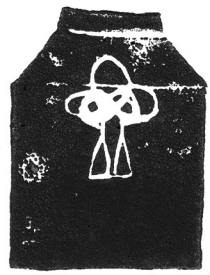

The
THINGS
SHE
OWNED
'Simply gorgeous.' MOLLY MURN
Katherine Tamiko Arguile



A Casket

It is a box covered in pale golden brocade. The cover is topped with a cream curlicue knot, which holds its folded upper corners in place. It adorns a tab which, when pulled upwards, reveals the box of white Japanese pine beneath. The wood exudes a special scent, like incense. The box is not the treasure, however, for when its lid is removed there is an urn of polished black granite nestled inside, smoothly shaped with rounded edges and carved with kanji characters: a name, a date. Its weight, for something so small, lends it gravity. But the urn is not the treasure either, for the treasure lies within. The urn's lid is held closed, simply, with sticky tape.

Erika

The escalator deposits Erika in the arrivals hall of Heathrow's Terminal Two. She frowns at the board, checking to see if the flight from Tokyo has landed. Being late to greet Kei is not an option. It hasn't landed yet, thank god. Erika left home early but there've been delays; at Earl's Court the Piccadilly line platform was crammed with people. Earlier that morning someone had thrown themselves under a train. She blocked her mind from going where it usually tried to go whenever she heard the person-under-a-train announcement, and bought a magazine from the kiosk to distract herself for the rest of the journey to Heathrow.

It had been a hot, airless night and she'd barely slept. She'd fidgeted and sighed, kicking at the sheets, seeking relief in whatever cool spot she could find. Sometimes she'd dozed off to be ensnared in brief, claustrophobic dreams: Kei disembarking from her flight, smiling in anticipation as she passed through immigration and customs, the arrivals-hall doors sliding open for her as she stopped to scan the waiting crowds. Erika craning over the railings, so close she could almost touch her cousin. Erika shouting 'Kei!' over and over, waving, but her cousin looking straight through her, not seeing her. Erika watching Kei's face darken with disappointment. She woke herself up shouting, drenched in sweat. Too agitated to stay in bed, she'd got up to watch TV. Once she'd gone back to her room she'd slept, though fitfully, and woken again just before dawn. She watched the light creep between the curtains, bleaching the shadows from her room. She'd lain awake in bed, wired and exhausted, until her alarm went off.

Erika looks up at the board, sees the flight has landed, and the knot in her belly tightens. She needs to sit down and she needs a coffee. Kei

will take at least forty-five minutes to pass through immigration, pick up her baggage and clear customs. Erika's mobile buzzes; she flips it open. A text from Marcus. *Hope today goes OK. Call me later x.*

She'd asked him to stay at his own place last night. She needed the solitude to calm herself, but now she wishes she'd asked him to stay over after all, even though she'd probably have kept him awake with her tossing and turning. He'd be in the staff room now, on his break. She heads for a coffee shop and calls him.

'Is she with you?' he asks.

'Not yet. I'm just getting a coffee.'

'You okay?'

She heaves a sigh. 'I wish I'd told her not to come after all.'

'I won't say I told you so.'

'You just did.' Erika reaches the counter. 'Black coffee please, triple shot,' she says to the barista. She points at her phone and mouths *sorry*.

'I'm sorry to be negative. I've been in a state since it sunk in she was really coming. There's that whole business with …' She trails off.

'Did you hide it?' he asks.

'I can't.'

'You realise you're making things difficult for yourself?'

She doesn't know what to say.

'Erika?'

'Forget I said anything. No point talking about it now.' She picks up her coffee, finds a spot at a table and takes a gulp, burning her tongue.

Now it's her turn to wait for him to speak, but he says nothing. She feels him pulling at her across empty space.

'I can't just stuff my mother in a cupboard, can I?' she says. The rhetorical adjunct floats in the silence. She forces a sharp, dry laugh.

'Well,' Marcus says at last, 'you'll just have to deal with it then.'

