MARY ONIONS

A Heavy Dew

When his wife died and his children moved away and he could no longer bear the silence of his small house in the suburbs of Tokyo, Kenichi would often seek refuge in the local pachinko parlour. There, in the huge pinball arcade, amid the bells, buzzers, whistles and metallic crashes, he would feed his coins into the slot and watch the small steel balls spinning round, mesmerized by the flashing lights, drowning in the cascade of sound. Gradually his mind would disengage from the scene in front of him and wander through his past; the birth of his children, his wedding day, his first day at work and, more and more frequently now, his childhood in Shimoda.

Today, on his way here, he'd passed a demonstration. Crowds of angry young people waved banners and shouted in protest at the Prime Minister's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine to honour the war dead. It used to be war 'heroes', he thought. When had they become just 'the dead'?

Kenichi was eight years old when the war ended. Seventy years on, in the mind numbing roar of the pachinko parlour, he thinks back to the day the war came to him.

He remembers the droning of the B29 above as it made its way back to Guam, shedding its last bomb over their village. The stuttering of the engine as it paused, then the whistle of the bomb and the thunderous crash of the explosion as the village school disintegrated, raining timbers and dust. Their mothers had screamed, and they'd

all dived to the ground but when the last splinters of wood had settled, Taro, his black hair covered in dust, his face white, looked up and grinned. "Wow! No more school!" The mothers had scolded, their faces pinched with fear, but the boys had whooped and danced.

They were a ragtag bunch of heroes. Taro was their undisputed leader and Kenichi and the other boys would trot along behind him as he devised drills, exercises and endurance tests for them all. They envied the older boys with their sharpened spikes attached to bamboo poles practising jukendo and copied their moves faithfully, using whatever sticks they could find in the clutter of burned boards and timbers. They marched and yelled and thrust their puny weapons, confident they would be able to defend their country and their emperor and drive the hairy foreigners out of town. They knew that a Japanese pilot on a Divine Wind mission, would not have been satisfied with carelessly dropping a bomb on a village school. He would have died a hero's death, sighting his target with eagle-eyed accuracy, plunging like an arrow and exploding in a burst of golden glory

But much as he dreamed of being a hero, Kenichi dreamed of food. He couldn't remember ever not being hungry. He and Taro would lie on their backs in the long grass and stare at the sky, sharing dreams of huge bowls of white rice or grilled chicken skewers or mochi filled with sweet bean jam, their mouths watering, their stomachs growling. Once they stole a kibidango from one of the smaller boys. They followed him behind a battered, old shed and watched as he carefully took the millet dumpling from his pocket. Taro pounced, snatched the dumpling from his hand and tore it in two. Kenichi crammed his half into his mouth and gulped it down, coughing and spluttering, tears streaming from his eyes. He didn't even taste it.

The hunger was a constant presence. He would whine and complain to his mother, but there was little she could do. So he and his sister Etsuko foraged in the hills for sansai, wild vegetables, to eke out the millet porridge that was their daily meal.

On the day his father came home, he and Etsuko returned from their scavenging expedition to the most enticing savoury smell. They rushed inside but drew up short as they saw a man in uniform about

to tuck into a steaming plate of rice and chicken. Kenichi stared in utter disbelief. His sister rushed forward and threw her arms around the intruder.

"Daddy!"

Kenichi burst into tears. He had been so fixated on the rice he hadn't even recognized his father.

"What's the matter with you? Aren't you pleased to see me?" laughed his father.

"Where did you get that food?"

"Hush," snapped his mother. "I've been saving it up for your father."

"But what about us? I want some rice—and some chicken. It's not fair!"

A sudden slap from his father and his head exploded with pain.

"Stop whining. Do you want the Kichiku Eibei to come and take your mother and sister? Don't be such a baby."

"Your father is about to go on a very important mission. He needs feeding up before he goes."

Kenichi wiped his tears with his grubby hands. An important mission?

"Is it the Divine Wind father?"

His father smiled. "No. It's even more important than that. And it's top secret."

Kenichi forgot the pain, he even forgot his hunger, as his father told them about his role as a fukuryu, a Crouching Dragon. He would defend the Japanese coastline by repelling any enemy craft with a mine attached to a bamboo pole. It would explode on contact.

"But isn't it dangerous?" gasped Estuko.

"Of course. But that is why we have been training, marching underwater every day for hours."

"How can you march underwater? Do you have to hold your breath?"

"The Imperial army has designed special suits and we carry oxygen to breathe from. It is an honour to be chosen for this special mission."

Kenichi thought his father had never looked so handsome and brave. He was bursting with pride. He couldn't wait to tell the other

boys. He was already devising a new game. They could use their kendo poles and make their own special breathing suits and well, they could work out the details later.

Three days later there was news of the Hiroshima bomb followed just a week after by the Nagasaki one. Kenichi and his friends marvelled at the idea of a bomb so powerful it could damage a whole city in one go and now in their games they equipped their Divine Wind pilots and Crouching Dragons with these magical weapons.

Then came the summons to the civic centre to listen to a special broadcast. The emperor was going to speak. This was unprecedented. Kenichi knew it could only mean that he was going to announce a fresh offensive. Perhaps the Crouching Dragons had been successful. He couldn't understand why his mother wasn't more excited.

As the broadcast began Taro started to laugh at the scratchy voice squeaking out of the radio, but he was quickly shushed. Kenichi was confused. Was this really the emperor? It didn't even sound like Japanese. One phrase stuck out clearly though: 'The war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage.'

One old man spat on the ground. "Ha! 'Not necessarily to our advantage'. Well that's one way of putting it. And now we're going to let those gaijin bastards move in and take over our homes and our women and children!"

A clamour of voices arose—some incredulous, some relieved.

