



LEE CLIFFORD GRAINGER

PRETEND  
GODS



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**Gotanda, Japan, September 2022**

The importance of this night could not be overstated.

Before entering the dojo, Hoshiko removed her shoes, placing them outside the door neatly. Stepping in, she politely bowed to the dojo showing her respect. She stopped for a moment to look intently at the black and white picture hanging on the wall, one among many. Hoshiko's mother walked up behind her, peering over her shoulder at herself in the image surrounded by many kendoka, holding a large trophy.

“I was so young,” her mother said.

*And so good.*

Turning right, she walked quickly with small steps to her proper place towards the end of the front row and close to the centre of the dojo, a position reflecting her seniority. Hoshiko placed her gear down in the correct order, the shinai bamboo sword to her left and the bōgu training armour in front and to her right. Sitting on the floor in seiza style, feet folded under her buttocks, hands resting palms down on her thigh, she waits for the kendo practise to begin. Her mother sauntered over to the observer benches along the rear of the dojo.

“Line up,” the sensei commanded.

Hoshiko stood, holding the shinai in her left hand by her hip, to stand in line alongside her fellow kendoka.

“Sit down.”

They all sit back down in seiza, placing their shinai back down on the floor to their left.

“Meditation.”

Cupping one hand in the other, she closed her eyes for a few minutes of quiet contemplation, ejecting all the distracting things of the outside world to focus on the practice ahead.

“Bow to shomen.”

Bowing forward, placing her hands flat on the floor out front, she showed her respect to the shomen, a shrine at the front of the dojo.

“Bow to sensei and form a circle.”

Everyone stood facing each other to form a circle around the centre of the dojo, shinai on the floor in front of them pointing inwards to the centre.

“Stretching.”

In unison the circle perform knee presses five times, followed by rotating the body at the knees, then stretching the legs, firstly to the left and then to the right. Swinging arms overhead leaning backwards then reaching forward to touch their toes, the warm-up continued. Side bends and body twists complete the first phase.

“Rapid practice swings.”

Picking up the shinai, they perform nuketo. Taking a small step forward onto the right foot then drawing the sword with the right hand, flipping it forward as if slashing an opponent. The shinai is now pointing upward towards the imaginary opponent’s throat. Raising the shinai above their heads, left hand almost touching the forehead, they bring them straight down in a slicing motion, stopping at eye-level, screaming “Ehy!” while slide stepping backwards in a smooth gliding motion, repeating the action while slide stepping forward.

”Ehy!” they yelled in unison.

Raise and repeat, raise and repeat, thirty times.

“Alternating diagonal strikes,” the sensei instructed.

Swinging the shinai down diagonally, they slide step sideways.

“Ehy!”

The process repeats, swinging and sliding left to right, then right to left, thirty more times.

“Strike with a skip.”

Increasing the tempo the footwork becomes a small skip forward and backwards, a final thirty times.

They were now ready to practice.

“Put on *men*.”

Returning to her original seated position, Hoshiko begins to put on her bōgu. She starts with the tare, a thick cloth belt with several protective flaps running along half its length, wrapping it around her waist and tying it securely under the front flap. Next, she puts on the dō, a gently curving stomach and chest protector with a pronounced bulge made from lacquered bamboo, securing it to her shoulders with two diagonal ties and another set of ties at the small of the back. Unfolding the tenugui, a plain black towel thirty centimetres high and ninety-six centimetres across, she holds it up in front of her face by the top corners. She wraps the towel around her face and head, leaving only her chin and bottom lip free. Crossing the top corners behind her head, she pulled them forward to tie them together at the forehead. The towel protruded from the top of her head, pointing up towards the ceiling. Lifting the bottom edge of the towel upwards over her forehead, exposing her face, she pulls the protruding point down, tucking it in at the forehead. Running her fingers around the edge of the towel, she tucked her hair under the towel. Using both hands, she adjusted the position of the towel slightly, so it sat correctly on her head. Penultimately she slipped on the men, the facemask. With her fingertips, she lifts the mask up and onto her head, adjusting it. Tying at the back a pair of woven cords that wrapped around the head from the front of the mask, she secured the mask in place. To complete the ensemble, Hoshiko slipped on the kote, a pair of mitten-like gloves.

Finishing first, she waited patiently for the other kendoka to catch up.

The sensei points to Hoshiko with his open left hand calling her out. With his right pointing to her opponent, a less experienced kendoka but a rising star. They both stand, walking briskly to opposite ends of the dojo, shinai in hand.

