

# **WOMAN OF THE BATHS**

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SAMPLE

# Part One

Tokyo, Spring 1945

SAMPLE

Late on a windy night in March, an ominous droning penetrated the densely-packed wooden homes of a Tokyo working class district on the banks of the Sumida river, drawing residents out to peer up into the dark. They had heard the warnings on the radio, they had heard the air-raid sirens, but how were they to know it meant them this time?

Heavy cylinders whipped down and strange lights began to shoot back and forth across the narrow lanes. Luminous beads, soft like honey, scudded across rooftops and dripped down walls. A house erupted in flame, then a second, a third. Within minutes, the dwellings were gone and families huddled in the midst of fire.

A woman moved swiftly through the bewildered groups still exclaiming at the dancing beads of light. One of those mysterious cylinders had shot through her roof, striking down her seven-year-old nephew. His mother, her sister, would not leave the burning body, but had given her the infant to bring to safety and care for. As families made their head counts, shouting orders about whom to fetch and where to meet, she had lunged through the flames and disappeared.

Fulfilling the mandate handed down to the civilian population, fathers and older brothers stayed behind to battle the flames that closed in on them. Torrential winds developed. Smoke thickened to viscosity. The sky glowed orange over Tokyo.

Towards dawn, solitary survivors lay gasping here and there, their faces pressed to the scorched earth, blinded but aware they were alone. The last images recorded, haunting them, were of the toy-like figures of mothers, brothers, sisters, as they were lifted up one by one, in terror and great surprise, thrown down and, despite frantic scrambling, scudded directly into the heart of the flames by the buzz saw once called wind. The screams, the shouted commands, even the piteous sounds of suffering were drowned out by the roar of the blaze. Those left by the flames huddled alone, horrified at their survival, the initial bombing a dim memory. It was the next day. It was still March, still 1945.

# Part Two

Pittsburgh, Autumn 1945

SAMPLE

# Chapter I

Ogden Fike's feverish ham radio activities were interrupted one September evening by a call from his father on the house phone.

"Get up here, if you would, please."

The man hung up abruptly, but he had said please. Ogden wasn't sure what to make of that. From the lights on the phone, he knew that 'up here' meant his father's study, and the call indicated that his father knew full well where he was, which meant he also knew what he was doing. Well, this time Ogden was going to demand an apology from him, or at least a civilized explanation, or maybe just . . . He hadn't exited his basement stronghold before his dithering began again.

At the sight of the irascible old man stationed in the unlit hallway, Ogden's assertiveness faltered having never flared. A wordless gesture from Wagner Fike compelled Ogden to glance into the study. What he saw there confused him and elicited a slow shame from which, once it took hold, he never quite recovered. A Japanese woman dressed in a white bathrobe occupied the room. She stood stock still, staring down at the floor, apparently oblivious to her surroundings and to them. Her dull black hair, chopped at the jaw, fanned down over her averted face, veiling eyes and nose, but her broad, dark jaw and small, protruding mouth were visible. Her shoulders were bizarrely rounded. She appeared to be bound.

"Well?" Wagner Fike sneered. "You've got my attention. What are you going to do with it?" A mild smell of brandy was in the air, vapors getting rapidly worked off in the passion of his displeasure.

Ogden hung back, worriedly scanning the figure. Something wasn't right. The woman wore the oddest bracelets, puffy bracelets.

Mr. Fike held up a folder containing a sheaf of papers. "So who's big idea was this?" He was seething.

Ogden didn't answer. He couldn't make anything of those bracelets. Not a very effective adornment, he thought. Was it something peculiar to the Japanese?

"Finally sinking in, is it?" his father jeered in an undertone.

As Ogden worriedly searched for the woman's hands, he realized with a sickening jolt that the bracelets were bandages, that her wasted arms ended there, that she had no hands. Then the shame set in: this, his greatest political move against his father, had gone very badly wrong. What inspiration had muddled him into thinking he could expose and shame his father by having a mutilated war victim shipped to his home? Ogden had only basely exposed and humiliated the poor woman—a monstrous result—not to mention himself. Well, he would be damned if he ever acknowledged it.

