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Excerpt from the novel *Tales of Maids*

The Story of Sumi

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I didn't dislike Irma, you know. Once I even saw her cry in front of her husband. Dr. Imuda sported a Kaiser Wilhelm-the-second-moustache.

"It has brought up terrible memories for you," Dr. Imuda said as he stroked Irma's back.

Irma was thinking about when she had just returned to Berlin. Mariko, it seemed, had gone to Germany in 1929. Irma had taken her there on a boat when she was just thirteen. The situation in that country changed drastically during the six years before they came back to Japan. Mariko was just a child then and was busy dressing her dolls up pretty and practicing her piano lessons. She returned to Japan without noticing any changes.

It was Irma, you see, who suffered. After ten years of living in the east and being married to the studious Dr. Imuda, the Berlin that she returned to was not at all how she remembered it. They had come back to Japan in 1935 in order to flee the terrible things happening there. But they found that a lot was going on that year in Japan as well. The book by that terribly smart member of the upper house had been banned. It was about constitutional studies, or something like that.

The ever-intellectual Dr. Imuda stood pulling on his Wilhelm the second-moustache in the middle of the living room with a troubled expression on his face. The son of that upper-house member had been the governor of Tokyo for many years.

What ever are you talking about? No, even if I have made a mistake somewhere, that honorable politician has no connection to the movie-star Yujiro Ishihara, whose brother is now the governor.

Dr. Imuda shook his head wisely back and forth, but Irma was even more troubled than he was. "I get it, I do. Very scary things are going to take place." Irma said in her staccato Japanese.

And then she burst out crying. News of the book-banning had made Irma think about that terrible night, two years or so earlier, when she witnessed the book-burning in Berlin. It wasn't anything I really knew about, but because Irma spoke about it so often, I can recall certain details.

It was an evening in May. It had been raining that day in Berlin. A Japanese singer name Michiko took Irma and her daughter Mariko, as well a gentleman painter from Japan, to dinner at the high-class "Hotel Adlon" on the famous Unter den Linden. As well as being a famous opera singer, Michiko took great care of Japanese people who came to Germany. I saw her, you know, in a movie musical after the war.

She played a maid named Suzuki in “Madame Butterfly” with Kaoru Yachigusa. Anyway, Irma and Mariko – who was half-Japanese – were very indebted to Michiko for all of her assistance.

As it approached midnight the women heard military music and marching footsteps off in the distance. The sounds of boots and drums passed through Brandenburger Tor to Unter den Linden in one long line of red torches. The procession stopped at the plaza in front of the opera hall.

When Michiko and Irma ran out to see what was going on they saw trucks piled high with books amidst the troops. Apparently, men were shouting out in loud voices and throwing books one after another into the fire. After each book was thrown in there was applause and loud cheers – they said it seemed as though it was going to go on for ever.

Personally, I have no idea how much those books were worth. But Irma knew. Every time she spoke about this incident her shoulders would bunch up in anger and she’d begin to cry. “The men shouted out “Heil Hitler” and threw the books into the fire. Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, Heinrich Heine, Erich Kästner... The books that I loved, those men burned them all.”

Mariko didn’t understand any of it. Already half-asleep, she had stayed behind in the warmth of the hotel and out of the cold night. Those foreign books hardly held any meaning at all for Mariko, you see. And unlike Irma, Mariko had absolutely no idea of what Germany had been like before then. I mean, I didn’t really understand what made Irma cry either.

There were a lot of things going on in the world, but none of us understood that until much later.

I didn’t dislike Irma. Sure, she gave me money, but maybe it was simply that we got along well as people. I was let go from the Imuda household the following year. When I would meet Irma in the street though, after the war worsened, I always gave her a little of whatever I happened to be carrying, a couple of potatoes or so. I’m not exactly sure why I did that – perhaps because it was so hard to see the way she looked now when she used to be so pretty.