Turning to her right, she bows her head to the sensei in unison with her opponent, the dō restricting movement. Turning back to face each other, they bow.

Both step forward quickly bringing their shinai to ready position to within a few meters of each other. Sitting in sonkyo, lowering their bodies down to a deep squat, and then raising back upright, they show their mutual respect.

Stepping forward, the tips of their shinai almost touching, they slowly circle each other. Keeping the right foot in front and left foot behind, they

effortlessly glide across the floor.

Suddenly launching forward her opponent extends his reach to strike with the shinai at the side of her head. Lifting her left hand high and keeping her right hand lower, her shinai turns to point down towards the floor, blocking the attack.

Slowly stepping backwards their shinai sliding against each other, their waltz continued. The tips of their shinai twirled around each other, occasionally tapping together.

Simultaneously they both raise their shinai and lunge forward for a head strike. Hoshiko missed her target by a fraction. The opponent was, however, on target scoring the first point.

*He is good.*

Reset. They both return to the centre of the dojo facing each other. Hoshiko felt the weight of her mother's stare. She strikes quickly at her opponents' head. He blocks, knocking her shinai to the side. Trying again, Hoshiko strikes at her opponents head again, resulting in another failure.

*This is not going to be easy.*

Hoshiko's opponent thrusts to her neck. Bringing her shinai to the horizontal, she blocks the attack. Seeing the opportunity, she quickly swings her shinai around above her head in a continuous curve downward onto her opponent.

"Ehy!" as she expels all the air in her lungs, with a scream, she scores the second point.

Reset.

They walk around each other.

Hoshiko steps toward her opponent, slicing down. He returns with the same move she used to score her point. Blocking her attack with his shinai inverted at a forty-five-degree angle, he then swings it up and around to slice down.

Hoshiko sidesteps the attack bringing her shinai around to rest on the back of her left arm. The opponent's shinai deflected away.

*He learns quickly.*

Stepping back from each other, they return to a ready position.

Slightly lifting the point of his shinai towards Hoshiko's left eye, he encourages her to move by suggesting an opening. Seeing it, Hoshiko starts to raise her shinai, stepping forward for a strike. Moving forward quickly keeping his shinai parallel to the floor, he strikes at her now exposed glove making contact with the back of her hand.

“Kote!” he shouts.

Point scored, Hoshiko has lost.

Stepping away, they bow to each other quickly.

Returning to their starting position, they face each other performing sonkyo. Returning the shinai to the hip, they both step backwards to the edge of the floor, bowing to each other once more.

Hoshiko turns, walking off the dojo floor to an empty bench seat. The sensei walks towards her. Her mother stands and indicates to the sensei with a raise of her hand. He stops, nods then walks away.

Slowly her body descends to rest on the bench seat. The shinai bamboo sword placed aggressively on the bench to her side. Slipping the kote mitten gloves from her hands, she released them, allowing them to fall to the floor between her feet with a soft thud. Reaching up and around to the rear of her facemask, she unties the holding cords. Leaning forward, head slightly bowed, with a slight push, the mask slips off her face falling to the floor to rest on top of the mittens. She pulls the tenugui head towel slowly and bleakly down over her face.

Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Kano Akiyama sits gently down on the bench next to her daughter.

“I am a failure, beaten by a lower-ranking opponent,” Hoshiko whispered.

The photograph of her mother came to her mind.

“Your only failure is trying to impress me, so your mental state is wrong,” Kano said.

Hoshiko shook her head in dismay.

Kano continued, “You have a natural talent. I saw it in you from a very early age. I suppose I saw myself in you. Your father was totally against it. He had other hopes for you, but this was what you wanted to do, so I allowed it, but I began to notice a few years ago you were losing interest,

your heart was no longer in it. I think you only continued to please me, but you will not succeed if you don't do this for the right reasons. Now get changed and cleaned up, your father will be here soon to take us home."

"I'll walk home, I need to be alone," Hoshiko said, standing and walking away.

\* \* \*

With her head bowed, Hoshiko walked slowly down the footpath, eyes transfixed on the still shining wet pavement from the earlier rain. Her mood was black. A cool breeze danced across her face pushing the scent of fresh, clean air into her nostrils. Her mood remained black. She shoved her hands deep into her coat pockets. Bright purple lights up ahead, reflecting off the wet stones, pulled her head upwards to a sushi restaurant. It reminded her brain that her body had been sending hunger signals for some time. This route home was a well-trodden one. This restaurant usually ignored. Overpriced and pretentious, she often thought, but not tonight.