After Marcus hangs up Erika remains sitting near the window, watching Lilliputian airport ground staff swarm around jumbo jets. She

hasn't flown for a while. The last time was to Japan twelve years ago. Her mind bounces off memories like a pebble bouncing off a frozen lake. She returns to the counter to order an apple danish, though she isn't hungry, and another coffee.

She isn't ready for this day. She was able to prepare the house for Kei's arrival, but she hasn't got a clue how to prepare herself. Erika has read her cousin's email over and over again to the point of paralysis. The thought of writing back in Japanese made her sick with anxiety, and she didn't trust herself on the phone. In the end, Erika had no choice but to write back that, of course, Kei could stay with her; that she'd take a few days off work so she could spend time with her.

She felt herself split into two halves, one fighting the other. What she wrote was the opposite of what she wanted, but another self had gone ahead with the invitation anyway. Kei had booked her flight, and that had been that.

Even then, Erika couldn't deal with the email's most difficult question; thank god Kei didn't ask again.

Kei should be in the arrivals-hall soon. Erika takes a final swig of her coffee and slops it down her chin and onto the white shirt she'd ironed so carefully the night before. *Shit.* She dabs at the dark stain with a napkin. *Shit!*

She follows signs to the toilets where she soaks paper towels under the tap and works the dark-brown coffee stain into beige. Now the whole front of her shirt is wet. Great. When she looks in the mirror, her bra is visible through the wet fabric. Worse still, the carp tattoo on her shoulder shows too. The knot in her belly twists tighter. 'Tattoos are for Yakuza whores!' Michiko had raged when, at seventeen, Erika had taken off her shirt to show her, knowing she'd get a kick out of her mother's reaction. She stoops under the hand dryer for as long as she can, plucking at the front of her shirt, waiting for opacity to return. Time is running out.

Back in the arrivals-hall, Erika panics at the sight of well-dressed Japanese travellers milling around. Tour guides hold travel-agency flags aloft. They bow and smile, calling out in high-pitched voices. Erika searches through the crowds and there, looking blank, with her suitcase at her feet, is her cousin. The stone in Erika's stomach turns into a boulder. Kei hasn't seen her yet.

Erika grips the strap of her bag with her hand to hide her tattooed shoulder and rearranges the dismay she knows is written on her face into a broad smile. She calls out. 'Kei!'

Kei wheels around and sees her. She smiles with her mouth, but her dark eyes flicker to the stain on Erika's shirt.

Erika's impulse to hug Kei falters and dies. It doesn't matter. A hug isn't expected now they're adults. She remembers their childhood reunions whenever she and Michiko went back to Tokyo – how Erika and Kei used to fall on each other in a half-wrestle, half-embrace, giggling with joy – and she feels a twist of sorrow.

'I'm so sorry,' Erika says. 'I was here waiting for you but I spilled my coffee and had to go clean myself up. I really, truly am sorry, I wanted to be here when you walked through the doors. I'm so happy to see you!' The Japanese words feel lumpen in Erika's mouth. She's gabbling.

'Well, I'm glad to see you too,' says Kei. 'It was such a long flight and there were huge queues at immigration. Then my suitcase was one of the last to come out on the carousel and I had to stand there for so long. I'm exhausted.'

The sight of Kei, immaculate even after her long journey, hits Erika with the stark reality of the next fortnight. How the hell is she going to get through this? The faux-pas of not being there to greet her cousin as she came through the arrivals-hall doors, of turning up with a stained shirt and a barely concealed tattoo, are nothing, nothing compared to the moment that's coming, when Kei will walk into Erika's flat and see the corner with the antique Korean cabinet, the corner that not even

the ill-anticipated visit could induce Erika to touch. When they get home, Kei will no longer need to ask the whereabouts of her aunt's grave. She will see the answer right there, on top of the cabinet, under its thick blanket of dust. The black granite urn in its box of Japanese pine, covered with silk brocade. It holds fragments of Erika's mother's cremated bones, still uninterred after twelve years.