The woman began to sway and, as Ogden looked on slack-mouthed, Wagner Fike darted to her side muttering softly as he seated her gingerly in his armchair, placed her feet firmly, one after the other, on a footstool he reached out a long arm to drag over, then rapidly removed an afghan from a nearby couch to cover her splayed bare legs which had emerged from the disarranged robe. The woman held her arms in front of her, light but unwieldy like the legs of a dying bird. Mr. Fike was careful not to touch them or the bandages that bound her forearms, although they seemed to be in his way no matter what he did. When he turned to address his son again, he came very close, anxious to keep the woman from hearing the tone of his remarks, although he did not think she would be able to understand his words. His voice was unforgiving. Long pauses occurred between his initial desultory statements, pauses Ogden made no attempt to fill with excuses, apologies, or protests of any kind. Ogden did not have his wits about him yet. Nor did he ever completely recover them.

"I've kept quiet all along . . . tolerating your nonsense," Mr. Fike began, "and just let me tell you something: *Everything* we did to win this war was justified. Do you hear me? . . . You . . . and all those people you exchange your bright ideas with . . . Your minds are as innocent as a baby's bottom and have about the same amount of control. You just produce filth someone else has to clean up. Over and over again. And that someone else has a name. It's me, and it's

society.” He leaned close, his eyes involuntarily widening and narrowing by turns, an unmistakable sign of his rage. He jabbed his forefinger repeatedly against the doorframe just outside of which Ogden hovered. “Look back through your history and trace the development of freedom, buster. I thought you might be doing that in your cozy little study groups. The victors of war dictate the terms of peace. They grant what freedom there is, if there is any. Freedom takes steps backwards, too, you know. Make no mistake about that. Freedom is what gets squeezed out in the end, if at all.”

“Sounds like a baby’s bottom, doesn’t it?” Ogden remarked.

“And it all depends on who—babies don’t squeeze, buster.”

“My name is Ogden, not buster.” Ogden responded simply, his manner so blandly radiant that Mr. Fike paused to take a suspicious look at him. There was an odd glow about his son’s face, something he had never noticed before, and it made him pause, but the pause was momentary. After a forceful inhalation, he continued:

“Have you thought about where you’d be spouting your sham ideology if we had lost the war? Any idea? Have you any idea? I asked! I’ll tell you where, big stuff. Nowhere. And I hate to say it,” the eyes narrowed ominously, “but I don’t think you know what that means even as I say it. You have no idea what was going on over there, do you? You don’t really understand power. You don’t believe it exists except in the form of my evil, hawkish ambition. Oh, by the way . . . during these soul-turning study group sessions of yours, you haven’t considered turning up your nose to the stink of a warmonger’s inheritance? You’ve made no mention of it. Perhaps the idea is unappealing to you.”

“What was going on over there? Father. Unburden me of my ignorance . . . which is causing me to stray. I only ask not to stray.”

Mr. Fike glared at him and again noticed the incongruous radiance of his son’s face, but said nothing.

“Top secret, Father? But my ignorance doesn’t convince you of my loyalty. Because I am loyal!” Ogden yelled abruptly. His brassy shout, in conjunction with the contradictorily mild, puppy-like expression of his large, wide-set brown eyes, enflamed his father’s temper even as it caused the queer doubt of his son’s mental balance to reassert itself.

“Poppycock,” Mr. Fike responded. “How did you get her over here?”

“If I weren’t so god-damned loyal, I wouldn’t have cared about this god-damned mess.”

“Still caring, are you?”

“I do care!” Ogden shrieked. “I have gray hairs now. And why have I been ignorant? Why? Because I didn’t snoop—”

The remark provoked a rude guffaw from his father.

“You’re saying I could have . . . or perhaps should have?” Ogden looked coyly at him.

“Top secret, garbage! You read the wrong papers and listen to the wrong people. And it would be just swell if you remembered anything you did read, because then you just might put two and two together and find your figures never tally. So how did you get hold of her? I don’t ask if—and how—you forged my signature. I do wonder about phone impersonations.”

“She saved Ricky’s life,” Ogden answered simply. “He wants to marry her.”

“Then he *hasn’t* married her, as these papers give out?”

Ogden scowled briefly at the folder in his father’s hand. “It’s all in there, I suppose?”

Mr. Fike flourished the folder briefly, angrily. “I’ll get back to this. Who’s Ricky, if I might ask a direct question in the hope of getting a direct answer?”

“It’s in there, too. If you’ll read—”

“I *have*. ‘Captain Richard Virostik’ and I repeat my question: who the hell is he?”

“He was to . . . to be here,” Ogden insisted dully. “With her.”

“You haven’t told me who he *is*.”

“We were friends. We had a paper route together.”

“What week was that?” Mr. Fike asked sarcastically.

“It was a long time ago. We worked very hard at that time. You wouldn’t know. You never noticed anything I did. I worked very hard at that time.”