Fumbling in her coat pocket, searching with her fingers, she finds the voucher. Pulling the voucher out to examine it, she recalled seeing it in the letterbox on her way out to the dojo, a coupon for a free meal at this very restaurant. Considering it bizarre at the time, she had folded it, slipping into a pocket to dispose of later.

*Maybe it will cheer me up, a little.*

Hoshiko stopped at the door squinting through the glass.

*Not too busy tonight.*

Pushing the door open, just enough she had thought for her to enter, she slid in through the gap and misjudged it. As the door closed behind her the side of her head banged hard against the doorframe.

*Ouch!*

Hoshiko looked over towards the sushi train where a snigger originated. A girl her age looked over, covering her mouth.

*Could this night get any worse?*

A little embarrassed and angry, Hoshiko walked over to sit a few seats away from the girl.

The sushi train trundled round on its rhythmic cycle. Hoshiko looked at each plate with cold indifference.



*Nope, nothing interesting here.*

Standing and turning away, she was about to give up and leave when a particular plate of sushi she had not seen before caught her eye, unlike all the others. Quickly she sat back down, but it had already moved on by. Not wanting to wait for it to make its way around again, fearing someone else may take it, she leaned, stretching in an attempt to win her prize.

*I have to get this. Something must go my way tonight!*

Weak from her hunger, tired from her sparring and a little overeager, she loses all sense of precaution, and balance. Too late she realised the stool was tipping sideways, knocking the empty seats out of the way, her undignified fall towards the floor had begun. Seemingly, from nowhere, two hands appeared grabbing her, stopping her descent, saving her from injury and further embarrassment. Hoshiko looked up to see the girl who sniggered looming over her with a wide smile. With the girls' help, she scrambled back to her feet to stand facing her.

“Thank you,” Hoshiko said.

“You're welcome. I'm Akemi.”

“Hoshiko, Hoshi.”

Several sushi dishes passed slowly by, they both burst into torrents of hysterical laughter. In an instant, the issues of the night, her black mood, evaporated.

The evening passed quickly, talking, joking and laughing.

Life did not seem so bad, after all. She walked home with her head held high.

*If I had a sister, Akemi is whom I would have wished for.*

*This is so crazy. I always do this to myself, and then get badly hurt later. But this is different. There is something special here, a connection I cannot explain.*

**Room 206, Hotel Chelsea, New York, August 1908**

Blood and spit bubbled between his lips, it fascinated Florence, and she had to admit it brought a degree of satisfaction.

Pulling up the front of her long pleated dress, almost to her knees, she stepped over the supine torso, a stretch for one short of stature constrained by a girdle. Kneeling close to George's head, Florence looked intensely at the red fluid gurgling up from deep within his mouth. Resting her hand's palms down on her lap, she watched the shallow rising and falling of his abdomen under the waistcoat.

"Why did you make me do this, George?" she whispered, shaking her head softly, "All I ask for is the identity of the Sanction."

He convulsed, coughed and spasmed.

"Still resisting death George, holding on to the very last. Who is it George, who is the Sanction, tell me?"

"Not born..." he gurgled through a glistening red grin.

Another spasm forced a fountain of blood high into the air, arching back down it spotting her left cheek. About to curse him, she pulled up short as he slowly exhaled his final breath.

Florence stood, straightening her dress.

"You fool George. Have it your way."

Reaching down Florence clutched the dead face firmly. Squeezing the cheeks inwards she forced the jaw partially open. Pushing her fingers deep into his mouth, she scooped out lumps of congealing blood and saliva.

Walking casually over to the wall of the hotel room, she smeared her bloody hand over the smooth white surface paint, a large triangle formed in red broken, uneven streaks, in its centre a barely visible approximation of a circle.

"There, that'll give the police something to get their noodles into."

Dipping her hands into the icy cold water in the large bowl on the side table, she slowly and meticulously washed away the blood. Using a nearby neatly folded towel, she wiped the blood spatter from her face and dried her hands. Turning, she looked down to the floor at the body of a young woman lying face down, her arms spread outward.

“I’ll bet when you woke this morning, George, you had no idea this was going to happen, despite all your fortune-telling---or maybe you did, and you let it happen anyway.”

Folding the towel precisely as it was she placed it back neatly on the table in the same position she found it.

“Yes, you are perverse George. Our industrious leader will return soon, does she need to die too? No, not yet, but soon enough.”

