

PART ONE

*Japan, 2018*



Our guilt, it gnaws us,  
Pesters, persecutes, till all  
Is empty. Hollow.

As the front door bangs  
and the gate clicks,  
the clock ticks  
and Grandfather's face falls.

Shadows of the past  
pulling on his soul.  
What is in that head  
that affects him so?

What is suffocating  
the man  
who taught me to  
ride my bike?

Who teased Grandmother  
learning to jive,  
then tried to  
learn himself.

Who woke me  
to show me  
the stars  
on a clear night.

Who played chess  
with friends.  
Made jam  
every year.

Who smiled  
and laughed  
and lived  
every day.

I miss  
that man.

His fingers flutter  
over the book on the table.

His palm brushes against the broken spine.

'There is no magic any more,' he says.

'I'm a bad person,' he says.

And walks away.

Out of the kitchen,

through the hall,

into his bedroom.

I follow.

The books on his shelves hold their breath.

What do they know?

What have they heard him

murmur in his sleep?

The smile of the shelf,

overloaded with weight,

turns to a grimace.

His back is to me.

'I did a terrible thing, Mizuki.

I can't hide it any longer.



On the shelf  
he places  
a perfectly formed  
paper crane.

'And always  
remember.'







PART TWO  
*6 August 1945*

## GRANDFATHER'S STORY

I remember it was only a few days before my eighteenth birthday. I'm lying on the floor in my friend Hiro's house, reading, and I'm tired. Last night was a long one – air-raid sirens continually waking my mother and me. We have made that journey to the community air-raid shelter so many times we know the way in our sleep, but although enemy planes are frequent, not a single bomb has yet been dropped on our city, Hiroshima.

This morning the all-clear has sounded, my mother has left for work, and I plan to enjoy a rare day free from our mobilisation for the war effort.

Instead of making aeroplane parts, I have a book to read and a day to spend with my best friend.

I turn the page to Chapter Four as Hiro passes me a cup of oolong tea.

‘That will take you a lifetime to read, Ichiro,’ he jokes as he moves around the room, picking up toys his sister Keiko deserted before he walked her to kindergarten, a journey that on normal days we make together.

The book is *The Tale of Genji*.

I look down at the pages and remember when my father gave it to me, just before going to war . . .



. . . ‘It was the world’s first novel,’ he told me, balancing the four volumes across both my hands.

‘It is so long,’ I said.

‘Then your mind will be kept busy while I am away,’ he replied. ‘Promise me you’ll read it all. It is a wonderful tale, full of love and guilt. Much to learn from.’

‘I promise,’ I said.

I remember that as I leafed through the pages, an unusual smile tipped his mouth and he leaned towards me, the smell of soap, shampoo and tobacco reminding me how long it had been since we were last that close.

‘There is magic in books,’ he whispered in my ear.

Yet as I turned to meet his eyes, he moved away.

‘Tape the volumes together if you wish,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘What a pity it would be to lose the ending.’

So I did, and I carried them under my arm everywhere I went, reading whenever I could, listening for my father’s whispers of magic . . .



Hiro strolls across the room and places a basket of washing on the floor; there are so many chores for a son with a father away at war. ‘How many pages are there in that huge book of yours?’ he asks.

I flick to the back and look at the page number. 'One thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine,' I reply.

He shakes his head in despair, for he is not much of a reader.

I turn a page. 'It isn't about reaching the end,' I say, 'it's the journey.'

Taking a sip of tea, I return to the words. The prose is as beautiful as the blue sky and yellow sunshine of the day outside, but my thoughts keep straying to my mother at work and my father at war, and to when I too will have opportunity to serve the Emperor and fight for my country.

From the corner of my eye, I see Hiro move towards the window.

'It's a B-29 bomber,' he says. 'But only one.'

My finger rests on page 348 of my book, marking the last word I will read from the 'before' time, and I listen to the distinct and familiar roar of the American plane.

Hiro turns to me. 'There's something . . .'

The rest of his sentence burns away on white.

A sheet of sun.

A flash of light.

Brighter than anything  
I've ever seen before.

So complete it fills my vision  
as if I've been struck blind.

*Am I conscious?* I think.



*Dying? Or already dead?*

Am I in heaven?



My eyes . . . they're burning . . .  
my throat . . . my head . . .





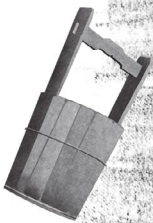


My skin is prickling . . .  
oh, now I am numb.



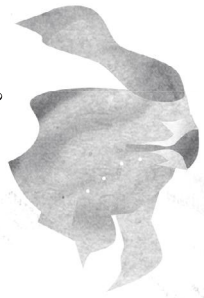
I am in the air.  
I am weightless.

I am in an exploding firework.



Floating in air so hot  
I cannot breathe.

'Gambare!' I hear. Be brave!



Did Hiro say that?  
A rescuer?

Or was it me?



The flash is barely a second.

The 'after' is about to begin.