Michiko

To Michiko, this was the natural order of the world: heart-pumping dashes triggered by wailing sirens; the scarcity of food, of everything; rousing military songs of empty bravado; the frantic waving of Hinomaru flags to send young men off to war, boys only just out of school uniform. Every day, women grieved over news of a son's, a father's, a husband's, a brother's death; over the loss of children, friends and homes to bombs and tracer bullets fired from the sky. The hoods stitched from old futon quilts normally used for protection against earthquakes were now used – with preposterous hope – for protection from the never-ending bombing raids. Michiko's friend Maki-chan was killed with her brothers and sisters when a bomb fell on their house. No padded hood could ever have saved her.

Life had always been harsh and grey; adults had never smiled; everyone had always been afraid and hungry. Sometimes when she was playing, Michiko might forget about the world for a moment. But then the gnawing in her stomach or the fatigue would stop her from skipping or climbing and wrench her back to the dreadful heaviness.

Kensuke, born eight years before Michiko, told her it hadn't always been this way. He insisted there'd been a time when there was plenty to eat, when their mother used to throw back her head and laugh. On a summer's night, during the Obon festival, they'd danced with everyone from the neighbourhood under the glow of a hundred paper lanterns, stepping in time as they circled around the enormous taiko drum, the singer's quavering voice intertwining with melodies plucked by shamisen players. This was how they'd honoured the spirits of the ancestors who had returned to visit the living.

'If father wasn't nearby, mother would dance the Okinawan Kachāshi,' Kensuke told her. 'I wish you could have seen her. She stepped in time to the taiko drums and waved her arms in the air. Her hands looked graceful, like the tentacles of a sea anemone. Here, like this,' he said, and he lifted Michiko's arms and swayed them from side to side, showing her how to take the dainty steps forward, head tilted: toe, step, toe, step. 'It made Mother so happy. Sometimes, if she really got carried away, she'd whistle, or call out, like this: *Haaa-iya-sassa*!' Michiko echoed her older brother's high-pitched cry, and together they stepped across the tatami, waving their arms and hollering until their father thundered up at them from downstairs to be quiet.

Michiko asked her brother to tell stories about the old days again and again, as if hearing them released her from the relentless darkness of her world. She'd listen, lying with eyes closed as he sat cross-legged beside her, imagining herself in the scenes he conjured up. Fusae would join them, sometimes; though she'd been born before the war, she'd been too little to remember much of those days. Kensuke told of the kamishibai man who came each month on his bicycle with thrilling adventures about oni ogres, brave boys born from peaches and egg-sized princesses discovered in hollow trunks of bamboo. They'd listened, rapt, as he narrated along to colourful storyboards he slid in and out of the wooden frame strapped to the back of his bicycle.

The dagashiya was full of tempting treats, said Kensuke. For a few sen you could win a favour in a lucky dip: maybe a goldfish made of hollow tin you could float in a bucket of water, or a whistle that tweeted like a bird when you spun it on a string. The bustling neighbourhood rang with cries from street sellers, and the joyful din of brash charumera horns, bells and drums of chindonya wandering musicians in multi-coloured costumes.

Kensuke told how, the year before Fusae was born, he had travelled with their mother a long way south, on a ship, to Okinawa, the place she told them secret stories about. He'd swum with his cousins in a

clear, bright-blue sea, their grandmother and aunts sitting with a picnic on white sand. He said it was a place of mysterious magic, an island where warm breezes blew through palm trees; an island lush with multi-coloured flowers, dotted with sacred groves and ancient rocks and trees. The sea was full of fish, he said, and its fields abundant with tasty vegetables. 'The island people live until they're a hundred years old,' he said. Michiko thought it sounded like one of those folk tales the old ones liked to tell. She couldn't believe that there had once been a life unburdened by panic and fear, sorrow and hunger.