Picking up a large and garish feathered hat from the stand, she placed it delicately on her head being careful not to ruffle her red hair. Tilting and turning her head in front of the full-length mirror, she adjusted its position to perfection. She slid the long hatpin through it to hold it in place.

“See you around---old friend.”

Clutching a small purse Florence leaves the room humming happily to herself the tune *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*.

\* \* \*

Stepping out of the hotel lobby into the cold crisp air, Florence stopped on the footpath. Securing her hat with her right hand, she craned her head back pointing her sight straight up far beyond the sky above to something unseen, to something unknowable to humanity directly over New York, directly over Times Square.

*Time enough, my old friend, time enough.*

**Cambridge, England, May 2012**

Drawn by the smell of frying bacon, Rebecca descended the steep, narrow stairs. A good breakfast, her father insisted, was the best way to prepare for the day ahead, but nothing that morning could have prepared her for the coming events of that day.

“Mornin’ pops,” she said, dropping down into the chair at the dining table, and placing her mobile phone down next to a teacup.

Her father continued to poke and prod the sizzling bacon around the pan, “Mornin’,” he said.

Rebecca selected three slices of buttered toast from a pile in the centre of the table. Her father slid several slices of bacon from the pan onto her plate. The mobile phone buzzed, a message flashed on the screen.

“Gotta go,” she said.

“Oh, no, you don’t, finish your breakfast young lady,” her father said.

Rebecca piled all the bacon on top of the toast with her fingers, squirting brown sauce over the bacon generously, then pressing down another slice of toast topping of the sandwich.

*Proper breakfast.*

Lifting the thick sandwich with both hands, dripping sauce from its edges, she pushed as much of it as she could into her mouth and chewed vigorously.

In record time, the entire sandwich was consumed, washed down with a whole cup of warm tea in one large swallow.

“See ya’ later pops,” she said, grabbing her mobile phone and leaving the table and the house in a hurry.

Sporting a small backpack, Rebecca walked with earnest down the quiet narrow road towards the main road, which would lead her to school.

Although cloudy, the temperature was comfortable, her school uniform sufficiently warm.

*Today is Tuesday. I like Tuesdays, all my favourite lessons.*

\* \* \*

The small corner shop was her regular stop on her way to school, a few snacks for later in the day.

Outside on the footpath, Rebecca placed the two Kit Kat bars and a can of Pepsi into her backpack, it triggered a memory, and she froze in a short daydream.

Rebecca sat crossed leg on her bed.

Standing in the doorway holding the soft drink can in one hand he waved the chocolate bar around in the other, "I'm famished," he said.

"Levy, you're goin' to get proper fat, or get diabetes or somethin'," Rebecca said.

He shook his head, "It don't matter how many of these I eat, never put on an ounce-- it's like my body was designed for this shit."

"Well, your apatite is legendary..."

The sound of her friend's voice snapped her back to the present.

"Hey babe," her friend said, hugging Rebecca, "We need to go through the back entrance across the field, Wayne is looking for you, he's got the hump."

*Great.*

\* \* \*

Squeezing through the small gap in the chained linked fence, Rebecca and her friend covertly entered the school grounds via the grassy sports field. They walk the long-distance across the field to the rear of the school's main building, always on the lookout for the boy named Wayne.

With the main building in sight, they relaxed.

Passing the bike storage building, they separated, their morning subjects different, "See ya at lunch babe," her friend said. Rebecca waved.

"There you are," a male voice said.

"Shit."

"You stood me up, Becky," Wayne said.

“Nope, never said I’d meet you, that’s your mug of a friend who thinks she’s a matchmaker, and don’t call me Becky,” Rebecca said.

She walks away.

Wayne speeds around to block her path. Rebecca reverses, and Wayne moves in. After several backward steps, she collides with the wall of the building.

Wayne pressed his hands firmly against the brick, his arms raised either side, blocking her escape, “Wayne, let me go, you’re a wrong’un,” she commanded.

“Listen! I only wanna chat,” he said.

Rebecca closed her eyes and whispered, “Help me, bruv.”

She looked to her left, where her brother now stood. Hands behind his back, his head bowed forward with lips tight, his face filled with disappointment as it was the day he left.

“I won’t let you down again. What’d I do?” she asked.

“Bring him down, now, quickly,” her brother said, “Right palm to the nose.”

Rebecca turned back to Wayne, thrusting the palm of her right hand as hard as she could upwards into his nose. His head snapped back with an audible crack and then nodded forward, eyes wide, mouth open.

