

ACCIDENTAL BLOOMS



A MEMOIR

BY KEIKO HONDA

Caitlin Press 2023

This book is dedicated to my loving and brilliant daughter, Maya.

Your endearing smiles and sparkling eyes light up my life and beyond.

Keep smiling, sweetheart.



Grandma Tamiko in her signature kappōgi (covered apron), a cherished sight from my childhood. *Where it All Began*, 2019

PROLOGUE: WELLSPRING

Spring 1975

A sea of white blossoms churned in the wind. My grandmother's plum tree was, miraculously for this southern Japanese climate, still blooming in late March.

Zaki, zaki, zaki, zaki. Wrapped in a spotless, white-sleeved apron, Tamiko, my maternal grandmother, was scaling fish that my grandfather, Konosuke, caught earlier that day. *Zaki, zaki, zaki, zaki.* The two dozen bright red *kinmedai* were splashing in the cooler. Extended family living nearby were coming for dinner. As was our tradition, my youngest uncle was jumping into the car to pick up relatives living farther away so they could join us. All four gas burners were in full flame. Steam was hissing through the ill-fitted lid of the large soup pot, making rhythmic sounds in unison with the *zaki, zaki, zaki* of scaling fish like a percussion score. In his atelier, Konosuke was creating a fish print (called *gyotaku*) with Japanese *sumi* ink and paper to immortalize the other fish, a huge red sea bream, that he had also caught that morning. Like most men of his generation, he rarely entered a kitchen. I saw him from a distance, passing through the corridor as he approached us. Then: "Ba-chan (Grandma), a cup of tea please." He said it gently. He gave me a boyish smile and nodded to signal how he loved the smell of the cooking in progress. I had just turned seven years old.

As usual, to make *kinmedai* soup, grandmother would broil the fish until charred around the edges, garnish with *mitsuba* (a kind of Japanese parsley that she would handweave into loops as edible ornaments) and serve it in a delicate broth of wine and seaweed. I was taught to eat every piece of flesh, including the eyeballs. My mother often said eating these soft bits would make us smarter. I always ate them last because I was fascinated by the tiny, light-blue lenses hidden under the gelatin.

I was born in Kumamoto, in the southernmost region of Japan, where I spent my childhood and adolescence in an endless cycle of life with the many land and sea creatures that live there too. The city of Kumamoto is known as the Land of Water and has the best drinking water in Japan. It is pure, natural mineral water, very soft and tasty. The city relies on groundwater for most of the region's drinking water, supplying a population slightly larger than Vancouver's. Our ancestors erected many tiny shrines adjacent to the water source long ago, honouring the spirit that lives in the water. Locals keep the shrines intact and spread our ancestors' appreciation for water and all that nature gives us. Even today, Japanese spirituality is deeply rooted in this kind of animism, the concept that everything, living or non-living, has a spirit or a soul. My family raised me—but perhaps the Kumamoto water did too.

My father worked for the national telephone company and travelled often. My mother was a full-time nurse in a large hospital and frequently worked night shifts. A dual-income family was not typical back then, but my parents were not conventional. They designed and built a home near my grandparents. "Close enough to share a hot meal," as we always said. My parents needed help with childcare, but they also wanted us to have a close relationship with our grandparents. So, until the new home was finished when I was six, I lived with my maternal grandparents. I slept with my grandmother every night. I remember her telling us stories of mythical creatures as vividly as if she had seen them herself. Many relatives lived close by and we often got together to enjoy each other's company.

Zaki, zaki, zaki, zaki.

"Ba-chan, may I help you?" I asked.

"Thank you, Keiko-chan, but your beautiful whitefish-like hands will get spoiled. You can sip green tea and eat cherry blossom rice cake over there." She smiled. Every time she spoke to me or anyone on the street, she always used the very polite Japanese verb forms, as did my grandfather. I always felt loved and treasured.

"Ba-chan, I want to help. What can I do?" I insisted. She was now dressing the fish and making a criss-cross cut in its skin.

"Okay, I will teach you how to tie *mitsuba*." She grabbed two blanched *mitsuba* and tied them together into one loop. "*Mitsuba* is a good luck charm. You can join a few stems and make loops, like this," she continued, demonstrating. "For generations, Japanese people have

wished for good bonds between people that will bring health and happiness.” Her voice was so tender. Briefly, she had a distant look in her eyes.

“You will live to be one hundred, Ba-chan!” I exclaimed.

“Now you try, Keiko-chan.” The blanched stems were flexible but slippery. I managed to make enough *mitsuba* loops for the whole family. The knot reminded me of *obijime*, decorative strings that hold a kimono sash. I had recently worn one for the celebration of my seventh year of life—a traditional Japanese ritual where children aged three, five and seven dress up in kimonos and go to a shrine to celebrate their growth.

Guests were arriving with food: wild vegetable rice, bamboo shoot salad, fried Spanish mackerel in *nanban* (sweet and sour) sauce. The aromas were seductive. I excitedly but carefully placed my looped *mitsuba* on the perfectly broiled fish. The intense green dramatically contrasted with the red flesh of the fish, and it bound together the space, taste and people.

“See, the fish is dressed in a kimono!” I exclaimed. The fish looked elegant and sacred.

At the crowded table, everyone was chatting, laughing and filling up each other’s beer cups. *Gyotaku*, the print of the red sea bream Kono-suke made, was signed, framed and hung up on the wall, while the fish itself was now before us on the table, transformed into sashimi.

“*Itadakimasu!*” we said in chorus.

Fishing a *mitsuba* loop out of my soup bowl, I proudly announced, “I made these!” and recited what I had just learned about how *mitsuba* symbolizes the deep bonds between people. In the future, the course of my life would test those bonds. I ate every piece of meat, two eyeballs and *mitsuba*—my new lucky charm.

My childhood was connected to water and everything that lived in it. As far back as I can remember, my playground consisted of rice paddies and the streams near my house. In spring and summer, I routinely discovered a world of wonder under the lush green carpet of the paddies. I would watch, spellbound, as millions of freshly hatched *medaka* swam between my bare feet in the muddy water. I learned in school that their ancient ancestors lived in the sea, so they could adapt to salt water quickly when the tide came in. The *medaka* had ancient bodily memories; what were mine?

Like a tiny *medaka*, I was raised in the lush and plentiful ecosystems of Kumamoto, drinking water infused with rich minerals from

Mount Aso and the Ariake Sea. My childhood was fortified with close family bonds and ample nature. I swam and kept swimming in the rapidly flowing rivers of change that inescapably drew me to the open sea. Would I be able to survive in salt water, like a *medaka*? Eventually, I would cross the wide Pacific Ocean and arrive in New York City—to the Japanese, the Wild West. Little did I know then what the city would give me, and what it would take from me.