She saw things a young child should never have to see: eviscerated dogs, their guts spilling into the road; soldiers missing both legs and covered in sores, crying and begging in the streets; women demented with grief, howling and ripping at their hair. Twisting into demons and ogres, these visions haunted her at night and she would wake up screaming. Her mother would crouch beside her. If Michiko didn't quieten soon enough, if she woke her father, he would bellow – '*Yakamashī!*' *Shut up!* – frightening her into louder sobs. Her mother would beg in a whisper, 'Please, Michi, stop crying, or you'll make your father very angry,' and when Michiko couldn't, he would rise from his futon with swift steps and loom over her, tall and dark. With the full length and strength of his arm he would strike her face until she fell silent.

They were not in the house when the bomb fell. The house appeared intact from the front, but the rear half was destroyed, roof tiles and splintered wood spilling into one end of the garden. Her mother had buried earthenware jars containing family documents, heirlooms and valuables in a corner of the garden for safekeeping, so they took only the things they needed and went to live with a nearby family. The Hasetanis' sons were away fighting in the war. Their father sat stooped in mute reverie every day, so his wife was glad of the company. She

accepted packets of tea from the rapidly diminishing Takigawa shop stocks in lieu of rent. The room they shared was smaller than the old study at home. Michiko could not escape her father.

Sometimes he'd smack her head from behind as he passed, or tap out his pipe on her head, filling the room with the smell of singeing hair. Her mother might murmur something if she was present, but she knew better than to try to stop him. Michiko wished her father would go away to war like her friends' fathers, but Fusae said he'd already fought in another war when he was barely a man, the one in China, and that he'd seen terrible things. He wasn't fit to fight anymore. Traditional Japanese traders like him were encouraged to continue working as best they could. Even if nobody bought much tea these days, even if they had less and less stock to sell, there was still much to organise. Michiko's father planned for the time he knew would come, when Japan won the war. He sat cross-legged at a low table in the little room that was their temporary home, going over his ledgers, and Michiko knew to make herself very small and very quiet.

'You must be good, Michiko,' said Fusae, 'and not make father so angry. He works very hard for us.'

'Mother does too,' said Michiko.

Michiko liked it best when she was in the kitchen with her mother and Hasetani-san. She liked helping her mother cook the gruel by stirring it in the pot over the fire, or watching sweet potato skins blister and turn golden over glowing charcoal in the hibachi, but most of all, she liked to listen to the women's stories. Some of them were funny, like the one about Hasetani-san's youngest son, who got a bean stuck up his nose when he was in primary school because he'd wanted to see if it would grow there, and they had to go to the doctor to get it out. Other stories frightened her, though she couldn't help but listen. The most terrifying ones were about the war. The one about Hasetani-san's son-in-law gave her nightmares. He had come home with only one arm – the other had been blown off in Burma – and it was said that

the Americans had found it in the jungle and eaten it. Americans liked to eat human flesh, people said, butchered from men they'd tortured and women they'd ravaged. She imagined American soldiers slashing at women with daggers until their insides burst out, like the dog she had seen on the street. She wondered why they didn't ravage the men too, but was too frightened to ask. The Americans must be monsters, even more dangerous and scary than oni ogres.

Everything felt impermanent and unsettled. Michiko didn't know when they could move back to their old house again. When she asked her mother, Chiyo said they would once it was rebuilt, but there wasn't any point in rebuilding until the war was over, because it might only get bombed again. No, she didn't know when that might be.

'But mightn't a bomb fall on this house too?' asked Michiko. 'And what if we are all inside? Will we die, like Maki-chan?'

But her mother just carried on scrubbing clothes in the wooden washtub.

Michiko was forbidden from going back to their bombed-out house, so she snuck away alone to play there in secret. She played make-believe, imagining she lived there with just her mother, brother and sister: a happy, peaceful life during the idyllic time before the war. She would sit under the smashed beams of the old room overlooking the garden. On the dusty tatami floor she would lay out plates of broken tiles filled with stones and camellia petals. She would pretend-eat this miraculous, endless feast with twigs for chopsticks. As soon as one plate emptied, it was filled again, like the enchanted rice bag the dragon princess gave Hidesato as a reward in the folktale 'Tawara Tōda'. But as dusk fell, she hurried back to the family's tiny room. She would swallow the same small portion of flavourless gruel she had every day, her stomach gnawing with hunger, and wait for something to happen.