“Don’t wait for him to respond, left thumb in the eye socket,” her brother said.

She followed the instruction.

Her opponent staggered backwards, hands up to his face.

“Fuuuuuckkkk!” he screamed.

“Kick the knee.”

Swivelling on her left leg, she kicked sideways across the inner side of the knee, exposed by his wide stumbling stance.

The leg collapsed like a broken reed, his body folding forward, his screams of pain carrying across the school grounds. Hitting the ground, he rolled onto his back, holding his leg with both hands. One eye closed tightly.

“Now finish him,” her brother instructed.

“That’s bang out of order un'all,” she said.

“An enemy that is left around is like a half-dead viper that you nurse back to health,” he said.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. You're quoting that now,” Rebecca said.

“I’m not really here,” he smiled wickedly.

“I’m gonna kill you, bitch!” the boy screamed.

“Damn it. I really wish you hadn't said that.”

Slipping off her shoes, she steps to stand by his head and begins to kick to his face repeatedly with her heel. He stops shouting. He stops rolling. He stops. Everything is quiet.

“What have I done?”

“What you had to do,” her brother said, and then he was gone.

Rebecca scrambled for her mobile phone, “Ambulance...”

\* \* \*

Students walked briskly and noisily through the corridors of the school, a mass movement from the last lesson of the morning to lunch.

“Dr Appleton?” a male voice called, stopping her slow aged walk.

Turning around, she saw a middle-aged man in a tweed jacket with large dark leather patches at the elbows, waving vigorously in her direction with his long, thin, lanky arm.

*There goes my quiet lunch.*

“Are you about to have your lunch?” he asked as he moved closer, “If so may I join you, I need to discuss a matter urgently.”

A teacher in a tracksuit followed by a small group of students in their gym kit rushed passed.

Keeping her face free of expression to conceal her annoyance, she replied, “Yes I was, but...” he cut her off, “Excellent, I will meet you in the staff room in five minutes, I just need to grab my sandwich box,” he said speeding off down the corridor.

*Oh, great.*

\* \* \*

The staff room was quiet at this time of the day. Most of the teachers were taking classes, the reason why she chose to eat at this time.

Wrapped in tin foil her lunch sat expectantly on her lap, she looked down at the reflective square mass and exhaled.

*I'll wait. I do so hate talking and eating.*

A hot cup of strong coffee steamed on the small table. The only sound came from some children playing a game of cricket in the nearby field.

The door opened a short distance. A thin pale face peered through, followed shortly by the rest of the tall skinny teacher.

“Excellent, you’re still here,” he said.

*I hope I won't regret that.*

Long gangling strides carried him to a large worn armchair opposite. He combed his greasy hair away from his eyes with his fingers.

“I must admit Doctor I was very sceptical of this mental health clinic you’ve been running, another one of our headmaster's great social experiments,” he chuckled finding himself funny, she did not.

“I am semi-retired. My physical health is not so good these days, so I do this voluntarily because I believe that good mental health starts when you are young. School can be a very traumatic experience for some, the negative effects persist into adulthood,” she said defensively.

He held up his large hand in an apology, “And that is exactly why I wish to talk to you. Did you hear about the fracas this morning?” he said.

“I saw the Ambulance outside, yes,” she replied.

“Well, the girl who attacked the boy...”

“A girl attacked someone?” she asked with genuine interest.

His eyes widened, “Yes, indeed, surprising when you think the boy she attacked was older and quite well built,” he explained opening his plastic lunch box with a pop, “Please don’t let me stop you eating,” he said pointing at her lap.

“It’s fine,” she said.

Searching his lunch box, he said, “A wonderful girl, Rebecca, fourteen, but with some troubles at home. Single parent, mother died when she was very young. Her older brother, Levy, was also a pupil at this school,” he stops to take a large bite from a ham, cheese and pickle sandwich.

After several noisy chews, he swallows and continues to talk.



“Levy was a star pupil. Then at the same age Rebecca is now, he changed, went completely off the rails. He became obsessive, delusional and violent. Attacked a teacher here, attacked his own Father, then runs away. Rebecca was devastated.”

Dr Appleton nods her head, “Any other siblings?” she asked.

“I believe another older brother and sister,” he said.

Reaching stiffly forward, she picks up the coffee cup from the table and takes a small sip of the bitter instant drink.

“I think someone taught Rebecca how to fight. I saw the injuries to that boy. She kicked ten bags of shit out of him if you pardon the expression.”

Another large bite of his sandwich, bringing a pause to the conversation, she drank her coffee.

