impatient look. "Are you alright? It looks like you're running a temperature!" Miya hissed, looking between me and Hide. "Quiet!" a harsh voice yelled out. That one word alone was enough to make an entire school silent. This was Nurse Sato, the one feared by all. She wore a pure white nurse's uniform that appeared as stiff and rigid as her reported character. She wasn't carrying a textbook. She was carrying a box of triangular bandages.

"Literature is a luxury. A luxury we cannot afford anymore," Sato announced in an oddly foreign and mechanical voice. "From today on, you will start with Military Studies. Your hands will no longer be for poetry; now they shall serve the emperor."

At my side, Miya let out a shaky, jagged breath. She was not looking at the bandages on my hands. Her gaze was fixed on the posters covering the walls where the calligraphy charts hung before. The posters showed pictures of stoic warriors and suns rising in bloody colors.

"This isn't simply a game, a role playing one in which we nurse the wounded," Miya whispered in a frightened tone, "Just look at her! See how her clothes are tattered and worn? These aren't clothes of someone who nurses wounded men in a regular naval hospital. This is more than it looks."

"Hush now, Mi," Tsu tried to soothe her in a tense voice as she squeezed the wood bench with her hand. Her gaze was averted towards the window, willing to see a piece of ocean, blue. "Ignore

all the nonsense, Tsu," she whispered again, "Just find that ocean, there should be none on ships around."

"NO IT IS NOT!" a jagged whisper hissed from behind us, Yoshihiro? She leaned in, her eyes were daggers piercing us, "I was at the docks, Tsu. There are ships - Navy ships. They're prepping for war. I have to agree with Miya for once."

We all sat in silence, no one dared to utter a sound.

"Bandages, do any of you slackers *not* have any bandages!" Nurse Sato exclaimed, breaking our vow of quiet. I reluctantly raised my hand and reached for the coarse, scratchy bandages Nurse Sato handed me. I knew Tsu was wrong, I just didn't have the heart to tell her. First the uniform, then the hairstyles, now the lessons. The whole school is upon a dark shift. The fake smiles and layers of lies are all a distraction for the danger to come.

Love,

(Your sister) Kiyoko

Chapter 2

March 23rd,

1945

Dear Takao,

Should I feel blissful or terrified?

Serving the Emperor is an honour – or so we're told each morning via the radio broadcasts. But the honour has now become stifling, like poisonous fumes.

The change from classroom to cave took place almost instantly. We were one minute sitting in the assembly hall, holding on to the coarse triangular bandages and the next in an enclosed van, along with another ten people. Besides myself and one other, all were brimming with enthusiasm.

We no longer are schoolgirls. Maybe we'll never be again.

The dawn was still just about breaking as we arrived at the entrance to the hospital caves. Not the hospital in the city that had its neat whitewashed walls and fresh linens. The hospital here is nothing more than teeth gouged into the cliffs. The air escaping through the entrance has the strong pungent smell of damp soil, unwashed bodies and that medicinal stench that Nurse Sato introduced into our school lives long ago. What other things made up that awful smell?

"Move, move! Don't dawdle!" the soldiers yelled, forcing us into the darkness.

Tsuru stumbled upon an ancient watering bowl. Tsuru had been walking too fast; I caught her arm, and her hand felt cold and damp.

"Keep walking, Tsu," I told her, but my heart was beating loudly in my ribcage.

There was another girl in front of us; she is called Yukiko, I believe. She walked tall, but her head drooped down. She didn't say a word since we started our journey outside the school walls. She

looked at the rocks as though they were cages for her. Everyone around her talks about bravery and how great our success would be, but she only looks into the darkness. So did I.

Every time we stepped down, the soothing whispers of the breeze and rustling of the pine trees were replaced by dripping noises coming from above and a thud underneath.

We were then shown to a side room in which the injured men were laid upon thin bunks hewn right into the rock. On one of their faces were swarming bright, slimy maggots, crawling around on the man's face while he thrashed about in agony. The moaning of the men seemed to reverberate endlessly against the low ceiling of the chamber, making up an eternal chorus of despair. Nurse Sato was at the head of the line of patients, with her white outfit stained with some kind of odd sludge. All excited voices fell silent; no one dared speak. The young nurses held onto their medical pouches, their spirits crushed by the sight of running blood and decaying bodies. One girl screamed, her knees almost buckling when Tsuru grabbed her by the hand while I supported her back straight. Through all this silence and horror came the realization that we were not heroes under the sun, but mere schoolgirls buried alive amongst the dying.

Love,

(Your sister) Kiyoko

Chapter 3

March 31st, 1945

Dear Takao,

The stratification of the cave was set up fast: some can tolerate the smell, others cannot. Poor Tsu is suffering from an inability to handle it. Today, her normally deft hands were shaking uncontrollably when trying to put on a dressing on my wounds. Yesterday, Nurse Sato shouted at her till Tsu's face had paled as much as the walls of the cave: "You! You slacker! You've spoiled another dressing! Get out of my sight!"