One hot and humid day in August, news came of a terrible event in the south west of Japan. A bomb that shone more brightly than a thousand suns had fallen on a busy city. A second fell, three days later,

on another. The bombs flattened a thousand buildings with typhoons of scorching wind, melting skin off people's bones. People who had been near the bomb simply evaporated, they said, leaving their shadows imprinted on the pavements and walls where they fell, like ghosts; others who had survived that day were now getting sick and dying slowly, their hair falling out, their skin oozing with sores, their noses bleeding. They said it was the worst atrocity in the history of Japan. There was going to be a radio announcement. Michiko listened to a small reedy voice speaking a language she didn't understand. 'What is he saying?' she asked, and her father roared at her to be quiet. They were gathered around the Hasetanis' tiny wireless with others from the neighbourhood, straining to hear the voice through crackling interference. That was the voice of the Emperor, Kensuke told her afterwards. He didn't understand what he was saying, either.

'Nobody's ever heard the Emperor speak before,' said Kensuke. 'Doesn't his voice sound funny?'

Michiko was surprised. Everyone knew that looking at the Emperor would make you go blind, because he was a god, a descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu, and staring at the sun makes you blind. Surely hearing his voice should have made them deaf?

Her mother told her that the Emperor had used ancient, courtly words. 'That's why you couldn't understand what he said. It's like another language, not the everyday Japanese that we speak.'

Once the Emperor had finished – 'He rambled a little,' said their mother, 'it wasn't clear what he was trying to say' – the radio announcer explained that Japan had surrendered. Japan had lost the war. Michiko's father sat, silent, at his table in their room. He didn't speak for three days. She knew to keep out of his way.

Her father started repairs on their bombed house, shoring up the smashed rear walls to make it safe. He was determined to re-open

the teashop. The carpenter and his son had still not returned from fighting in Singapore, so her father undertook to rebuild the house himself. Michiko asked her mother if her father might let them plant vegetables in the garden now, since most of it had been destroyed when the bomb fell.

'Just let him get the house ready first, Michi, and then we'll see,' she said.

The Emperor's radio speech was still the main topic of discussion a week later, when Michiko's father began to spend entire days repairing their home. He left the Hasetani house at dawn and returned at dusk, dusty and tired. His uncharacteristic three days of passivity had been replaced by fierce determination.

'I won't let the Americans stop me,' he said. 'Those barbarians know nothing about tea. In Japan, people will always want to drink good tea, war or no war. I will not be the one, after all these generations, to break the family tradition.'

Kensuke told Michiko that rebuilding the shop and the house was pointless because the Americans were probably going to kill them all anyway. There was speculation in the neighbourhood about what was to become of them. More men were returning from the war. Many didn't, killed or missing in action. There were those who killed themselves by seppuku after surrender so they would never return to face the shame of defeat. There were whispers too, about some who had returned who were no longer right in their minds. They'd been ordered to do terrible things or be condemned to death, they said, and were driven mad by their acts.

'The rice merchant's son just sits at the table staring into space,' said Hasetani-san. 'He won't eat or talk. His poor mother.'

At last the house was safe enough for the Takigawas to move back in. Despite the rubble in the garden and the still-unusable room overlooking it, their lives resumed a semblance of normality. One evening when her father sat cross-legged on the verandah, Michiko

crept up to him, daring to whisper, 'Father, are the Americans going to kill us?'

He half-opened his eyes to look at her and said nothing. She flinched when he moved towards her before slackening in astonishment as he took one of her hands in his own. His fingers felt rough and calloused. She held on to this moment in her mind for a long time.

Later that week, she found her mother crouched in the garden, her apron over her head, crying. This frightened her more than the stories, more than the Americans. Seeing her mother helpless was unbearable.

Michiko wondered if Tokyo After the War would be the same as Tokyo Before the War. Japan would never be the same again, people were saying. They would have to get used to life with the Americans. That is, if they left anybody alive.