

In the Ginza

Bobbie Jean pushed the stroller through the crowded market and silently rehearsed her textbook Japanese. “*Ohio*”—just like the state—for “hello.” “*Gomen*” for “I’m sorry.” “*Domo-arigato*,” lots of syllables for a simple thanks.

She was elegant and teak-skinned, her thick hair pinned in a French roll, her hands kid-gloved. No one would recognize who she was beneath her polished cotton dress with sharp darts and perfect pleats: A country girl whose childhood had been crowded with big Virginia pines and bigger dreams.

She had quickly completed her mission in college—to find a husband in the first year—and left behind the backwoods town that always smelled of pig shit and sawdust. Now there she was, the wife of an airman first-class, raising her brand new baby in the Orient.

Bobbie Jean leaned over the sturdy pram and adjusted her daughter’s pink summer blanket. It had seemed like a good idea that morning to take a stroll off the base into downtown Fukuoka. But the market air was thick with dried squid and seaweed, and the push of women with their wicker baskets made the pram feel hulking and pretentious. The Japanese mamasans never used strollers. Their babies were always lashed to their backs, even as they hunched in the rice paddies.

“Maybe we should go home now,” Bobbie Jean said to the dozing child, who began to suckle the air at the sound of her mother’s voice.

Bobbie Jean had just turned toward home when she caught the smell of roasted sweet potatoes, their syrup dripping onto the hot coals. For a second, her stomach quivered, hungry for the familiar.

She steered the stroller toward a group of kimonoed old women, their heads wrapped in blue and white scarves. “*Ichi, dozo.*” Bobbie held up a one-fingered request while bowing slightly.

The women tittered toothlessly. The plump one put down her paper fan and went to claim a potato from the iron pot where they sat cooling.

“You baby-chan?” the other woman asked, peering into the stroller.

Bobbie Jean moved the delicate blanket so that the women could take a peek. Her little girl had only been six pounds at birth. Even now, three months later, she was still as fragile as porcelain, her skin pale against the dark curl of her silky hair.

The Japanese women drew in deep breaths and Bobbie smiled proudly. Indeed, her baby was beautiful. But instinct made Bobbie Jean’s skin prickle as the old women kept pointing at the pram and debating. The plump one spat with finality into a tin can by her wooden chair. “You baby-chan?” she asked Bobby Jean again. This time the question felt like a cross examination.

“*Hai,*” said Bobbie, putting her hand over her breast. “My baby-chan.”

“Ahhhh,” the women nodded at each other knowingly and began to discuss something again, pointing first at Bobbie, then at the sleeping child.

Irritated, Bobbie dug into her coin purse, “*Ikura?*” she asked. “How much?”

The women ignored her, clucking like hens. Tears began to rise instinctively, but Bobbie Jean resisted the urge to back away. This wasn’t the rural South, where uppityness could cost her life. This was post-war Japan, and her husband was protecting both his country and theirs. She had every right to be in the fishy market buying a roasted sweet potato.

“You got G.I.?” One of the women crept closer. Her teeth were rotted nubs and her skin was tanned and leathery. She pointed to the baby, then to Bobbie: “You got white G.I.?”

Bobbie Jean stepped back, understanding the accusation. Her daughter’s pale cheeks and cat-slick hair were scarlet letters. Even here, halfway around the world, a decent colored woman was easily taken for a whore.

Without answering, she paid quickly and took the warm yam. The smell was suddenly sickly sweet. Until then, Bobbie Jean hadn’t realized how much it reminded her of home.