The door to the staff room opened once more, another teacher carrying three large mugs skilfully in one hand headed for the sink in the small kitchen at the far end of the room.

“So, you would like me to talk to her?” she asked.

He finished chewing, “Very much so, I would hate to see her go the same way as her brother.”

“Well, I am only here for two days each week.”

“She has been suspended, pending an investigation, can you visit her at home?” he pleaded.

“They involved the Police?”

He nodded, with his mouth full.

“OK, I will see what I can do,” she said.

\* \* \*

Stepping into the warm, bright air of the conservatory of the Moore household, Doctor Hayley Appleton spotted Rebecca curled up on the leather sofa surrounded by large soft cushions, biting her thumbnail.

“Hello, Rebecca, I’m Doctor Appleton, but please call me Hayley,” she said.

She sat slowly down in a large hanging egg chair suspended from a large hook on the wall, resting her handbag on her lap she held a glass of water offered on arrival.

“Dad said you were coming. I don’t need a shrink. I’m not crazy. I don’t want to talk about what happened,” Rebecca said.

“Of course, but I would like to talk about your brother, Levy,” Hayley said, taking a sip from a tall glass of water.

“This has nothing to do with him!” she shouted.

“Rebecca, I have read your academic record. You’re a smart girl, so I won’t insult your intelligence. This has everything to do with your brother,” she said, “Tell me about the day he left.”

Hayley took two long sips of the water.

“Levy found out what Dad had done, they argued, Levy hit him, knocking him to the ground. John, my other brother, stepped in to defend Dad. Levy kicked him across the room. My sister Susan was screaming as if Levy was going to kill them. I pleaded with him to stop. He looked at me...”

Rebecca held her face in her hands.

“...the disappointment in his eyes...I promised, I promised to look after him. They were going to lock him up in the nuthouse. I let him down!”

*A paediatric psychiatric hospital, my God, kids often come out worse.*

Hayley shook her head in disgust.

“You made a promise to Levy?” Hayley asked.

Rebecca looked at her, with her jaw clenched, staying firm.

“How long ago was this? Hayley asked.

“Five years,” Rebecca said sadly.

“Your brother taught you martial arts when you were very young then?” Hayley asked.

Rebecca was unsure if she could trust Hayley at first. She decided she could, her brother told her she could.

“Yes, since I was six,” she said, quietly shifting her position.

“Your father didn’t appear to know or any of your friends.”

“It was our secret,” Rebecca replied.

*They have many secrets.*

Hayley placed the glass of water down on the floor to her side. Reaching into her handbag, she retrieved a folded paper, handing it to

Rebecca, who accepts it reluctantly. Unfolding it, Rebecca sees a computer printed copy of a newspaper page, a picture of a group of people standing behind three monks sitting in the lotus position. She was unable to read the report, the language foreign.

“It’s from a recent publication of a Thai newspaper,” Hayley said.

Rebecca’s eyes filled with water at the recognition of one of the group. Standing at the back his height and size compared to everyone else, he was unmistakable.

“Your brother is doing OK, Rebecca, he’s in a good place now,” she said.

Hayley closed her bag and rose to leave.

“Don’t tell anyone else,” Hayley said.

*One more secret.*

\* \* \*

Even before they entered the dojo, Hoshiko sensed something was different, she rushed in ahead of her father. A large audience filled the observer benches. Her mother stood on one side of the floor, a real katana sword at her hip, standing on the opposite side a petite young woman in her early twenties also with a katana. Hoshiko sat excitedly on the end of a nearby bench. She rarely saw her mother train, her father disapproved of any interest she showed in kendo, but today the training session was running late.

Hoshiko leaned in close to the man at her side and whispered, “What are they doing?”

“It’s a kata demonstration, with real swords,” he replied.

Hoshiko’s father came to sit down next to her. His body language was clear, he was not happy with this unusual situation. Hoshiko did not care, she needed to see this.

Hoshiko’s mother and her opponent moved towards each other, drawing their swords in one fluid motion, stopping with the tips of their swords almost touching.

The demonstration began.

Hoshiko watched the ten-minute performance intently. It was awe-inspiring, the intensity and beauty of it, their screamed kiai both terrifying

and exhilarating.

She turned to her father and said, “I want to do this.”

He gave her a stern and disapproving look, which she knew meant a clear “No”. Hoshiko did not care, she would be ten years of age soon and was old enough to make this decision for herself.

“I want to do this,” she repeated quietly.

That night her mother and father argued for many hours.

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