Right up until the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War, Irma was used to feeling like a welcome citizen of the League of Nations. But after the capture of Richard Sorge, the German spy, and once the war with the United States began, she felt as though all foreigners had all of the sudden become enemies in the eyes of the Japanese. In school everyone was taught the famous battle cry “Brutal Americans, Brutal British”, but the average Japanese person couldn’t tell the British and the Americans apart from the Germans and the Italians. So, all white people turned into spies.

But I did help out the Imudas a little. They would stop in at Mitaka and Musashi-sakai and since I was staying in Nakano back then I would sometimes buy them food. After the air raids intensified Dr. Imuda sent his wife and his daughter to stay with a German family in the wealthy resort town, Karuizawa. After that I didn’t see them until the end of the war.

In Germany, when Irma took Mariko to services at the church they frequently ran into Mason Yume, the Japanese artist they had met that troubled night in Berlin. The charming Mason Yume often began conversations with Irma, who could speak Japanese. One day he told Irma that he would like to paint her portrait and that is how she became his model.

“At that time Mason Yume was involved in some very dangerous work. The church that we went to, the Kaiser Wilhelm Church, was a refuge for the Jews who were being persecuted. Yume was in complete solidarity with their struggle. He would often receive communication from the Jewish Relief Center in Vienna and Geneva and head out on his own to help. He went to Prague, too. Why would someone like that want to paint my picture? There were plenty of younger and more beautiful models around. It’s a little embarrassing to admit, but I was really pleased. I treasure that painting even today.”

When I happened to see Irma again in the difficult days after the war she talked a lot, like someone possessed. I realized that it didn’t really matter to her whether I understood what she was talking about. Irma was just glad that she had met someone she knew well enough to talk to.

The Night under Martial Law

For the first time in six years the Imudas were able to spend New Year’s at home together by the fireside. The passing of years, however, had not tamed Mariko’s hysteria and she still treated me as she liked, often leaving bruises on my skin. But I wasn’t calm and long-suffering like their former maid Tama. When Mariko pulled my hair or pinched my chest I would threaten her and say “I’m going to tell your mother if you keep on doing that.” Then, making a disappointed face, Mariko would change tactics and plead “Mariko is crying...”

Then came that February morning. There had been a lot of snow that year. It didn’t just snow that morning, it had snowed many times already.

It was foggy the day before the incident. A white rainbow hung across the sun. A “white rainbow” is an omen of war – didn’t someone once say something like that?

The snow started falling in the evening and kept falling all night. People said that it was going to be the biggest snow fall in three years. It continued to fall as though it would paint the whole capital and I remember thinking that children’s snow-boots would simply sink.

In that piercingly cold morning I heard what sounded like firecrackers. Or at least I thought I heard it. The account of that day has been told to me so many times that I may have just come to believe that I heard the sounds.

Ministers were being killed one after another by young patriotic officers. The Imuda household learned of these events well before most people did. You see, we were close to the residence of the Minister of Internal Affairs, and we were close to

the military headquarters, as well as the Prime Minister's residence. So rumors of such dramatic events were very quick to reach us.

That evening the late edition of the newspaper came out.

The paper reported that many powerful leaders had been murdered and that Tokyo was now under military control. By the following day the news had spread all over Japan. But even after the war was over no one actually knew what really happened that day..

The capital was placed under martial law. We were all told not to go outside. Irma swooned and fainted when she heard that.

Dr. Imuda stayed in Irma's sickroom all day long and was in constant attendance on her.

I spent my time just gazing out the window. I had known that a day like this would come. You see, I had heard about it from Fumiko, a waitress-friend, a long time ago. Fumiko had told me about that the Prime Minister's residence was going to be attacked by young gun-bearing soldiers from Miyakezaka. All the cabinet members would be removed from office and the military general would become Prime minister. More than three hundred bombs, she said, might go off that night.

So I understood that there were some people who were just waiting for this to happen.

