

## The Hikikomori's Cartoon Kimono

by A.R. Morlan

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*“...we have to answer the challenge of modernity: what is a kimono, or what will it become, if it ceases to be a thing worn?”*

—Kunihiko Moriguchi (one of Japan’s preeminent kimono painters; from: “The Kimono Painter,” Judith Thurman, *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2005)

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I (Obi)

*“The nail that sticks out gets hammered in.”*

—Japanese saying

It didn’t matter how often Masafumi saw Harumi Ishii walk through the autoclave room door in the back of his employer’s tattoo parlor—his reaction was invariably the same: first, a sharp sudden intake of breath, not unlike his response to the initial visits of his rescue sister Mieko back in Japan, in his parents’ house. Back in Tokyo, the reflexive shortness of breath was understandable. There was a strange woman standing on the other side of his bedroom door, bare knuckles touching the thin wood in a patient, persistent *rapraprap*, waiting with trained politeness born of dozens of encounters with other men of his kind, suffering from *hikikomori*, the withdrawal. Masafumi had wondered, there in the comfortable, yet painfully familiar confines of the room he so seldom left for all those months, those years, if women like Mieko looked upon their job as a form of service, or as something more insidious, a means of forcing those who’d chosen to withdraw from life, from society, and ultimately from unwanted responsibility, to become a part of that hellish social miasma ... simply because *they*, the rescue sisters (or the occasional rescue brother) hadn’t had the self-reliance necessary to withdraw from life, as he and his fellow *hikikomori* had done with such ease, such completeness.

But no matter what he’d thought of Mieko (with her schoolgirl’s mini-skirt and bleached-to-coarse orange streaks in her hair, despite her three-decades-plus age), she’d kept on coming, twice a week, to stand for hours at his door, knocking and imploring, begging and rapping, until her sheer tenacity wore him down, and he’d opened the door—only a crack, enough for a quick glance at her—and asked,

“What?” Not the *Why?* or the *How?* he’d longed to ask (he knew too well that the *Why?* was cultural pressure, Japan’s need for all to have a place, to be successful, just as *How?* was the result of his parents calling for the aid of a rescue sister to cajole him into leaving his room, before his nineteenth birthday.)

“Because I’d like to get to know you,” was all she’d needed to say; as rehearsed as her words sounded, there had been something in her eyes, in the quirky flicker of a smile on her lips, which had been enough, at least then, to make him open his door just a bit wider....

But that was Mieko; as far as Harumi (of the natural brown-orange hair, worn in elaborate quasi-Incan khipus of braided, knotted, and wooden-beaded swaying tresses, and the minimal clothing) went, the second thing Masafumi would do was lower his eyes, their lashes forming a capri-shell screen between him and the object of his fascination, as if she might be offended by his stare.

(His boss kept telling him, “If she don’t want people to look at her, why have all that ink drilled into her hide? Or do her hair in coked-up dreads?”)

For her part, Harumi either pretended not to notice his persistent shyness, or didn’t notice him in any real sense aside from being aware that there was another space-taking, breathing form in the small room. True, she literally had her hands full of wooden trays of *momengoshi*—firm, well-drained “cotton” tofu flown in daily from Japan, to be served an hour or so from now, after Harumi worked her magic wand across the pliant creamy white surfaces. Masafumi prided himself for having learned that nickname for a tattoo gun from one of his boss’s many repeat customers. On occasion, he’d shyly remark about it as Harumi worked, and, often, she’d smile.

Setting the layered trays of tofu on the low table nearest the outlet across from the autoclave, she peeled back the cheesecloth coverings, revealing the waiting slabs of skin-solid tofu, one tray at a time, prior to picking up the prefilled ink bottles that contained freshly squeezed *yuzu* juice and onion-skin dye, then attaching them to the old, slow-vibrating tattoo machine Masafumi’s boss gave to Harumi for her exclusive use. After plugging it in, and turning it on, she filled the small space with the insect drone of the quick-darting three needle cluster.

A tired, yet apt cliché, *only in America*, spun in his brain as he watched Harumi work; without need for a stencil spotted onto the waiting surface, she worked the business end of the wand over the tofu, leaving weeping sprays of pale, citrus-scented pigment on the gelid upper layer of the processed bean curd. Her designs varied by her mood; today, he surmised she was troubled, obviously agitated, judging by the wild waves-breaking-on-rocks chopiness of the design. Finishing one tray, she shoved it aside with a dismissive thrust of her lower left palm, moving so quickly that the smooth-bottomed wooden tray nearly slid off the low table—until Masafumi put out both hands to stop its momentum.

This time, she did notice him; letting out a shuddering exhalation smelling of cinnamon and cloves, she locked her hazel eyes into Masafumi's dark brown ones, and said, "You saved my *ass*—no way no how could I bring that back to the restaurant with tatami-mat lint on it. The chef, he'd *know*—"

Masafumi nodded.