"You," Nurse Sato's steely grey eyes locked on me. Tsuru's shaking did not seem to faze her. "Go to the surgery ward right away."

Tightening my grip on my medical bag, whose coarse fabric pierced my skin, I told myself I had to be stronger than I thought I was. I had to believe in the ability of my hands to help patients who no longer wish to stay alive. Darkness filled the cave as I headed for the surgery nook, wondering if we would be able to leave the cave once again under its roof.

In the ward, a haze of ether and burnt flesh covered the place. Doctor Tanabe (the head surgeon) demanded for a scalpel, not even lifting his blood-covered apron. My hands, they were covered in

Blood

He did not resemble a person; he was more like a shadow butcher. I felt no quivers in my hand when I gave the scalpel to him, even as the young soldier on the table emitted a blood-curdling groan. "We are running out of anesthetic," Tanabe barked at me, his bloodshot eyes glowing beneath the flickering light of the candle. "Restrain him, if you cry, you're out." I placed my weight on his shoulders and squeezed my eyes shut to drown his shrieks. His agony seemed to seep into my very mind.

An unforgettable picture branded on my mind.

However, the physical torture was not the worst of it, starvation has become my norm. We are left with nothing but a measly ball of rice per day, even that is earned by hard labor. Our faces appear skeletal. We were supposed to carry adult men and clean floors drenched in blood, all without food in our stomachs.

The environment is suffocating. The soldiers, who previously acted as our protectors from the senior nurses, now act like wild animals with their pain and fears.

"What useless girls!" another spat angrily, his leg a festering mess of burned flesh. "Nurses, is that what you are? Nurses allow us to fester while the Americans claim our country!" Why do you move so slowly? Why are we not healed?" We come under criticism for even tying a knot right and getting the water fast enough. It is not us they see, nurses and nursing students; it is our failure as servants of the empire. All I can think of is that we are children, that we, too, are hungry, and I can only bow my head and wrap bandages around wounded limbs.

Each night, we would wait until darkness fell so that we could sneak away. Nurse Sato picked three of us for the job everyone sensed but no one mentioned. We carried the dead on their thin mats of straw into the foul odor of decay and smoke, scraping at the ground with our bloody fingernails. We dare not speak lest the truth be admitted—that these corpses were the men crying for their mothers only hours before.

After burying them, we scavenged a charred storehouse, freezing whenever American flares turned the sky a terrifying white. We found a sack of fermented, mouldy rice. I gulped, my skin slick with the slimy grains.

We retreated to the humid cave, clutching the spoiled food like gold. Inside, the air tasted of blood and the unwashed living. Nurse Sato watched us with hollow, unfeeling eyes—a silent permission to survive. We cooked the rot over a meagre flame. Looking at my cracked and peeling palms, I wondered if I would ever be clean, or if I had already become part of the dirt.

Love,

(Your sister) Kiyoko

Chapter 4

April 3rd, 1945

Dear Takao,

The "Iron Rain" had been hammering for weeks now, a steady barrage of American naval artillery fire which caused the earth itself to quake. But today, the heavens themselves decided to descend upon the cave.

A rumbling noise far more powerful than anything nature had ever produced before reverberated through the cave walls, followed by an explosion that hurled me into the surgery ward. Everything went from bright light to darkness and back to oppressive, choking greyness. Thick dust particles burned my eyes, and the few remaining candles flickered and went out at once.

The nurses began to panic, pushing past their recently wounded. I hurried towards the dim light shining at the end of the tunnel, my lungs searing as I breathed in pulverized rocks. The roof caved in, trapping us inside this slaughter-house.

"Kiko... help..."

A tiny, pathetic squeak came from under the settled dust. I fell on my knees, clawing through the debris until I caught sight of a white sleeve.

"Tsu?" I screamed in a cracked voice.

Tsu was there, her legs held down under a sharp jutting rock which was too heavy for anyone to lift. Her joyful face was covered with dirt and blood, she was so small and vulnerable.

"Tsu, I'm here! I've got you!" I held onto her hand, dragging with all my strength. Still the rock would not budge. Even the ceiling started shaking and more minute stones fell down from it.

"Kiyoko, get out of here!" Tsu panted in a strange clarity that spoke to death and not to the sea anymore. "They're going to blow the tunnel up. Run!"

"I won't leave you here," I sobbed and scraped at the stones with bloody fingers.

"Tsu..." she screamed again in one last, desperate attempt to break free. "Run, Kiko...Don't make both of us die...!"

Soldiers' voices came from behind me, somewhere in the darkness.