"The military seemed to claim that they were the only ones who could help the starving people that made up the majority of the Japanese population," Fumiko had said.

Mariko blinked her round eyes and tried to control the heaving of her chest. She had joined forces with those young officers even though there was no one that had less in common with the masses of hungry, dying people than she did.

Mariko liked that sort of thing.

Because Dr. Imuda was staying close to Irma's bedside Mariko called me from the maid's quarters and implored me to stay with her. She claimed that she couldn't be alone and threatened to go out into the night if I didn't comply. So I carried my futon into her room and laid it beside her bed. What else could I do? I spent that night with Mariko.

Her expressions changed as soon as I entered her room. Instead of tears, she playfully stuck out her tongue.

"This is lovely. To be able to spend a day like today with Sumi is really great. Isn't it Sumi?"

Mariko grabbed my hand and pushed it against her cold cheek.

"These nights under martial law are so romantic, aren't they?" she asked.

Mariko was very excited that the two of us were spending the night all by ourselves. She was the type of person whose intuition was off about most things.

"I have been waiting for this day to come for quite a while, you know," she said.

There was a small fireplace in Mariko's room. The night was cold so we moved close to the heater. Mariko's pale face was bathed in the red light of the fire. The flame was reflected in the tea-colored pupils of her big round eyes.

“Sumi, Sumi... wait just a minute, I have some treasures I want to share with you, only with you...”

Mariko clambered out of bed. There was a glass case filled with western-style dolls, music boxes, and other knick-knacks. Rummaging around in there she pulled out a beautiful German chocolate box with seams sewn in gold thread and lovely embossed letters. From the box, into which lace and matches and other little things had been randomly thrown, Mariko picked up a new, unused stamp.

I had no idea what type of stamp it was. It wasn't a particularly beautiful object. The other things in the box were far more elegant and feminine. But the more I listened to her the more I began to feel that the stamp really did suit Mariko. She was a strange young lady. One of her screws was certainly loose, but that particular screw was loose in a way that oddly suited the times.

Her eyes shone brightly in the light of the fire. She gazed at the stamp and dangled it in front of the flame as though to see it better.

The face of a barbaric long-haired man occupied the left side of the stamp. The only thing I could make out was the date “November 9 1923.” I assumed that it was some sort of commemorative stamp.

“It's in memory of the 1923 Munich coup, you see.”

Mariko's songlike voice floated through the crackling of the wood in the fireplace. She had studied singing from Michiko in Berlin, you see.

“Do you know about the coup, Sumi? Hitler tried to take control of the Weimar Republic by force, but that time it ended in failure and he was put in jail. Isn't it incredible that just ten years later he was overwhelmingly supported by the people? You know, those men who just attempted a military takeover here could be voted in as the Prime Minister in the future. Sumi? Thinking about those men who acted out of such love for our country makes me so excited, I'm not sure I can breathe...”

Mariko heaved a huge sigh of relief and clasped her hands together as though in prayer. She stared past the flickering flame that cast a shadow across her face. This nineteen year old woman was thinking proudly of the young officers in uniform.

“Hey, Sumi...” Mariko called out to me. But she wasn't speaking to the person sitting right in front of her. Her thoughts had jumped to the men in uniform whom she had never seen.

“Father had a friend who witnessed the Munich coup, a psychologist who loved to write poems. When he saw the events take place in front of him he simply couldn't stop himself from composing poetry. He shared his poems with father and me.”

“The battalion went to the river bank to raise Hakenkreuz's red flag” Mariko began as though reading from the sky above. “The voice of victory could be heard far from the town heavily encircled in mist.”

“Sumi, don't you think this “heavily” captures the essence of today?”

“The voice of victory could be heard far from this town heavily encircled in mist' brings the fragrance of the military coup directly to my body. Beyond this town, I mean beyond Miyakezaka, don't you believe the young, brave officers have raised

high the ‘voice of victory’? “The new power gathering strength in Munich moves us...” This morning, Sumi, instead of ‘Munich’ I tried whispering ‘Tokyo.’ “The new power gathering strength in Tokyo moves us...” How is that?

