

## OKI ISLAND

### Oki Island

## HIRO

Rumors often catch in the wake of our small, seaside village. They are dragged in by the currents and collect in shallow pools near the shore. We see rumors as we see sea glass. We believe it to be one thing, creating our own reality and failing to remember that once this glass was a broken bottle with edges so sharp it could cut flesh. To our small island, the outside world always seemed exciting, but with that, its instability was terrifying. While our Oki Island was not the safest, it had a reassuring predictability. The winter months always carried foul, treacherous storms. Starting in early January and continuing through late March, the winter storms raged with harsh winds and heavy rainfall that were so extreme it prevented boats carrying supplies and food from the mainland for weeks at a time.

During these storms the tipsy houses near the cliff's edges would rock back and forth, their wooden framing moaning beneath the heavy winds and while they always looked a bit more lopsided after the storm, they never did crumble into the sea below. Despite the tenacity of our winter storms they never lasted for more than a week at a time and while some buildings took a beating, no lives were lost and the only real change was that instead of our town smelling like fish, it was now soaked in saltwater as if it just emerged from the ocean.

It wasn't just the tipsy houses that looked on the edge of collapsing, but our dock too. Our dock was black as charcoal. It looked like it wanted to fall into itself like a person pulled into a riptide. The dock had its legs half buried, black dipped into white sand. The children would often complain about splinters in their feet from running on the dock but in three years' time, the complaints always stopped. It was not because we fixed the dock or because we began to wear sandals but because we simply accepted the fate of our small, broken dock and tried our best to find its qualities as nothing short of endearing.

Yes, while Oki seemed dangerous at times, it was predictable, and we locals knew when to hide behind locked doors and wait for the howling wind to stop. It's for this reason that when Kenji and his foreign daughter moved to town suspicion and curiosity rose like the heavy tide. Maybe if the two didn't move in next to the Hamada family—a family who found such monotony in their own lives that they chummed the calm ocean with lies to try and catch whomever they could—maybe the two could have been able to live their lives pleasantly enough.

Of course, I'm only able to say all this now as I look back, because back then we had no idea that the Hamada family was capable of such cruelty, not that the blame can be entirely placed on them. We were all so bored in our small town and I think we were willing to believe anything.

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Before the two even stepped off the boat a crowd had formed near the dock. The whole of the island could be seen crowded around the dock. Everyone's heads bobbed up and down as they tried to see over and under each other. Perhaps many were there awaiting their family's return. Every year the *Obon* holiday sends people traveling to all parts of Japan, returning to their hometowns to pay homage to their ancestors. Yes, maybe that is why the docks were filled with people, but the excitement in the air was new. It seemed everyone had their eyes on one person, a small girl with hair as red as the lanterns that now decorated the streets of our village. You could see her red hair spinning in the sea breeze, each strand tangling in the wind. Even from a distance, and despite her small frame, she seemed dangerous. Like if a strand of her hair broke off, it could set our charcoal dock ablaze.

As the boat got closer you could see that the girl was no longer standing, but she was now on her stomach, reaching her hands toward the frothing waves, trying to touch the white foam that was sticking to the side of the boat. Even when the boat would violently break on a wave, the cold ocean spray

drenching the girl's face, she didn't flinch away. Instead, she moved toward the sensation, as if she wanted to drown in the sea salt and become sea foam.

She was a spectacle; there was no longer a doubt in my mind that the crowd was larger for the curiosity of seeing a foreigner up close. We rarely ever saw people from outside Japan because there really wasn't much to see or do on our small island that would bring tourists away from the mainland. And while I and a few other locals would argue that our red snapper was the best around, it seemed it wasn't worth a two-hour boat trip.

As the boat came closer to the dock the excitement in the air changed. A few of the older villagers with hard lines on their foreheads and eyes as dark as squid ink quickly made their way home. They shook their heads at one another and moved with the speed as if they were preparing to board up the doors and windows in preparation for one of our traditional winter storms. On the other hand, a few people scattered like crabs onto the dock, practically tripping over one another as they were eager to help tie up the boat and be the first one to see the *gaijin* up close.