I looked at Tsu—my best friend, the girl who taught me how to braid hair and find the best seashells. I felt the heat of the next explosion rocking the cliffside. And then, I let go. I pulled my hand away from hers and I ran. I ran into the light, leaving her to die alone.

Love,

(Your sister) Kiyoko

Chapter 5

June 21st, 1945

Dear Takao,

I am a coward, a beast, a creature warped enough to betray her closest companion. For hours I have roamed the jagged shoreline, my shoes sliding over the crimson sand. I had curled up in a tiny

cave within the cliffs, relishing my last reprieve, when a hand grabbed my shoulder.

I almost jumped out of my skin in fear, but it was just Miya. Miya, why was she here? She was pale, her uniform shredded and her eyes eerily vacant.

"They're done with us, Kiko," she murmured, her voice hoarse. "All of us were discharged, teachers and students. But I've found a route. I found one that's safe along the coast. Join me, Kiko. *Come*. Nothing remains here but... massacre."

I couldn't. I could hear my voice crack as I backed up. "I can't leave, Miya, not after Tsu. I abandoned her, she's most likely dead now. I can't leave. I should but I can't do it."

The look in Miya's eyes changed. There was something like pity in her cold stare. "Stay, and you are dying with them, too," she stated matter-of-factly. "Do you want to end up just one more stain on their bloody hands?"

"No! You don't understand!" I wept.

Miya didn't say anything to refute my answer; she simply turned and disappeared into the fog. "Goodbye, Kiko," she called softly. I watched as she disappeared among the rock faces into the mist, getting smaller and smaller until she seemed to vanish. I often wonder whether or not I will ever see her again.

Now, I am huddled in the back of this crevice, watching the enemy patrol the sand. Their boots are heavy on the rocks, coming closer. I'm so scared. I want to go back to the days of joy and laughter. I want to go home.

Love,

(Your sister) Kiyoko

Epilogue

October 20th, 1945

Dear Takao,

This world ended with the explosion of a grenade and a deafening quiet which echoed within me. The smell of the ocean, of Tsu's ocean, remained fresh and salty as the Americans descended, like the sea itself. I expected to see the bayonet, the end we were supposed to have witnessed, based on what our instructors told us. However, all I saw was a thick woolen blanket and a canister of food. The "devils," were merely burnt necks and exhausted eyes.

The prison was a huge patch of beaten up canvas and mud. There, among the cries of children and cooking fumes, was she, cooking something in some kind of pan. I noticed the hair with white streaks in it bending to prepare some sort of tempura. But the smell of cooking oil was not sweet and savory as I would expect from cooked tempura, but a rather pungent and chemical one. What could it be?

"Mama?"

She turned, the loving face from my childhood was staring back at me. Tears started to well in our eyes.

"Kiko, my little Kiko?" she whispered, eyes scanning my face, her hands trembling with - hope?

"Yes, it's me." I responded, a smile forming between us.

She was thinner, her hands mapped with the rough scars of labour, but she was here.

Alive

We didn't speak of before. We simply held each other, two lost souls finally reunited.

March 20th, 1950

Dear Takao,

It is my birthday and I have turned twenty.

Indeed, the world has advanced. The war is over. It's all because of you, all because of us. Your life wasn't spent in vain. The smell of iron is gone in Asato. It isn't raining anymore, that horrible Iron Rain. I stood before the memorial statue. I ran my hands along the inscription on the stone for the names of Tsuru Ruri, the one without Miya Maki's name. The fake smile I used to wear has slowly morphed into a real one, albeit one that's still raw around the edges.

I still remember the day we met again, two years ago. Just the three of us; Yoshihiro, Hide, and I; the few that survived.

"You're still writing to him?"

I lifted my head from my book. It was Hiro standing under the tree, looking at me from where she was leaning. The wild and reckless girl with her hair cut short and her spirit still sharp but less volatile than before. With her was Hide, no longer carrying the haughty airs of her youth but walking beside me with confidence and grace.

"I am," I said, closing the small, battered diary.

"You've got to stop, he's dead. Admit that."

We stood in silence, listening to the soft swooshing of the grass around us. We were no longer separated by grades or the petty jealousies of schoolgirls. The distance between us had made us grow stronger, together. Though it seemed hurtful at the time, her words made something click inside me.

So, Tak, I have one last thing to say to you before I move on:

Dear Takao,

The lilies in the valley have wilted, but new ones are blooming in the cracks of the stone. I watched Hiro laugh today—a real laugh, not the desperate sound of the caves. I saw Hide plant a tree where a house used to be. For a long time, I hated myself for choosing the air while Tsu and you stayed in the earth. I thought survival was a sin.

But I understand now. I am still Kiko, I can still be happy, not because the world is kind but because I owe it to the ones who stayed in the dark to carry the light.

This is my last letter, Takao. I'm putting the pen down. I'm going to go live now.

Love,

(Your Sister) Kiyoko