“From time to time the voice of the military is a distant noise but the town under martial law is dark’. ‘But the town under martial law is dark,’ don’t you think that totally captures this February, right here, in Tokyo?”

Mariko abruptly stood up and moved the dark crimson velvet curtains slightly. A torchlight could be seen in the dark night. Mariko’s warm breath fogged up the window. She wrote “uniforms” in childlike letters and pressed her cheek, warmed from the fire, against the cold window. Her long white finger wiped the droplet from her red cheek. Then she turned to me. “My mother hates Nazism,” she said, “but for whatever reason, my heart is drawn to it. The strictness and the pride fill my heart. I wonder why my mother doesn’t understand the spirit that has grabbed her own country’s heart?”

Mariko cast her gaze at the darkness outside and let out another deep sigh as she turned to sit by my side. The flame from the fireplace lit up her face.

“The fire is pretty,” Mariko whispered. “I also saw the fire that day. That fire in May, three years ago... the flames of the torches. I know my mother said it was something a child wouldn’t understand, but I was already seventeen years old. That’s hardly a child is it? I mean, how could I not see the torchlight procession that filed through Berlin in step with the beat of the military music? My chest swelled with emotion. The next night I snuck out into the streets all by myself. The streets were much quieter than the night before, almost spookily quiet. But I felt just like a woman straight out of Dr. Saito’s poem: ‘In the hushed sounds of night falling under martial law, a woman lingers.’ You know, if you hadn’t been here tonight, I would have ended up wandering out again – into ‘the hushed sounds of night falling’...”

Mariko broke off her sentence and wet her cherry-colored lips with her tongue as though she had just become aware they were parched.

“Sumi, don’t you wonder what those men are thinking right now? Those officers, I mean, who carried out their patriotic plan in the middle of this snowy night? ‘The officers on the far banks of that city encased in heavy mist who lowered their breath and flashed their eyes’... I mean, what are they thinking about?”

After saying that, Mariko took my hand and gently stroked her cheek with it. She looked at me with eyes that were red – as if she had been drinking or running a fever.

“You know, Sumi, tonight I just don’t feel like I can sleep at all.”

She didn’t loosen her grip. She caressed my hand time and time again. And then she gently brushed her lips against it.

Even now I don’t understand why things happened the way they did.

We continued to feel the cold blowing through the windows, but it didn’t snow any more that night.

It was the type of night where no one knew what they might become.

Instead of returning to her bed Mariko remained sitting there, pulling my hand down around her pale neck. She pulled little by little until my hand rested against her chest.

“It’s cold!” Mariko cried out. But even as she cried out her grip didn’t loosen. I had no idea a chest could become so warm and excited. Mariko continued pulling my hand, as though it was a tool for her pleasure, and I felt, closely, the swelling of her breast. She only laughed when I tried to jerk my hand away.

“Oh, Sumi, now it is my turn,” I thought I heard Mariko say. I don’t know if that is what really happened or if that is what I imagine happened. Even now I can’t decide.

After she said the word “turn” Sumi’s cold hand reached into the side of my kimono and began stroking my breast. My kimono was fastened tightly in the front, but the gap in the sleeves posed no resistance to her hands.

Far away the soldier’s boots marched through the remaining snow. At least that is what I thought I heard. Later I was told that the troops had already withdrawn and the only people left were curious onlookers waiting to see what was going to happen. I might have just imagined those sounds.

Slowly, slowly, Mariko’s finger fondled my breast. Her finger crawled towards my nipple. My nightdress gradually came loose around my chest and, in front of the red-hot fireplace, my breasts were exposed. As I lay close enough to the fire to be scorched, red splotches spread across my chest. The only thing that was cold was Mariko’s finger.

And I didn’t ask her to stop.