“So what happened? Anyway, you’re no longer friends, I take it.”

“Out of touch. On his side. Understandable. He’s a little younger, a little less—”

“Not that little black-haired boy.” A sense of foreboding tacked the course of Mr. Fike’s already foul mood.

“Snappiest person I ever met. Full of daring. Full of strategies! When he was around things were so—” Ogden’s voice dropped



suddenly, quivering with emotion, “*alive*. He turned this cheap world into an adventure, a true adventure. He could see it, interpret it, interact with it. When he was there *it* was there! He was a genius. He could get away with anything.”

“Except hanging around with you . . . if that’s what he was after.” The weighty remark shot down Ogden’s brief flight and elicited an evil look from him which he hid by hastily averting his face. Mr. Fike, oblivious to his son’s reaction, continued: “In your mid-twenties! Hanging around with . . . with a . . . that *boy*. That was a strange association.” The consideration, resurfacing so unexpectedly, provoked intensely unpleasant sensations about the time his son, at twenty-six, had developed an obsession for the person of a bright-eyed, perky, dark-complected thirteen-year-old boy. Finally forbidden by both his own and the boy’s parents to spend any more time with him, Ogden had stopped. So they had all thought. But no, by his own unintentional admission now, Ogden had continued seeing the boy by accompanying him on his newspaper route, the one time, apparently, when the boy’s activities were completely unmonitored, with Ogden remembering it as their having the paper route together. So Ogden’s obsession for the boy, now a man, had continued all this time. To find that out was more than unsettling for Mr. Fike. The knowledge cast a sordid light over the entire matter.

“I’ve always been very interested in him.”

“Oh, yes,” Mr. Fike affirmed, defeated. “I know.”

“I knew all along what he was training for—bombing. I didn’t know exactly where he would go, but I’ve got maps.”

“Bright boy. Maps and a ham radio and nothing better to do. Called meddling in my book.”

Ogden’s puppy-like expression darkened again.

“A dangerous meddler. What’s changed with you anyway?” Meant as a snide remark to indicate that nothing about his son had changed, the question came out differently, as a query much more genuine than Mr. Fike had consciously intended. His son had indeed changed. His posture, typically hunched, was extremely cramped now. Combined with the air of radiant innocence he exhibited now and again during the strained conversation, and in light of the acts of forgery, fraud, and who knew what else he had committed with the result that a female Japanese amputee now occupied Mr. Fike’s

study, his son presented a very questionable figure. "When are you going to change that sweater?"

"Oh, come on now!" Ogden griped. "You're not going to start criticizing my clothes?"

Non sequitur and below the belt as it had been, Mr. Fike's remark resuscitated his son's familiar belligerence, far preferable to the vacant-eyed stranger that kept flashing in and out of existence in the dim hallway. The radiant, vacuous stranger returned almost immediately not to be effaced.

"I like used clothes," Ogden said dreamily. "Things I didn't pick out. Things too big. Drab. I like them. I don't know why. I think they look snazzy. I feel snazzy in them."

"Like a real revolutionary, eh?"

Ogden's scowl returned.

"You do pick them out, you know," Mr. Fike persisted unkindly. "But not until they've been discarded by someone else. Just like your ideas."

At this Ogden's face contracted to an alarming degree, and he began picking at his sleeve, but Wagner Fike did not let up:

"So you in the used clothes thought you could get an honorable discharge for your pal, ship him home to marry a . . . debilitated enemy civilian who is supposedly, according to these papers, already his wife, and everything's hunky-dory. Is that it?"

"They didn't discharge him?" Ogden was dumbfounded. "The war's over."

"He's still . . . recuperating."

"Where?"

"He's in the hospital."

"In the hospital?" Ogden echoed, nonplussed. Something had gone very wrong, and his miscalculation was making him appear both stupid and cruel. But he had lost his bearings. His gaze wandered back to the black-haired woman reclining in his father's reading chair. "But . . . the war's over," Ogden repeated vacantly. "He was a prisoner of war. A prisoner of war! What more do you want?"

Mr. Fike had to control himself to give his son a reasonable reply. "That is *why* he's in the hospital. How much of all of this are you aware of, anyway?" His son's naiveté disgusted him. Not only was it a dangerous, culpable quality that encouraged the very horrors

of war his son professed to be conscientiously objecting to; it was exercised coyly by the young man, a wayward attempt to tease something from society he had not gotten at home. Apparently. "I wish to God you'd take note of what's going on around you."

Ogden stared up at him sullenly, but said nothing.

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