"Have we lost the war?" asked one small child in disbelief.

"Thank God it's over," breathed his mother, sinking to her knees.

The mayor, who had put on his best uniform and shined his shoes for the occasion, shouted clearly over the din. "Quiet! We must thank our beloved emperor and follow his guidance. As He said, 'We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable.' Now we must go home and endure. Gamanzuyoi!"

The old man spat once more but the crowd dispersed quickly and quietly. Everyone was too stunned to say any more. Even the children followed their mothers home without a murmur.

For the next couple of days Kenichi bombarded his mother with questions: "What's going to happen?" "When are the barbarians going to come and take you away?" But she just smiled sadly. "At

least there's no more fighting. No more bombs and fires. Nothing can be as bad as that pikadon in Hiroshima."

Kenichi found this new state of peace strange. No one seemed to know quite what to do. There was a sense of helpless anticipation in the air. The older boys stopped practising their jukendo and scoffed at the younger ones when they tried to play their war games. "You think you're going to fight off the Americans with those sticks? How stupid can you be?"

And still there was no food. Kenichi continued his scavenging. At least it gave him something to do.

One afternoon he had strayed quite a long way from his usual hunting ground, when he heard a rumbling noise coming closer. At first he thought it was an earthquake. It took him a while to recognize the sound of engines; it had been so long since there was any petrol for cars. He stood at the side of the road and watched as a convoy of trucks and jeeps loomed over the brow of the hill. The gaijin were coming. What to do? Should he run and warn everybody? Should he pick up a stick and fight?

The first jeep drew up alongside him. A huge black-faced man in a smart uniform smiled at him. He could hardly breathe from fear. "Hi kid. How're you doing? Want some gum?" He held up a bright silver packet. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" The black man laughed and tossed him the pack of gum.

Then they were gone, off down the hill in a cloud of dust. Kenichi sank to the ground. He realized that in his terror he had wet himself and was overcome with shame. Heroes didn't just stand by the side of the road pissing themselves. He should have done something. Even now the Americans were heading towards his village. His mother and sister were in danger. He should go and see what was happening. But still he stood, rooted to the spot.

And then there was the gum. It was a small packet with five flat sticks, each individually wrapped. He opened one and considered it carefully. What if it was poison? He licked it. It was so sweet! Impulsively he stuffed the whole piece into his mouth and almost wet himself again from the pure bliss he felt at the juicy sweetness. He sat by the roadside for ages chewing furiously, his mind in a whirl. Had he really met Americans? Why didn't they capture him? Or

kill him? They had sounded amused, kind even. Would they really kidnap his mother and sister? He had to get back. Carefully grasping the remaining sticks of gum, he ran home, fearful and excited.

As he reached the village, Taro and the others rushed up.

"Did you see the Americans?"

"Weren't they scary?"

"They drove straight through! Do you think they're heading to Tokyo?"

"One of them was black. Can you imagine that?"

"Phew—what's the matter with you? You stink!"

"Ha! Kenichi's wet himself!"

Kenichi slunk away. He had been going to tell his story and show off the gum, but now he just wanted to get home.

And when he got home, his father was there.

He was slumped, white-faced on the tatami. He looked like a sack of flour. Gone was the hero with the flashing eyes who had been with them just a few short weeks ago. This man was spent, defeated. He looked up listlessly as Kenichi burst through the door.

"Dad! You're home!"

His father just stared at him.

His mother bustled up—"Leave your father alone. He's tired."

"I saw them," he whispered.

"Who?" replied his mother.

"The Americans. They gave me this." He held out the packet of gum.

His father shot up. "How dare you?" he screamed. "Traitor! You have brought dishonour to this family. Get out! Get out of my house!"

Kenichi turned and fled. He ran and ran, his heart pounding, his mind racing.

There was a crack of thunder and the rain started to fall like needles, but still he ran on. His feet slipped and slid on the treacherous, muddy ground. Finally, he could go no further. He saw the hollow trunk of a burnt-out tree ahead and crawled inside, wet and shivering. For hours he huddled there, sobbing, His father was right. He had let down his family, his friends, his country. At last he slept.

When he woke the storm had passed. Kenichi crept out of his hiding place and sniffed the air. It smelt clean, refreshed. Beads of moisture on the grass glittered in the sun and above a hawk swooped and dived. Perhaps he could apologise to his father, make things right? He realised he was still clutching the gum; the shiny silver strips now a dirty, sticky clump in his hands. He scrabbled in the earth and pushed them deep into the mud. Then he turned towards home.

As he neared the house, he paused. The door of the barn was slightly ajar. From inside came a strange rasping noise. Kenichi pushed the door fully open and looked inside. The first thing he saw was a pair of army boots at eye level. He looked up and saw the body of his father swinging from a beam. The face was distorted, blue-black above a tight knot of rope. Everything was silent save for the creaking of the rope groaning at its load. Even as he stared, stupefied, Kenichi saw something flutter to the ground. Picking it up he read the words beautifully inscribed.

Through the years that followed, through their move to his aunt's in Tokyo, where everything smelt of new lumber as the reconstruction got underway, through university, work, marriage and children, Kenichi kept that paper, unfolding it and rereading it until the words faded and the paper became transparent. He could still recite it by heart, his father's jisei, his death poem.

Both the victor
and the vanquished are
but drops of dew,
but bolts of lightning—
thus should we view the world.

An avalanche of metal balls clatter into the tray in front of him. Kenichi comes back to the present with a start. He scoops them up and goes to the counter outside to collect his prize. He passes the demonstrators he'd noticed earlier. They are packing up: rolling up their banners and stuffing their loud hailers into their bags. They're laughing, smiling, their earlier anger dissipated. "Till next year then!" they call to each other.