I was only eleven, and never having seen a foreigner, looked on at the red-haired child without blinking, afraid that if I looked away for even a single moment that her hair would extinguish and turn to ash. I was with my mother, my hand held tightly by her own. When I felt the pressure from my mother's strong grip, her wedding ring digging into my skin, I looked up at her face and noticed that her expression was formed into what I liked to call her Noh Mask. Noh Masks were known for holding deep emotions. Each mask represented a character, carved lines told a story, and the paint depicted happiness, fear, and pain. The masks were magical. Different angles told different tales, different emotions.

Looking straight on you might think there was no emotion to uncover on my mother's face, but as I looked up at her I felt the opposite to be true. Her free hand, which she used to block the sun from her

eyes, cast black shadows over her brow. The bright sun made other features sharp and prominent, she looked worried and a mix between melancholy and scared. It was only then that I realized my mother's grip was so tight my fingers began to turn white. She was acting as if she let go of my hand, I might sprint towards the dock like the others. She probably thought this way because my feet tiptoed in place as my excitement and eagerness were ready to explode from my body.

As the boat pulled in, a few people threw ropes off the boat and began to tie it to the dock. The moment the first rope was secure was the moment I began to feel nervous. Yes, I was excited to meet the girl with hair as red as the *torii* gates, but from afar. I was shocked at how fast my heart changed. While moments before I wanted nothing more than to meet this girl, I now wished she would stay on that boat. I wanted her to stay at a distance. I wanted to look on at her and be amazed without actually coming into contact. I wanted to look at her as I looked at crabs below the water. They skittered and moved along, unknowing to the eyes that watched from above. Thankfully my mother decided it was time to return home, there were more than enough people at the docks.

The next day the village was alive with talk. I sat by myself, staring at the glass fishing floats that hung in a net in the local teashop's sitting area. My mother and a few of her friends sat together and talked about the arrival of the local and his daughter.

"It seems that Kenji finally returned."

"As to be expected, most do for the *Obon* holiday."

"No, back for good!"

"Back for good? He's not returning to the mainland?"

"Lost his job, I heard from Yumi Hamada, she says Kenji and his daughter are living right next door."

“Oh, the poor Hamada’s, I have a feeling the daughter will be so very loud.”

“No doubt.”

“How troublesome.”

“I guess they’ll be here a while then.”

“What does the wife do? I didn’t see her on the boat.”

“Oh! Did you not hear?”

“What?”

“There is no wife!”

“What!?”

That same conversation was told over and over for hours, all the while the women’s green tea sat cold on the table. Aki, the tea shop owner, came around and asked the women if they wanted any more tea, but they all assured her that they had a full cup. Aki smiled, but her lips were twitching as she delicately took off her apron, set it on a table, and went to the back of the shop. There was a small clatter, but one of the older women assured she must have simply dropped a plate. Best not to mention anything, it would be a shame to embarrass the girl.

While I found my mother and her friends' conversation boring, I couldn’t help but turn in my seat, sitting on my knees and leaning over the back of the chair in hopes of hearing more talk about the *gaijin* girl. I watched with a small smile as my mother would now and again grab her teacup. She would bring it close to her lips like she was going to take a sip before she lowered it slightly, speaking briefly before finally she placed the cup down on the table and continued talking about Kenji and his daughter. My

smile would fall when the cup hit the table. It was a boring conversation, but at the moments they talked about the daughter I found myself straining to try and hear better.

“Her hair is so loud.”

“Is it really not dyed?”

“No, apparently that’s just how they’re made in the West.”

My mother and her friends laughed as they all picked up their tea, taking a sip and grimacing together as they put the cups quickly back on the table.

“Ugh, tea’s gone cold.”

“Excuse me! Aki! Our tea!”

I looked to the kitchen as Aki came out smiling brightly. “Sorry about the wait!” I remember at that moment, for the first time, I wondered if all women wore a mask of their own.