Her cheek followed her finger and pressed itself against my chest. My chest began to cool her cheek which was flushed from the fire. Her finger had been far colder. As she pulled her cheek away her lips brushed my nipple. Mariko paused for a split second, as though wondering if blood would bead on her dry swollen lips if they split apart, and then parted her lips and took my nipple in her mouth. The soft flesh of her inner-lip wrapped itself around my hard nipple as she sucked it. Finally responding to the moisture within, her tongue came thrusting out and licked the uncomplicated hardness of my nipple.

My mind, muddled by the evening’s fire, vaguely remembered that the poor carpenter’s wife Tama had mentioned something about this.

“I think women are better at this type of thing. Don’t you think a woman, who obviously knows how a woman’s body feels, can please a woman better?” she had said.

Mariko’s pearly front tooth nibbled at my erect core.

A moan escaped from my lips.

I have never forgotten the pleasure that appeared on Mariko’s ladylike face when she heard that. .

Then her finger parted my thighs and all thought flew from my head.

That was my night under martial law. February 1936.

The General Evacuation Order was issued in Kojimachi the next day. We were forced to take shelter at Dr. Imuda's sister's workplace in Mitaka. The day after that the infamous handbills were distributed and even the officers involved had to admit that the coup was a failure.

Nothing like that ever happened again between Mariko and me.

Mariko would sometimes shoot happy glances at me with eyes that said, "You really do love me don't you Sumi?". But I looked at her as little as possible and went about my work as though nothing had happened.

Oddly, after that, Mariko no longer pinched me. But when, for whatever reason, that fair finger would come in to contact with my skin I shivered so much it frightened me. When that happened, without fail, my head would later be flooded with thoughts of that poor pitiful carpenter's wife.

Things got really bad after the February 26th coup. The country was in a state of poverty and keeping maids became an unaffordable luxury. That is why, you see, I was let go from my job.

But it was a good time for me. People just heard the word "maid" and looked at me with rose-colored glasses. Mostly because of the case of Abe Sada – remember that maid who ran away after she cut off her lover's penis?

I didn't really want to be with that lesbian princess-of-the-house. I went back to my old cafe but the work there was also unsteady so I ended up working construction during the war. After that I went, as you'd expect, to hell, by which I mean the brothel.

The young lady who had said, "I know my mother detests Nazism but for whatever reason it captures my heart" became emaciated with malnutrition and died. I heard her father was killed in an air raid. I learned lots of sad news from the surviving Irma when I happened into her amongst the ruins after the war.

I learned, for example, that the Nazi Germany that had captured her daughter's heart, was as harsh to lesbians and gays as it was to Jews. And I learned that Michiko Tanaka, who had helped them so in Berlin, was forcefully sterilized so that her marriage to a German wouldn't result in German blood being contaminated by yellow blood.

Irma said that she had fled her hometown of Berlin and come back to Japan because of what was going on there. Nevertheless, she had wanted Mariko to marry some young promising German man. She shuddered at the thought of someone meddling in their affairs and making her beautiful half-Japanese daughter undergo the same operation.

Irma was a devout Christian and she had sought emotional support from the services she attended at the Kaiser Wilhelm Church every Sunday during her stay in Berlin. This coquettish painting of her is by the Japanese painter Mason Yume who she met at that church.

She really is pretty.

Irma returned to German after she lost everything and was left completely alone. She gave me this painting to keep.

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Riho moved closer to the painting and straightened its dusty frame. “It’s exactly like a Takehisa Yumeji, isn’t it?” she said. “I’ve always thought that this painting of yours was a Yumeji.”

“You can have it when I die – you’ve always been so kind to me.”

After she said that the old lady lowered her eyes and looked down. She heard Irma’s accented Japanese in her head –

“I give this to you, Sumi. You have been so kind.

Mason Yume said that his Japanese name was Takehisa Yumeji.”

[...]

(A tribute to Yoshiya Nobuko’s “A Story of Tama.”)

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