Shutting off the gun, Harumi let out another sigh. "Your boss, he wouldn't want me smoking in here ... but when I'm done, you wanna join me for a stick? They're clove, no nicotine—"

He started to shake his head, then mumbled, "I'll stand with you while you smoke. I don't."

Harumi shook her head; her intricately braided and embellished strands of hair rustled and whispered, like the silk-on-silk sound of a woman wearing a layered kimono, delicately stepping along a subway platform. A sound Masafumi had not heard in the years he'd lived here, in a particular United State called Minnesota, yet the motion of Harumi's head brought it all back, so vividly....

"You're something else, y'know that? Not many guys are willing to breath in used air, but you ... why am I not surprised that you would?"

(Over time, Masafumi had learned enough of the intricate nature of the English language to know better than to consider her questioning tone of voice to be an actual question. A *yoko meshi* thing, that inherent stressfulness of mastering, not merely learning, another tongue.)

Harumi uncovered another tray of naked tofu, and switched bottles on her gun, taking up the pale reddish brown onionskin ink she'd distilled herself in the restaurant down the block. Watching her ply the needles across the yielding, fleshy foodstuff, as the tattooed woman created starbursts of sunset-ruddy pigment, Masafumi found himself uttering a thought that had been in his brain each time he'd watched her work, "Why do you not do this in the restaurant? You carry the trays here, you carry them back, while the gun stays—"

Over the ear-numbing drone of the gun, she replied, "My boss and the other cooks, they can't stand the sound. Some of the early customers, they can hear it, ruins the whole exotic dining experience. Now the inkjet printer we use to print designs on the starch-paper, that's pretty quiet, compared to *this*. If you ask me, aside from being useful for wrapping up sushi rolls, starch-paper covered with pictures of *maki* rolls and *amazū shōga* and *heni shōga* pinwheels is just a piece of starch-paper, y'know? It's still something *extra*, which you don't need. But what I'm doing here ... *this* is true edible art. 'Cause the art is *in* it, a part of it, even if it's a subtle taste thing. I mean, these slabs are gonna be chopped up, and steeped in broth, so all the customer sees is a hint of color on each piece, and *maybe* detects a hint of

onion or citrus if their taste buds are halfway alive, but still, it's *there*, part of it. It's not a coating of cartoon sushi someone slapped on as an afterthought, all because some guy down in Chicago came up with it a couple of decades ago in *his* restaurant. I dunno ... does this make any sense at all to you?"

This time, she was asking a question. But how to answer? Even as she spoke of food, novelty dishes, to be precise, Masafumi was reminded of *his* former art, that of kimono-painting. That same art that had eventually brought him to such a state of despair, of utter inability to decide something as simple as which new outfit to wear upon waking, that he'd taken the route of no road, of no destination. Staying in his room, week after month after year, where nothing associated with his former art could be found—no *aobama* ink, no tiny zinc granules of *makinori* to be sprinkled across silk, then fixed in place with rice paste, prior to being coated with wood wax, then fixed on the fabric with soy juice ... and no disassembled eight panels of silk, waiting to be painted, resist dyed, then sewn back into that ancient "T" configuration which had been the staple of the kimono design for centuries. Eight panels of cloth, eight chances to turn the two-dimensional into the three-dimensional, once the final element of his art was included ... the woman wearing the kimono. While Harumi understood the excess of something merely *added*, Masafumi didn't know if she'd understand the inherent obstacle of his art in itself—there was the design to be added, then there was the woman within, who'd give life to the design, but in the middle was the kimono, eight inevitable squares of cloth, two each for the front and back, the remaining four for the sleeves, culminating in literally a "thing worn"—always, no matter how one decorated a kimono, in anticipation of the woman who was to wear it, the "thing worn" *itself* had become his creative nemesis. When those eight pieces of cloth began to insinuate themselves between Masafumi and his artistic ideal, preventing him from instilling his creative will directly onto the being that would give it real life, he'd given up, withdrawn, become a twilight ghost who only ventured out of the house for short trips to the neighborhood *konbini*, the Japanese answer to the convenience stores that popped up in fungal stealth by the day in his new country, his adopted city.

True, cartoon sushi and hand-painted kimonos had little in common save for being something worn by something else, but Masafumi didn't know if Harumi cared about his *hikikomori* episode, his lost years ... even if she'd asked him in a direct question about her own art, and its purposefulness.

"I suppose ... one is an embellishment, while the other is an ... ingredient. Both are edible, but only one is essential."

She smiled at that. For the first time, he felt bold enough to sit down on the tatami mat next to hers, his chest level with the tattooed sheets of *momonogoshi*. He wasn't certain, but he thought he smelled the faint odor of citrus and onions against the creamy bland near-nothingness of the tofu. Leaning over to peer at her freeform designs, he surprised himself by suggesting, "If they serve *kinugoshi*, do you think branding the tofu first would survive the deep frying process?" He hadn't thought of *kinugoshi* in years, but the mere utterance of the word brought back that creamy, custard-like texture of the silken tofu's interior, after one bit through the deep-fried exterior, which rested unseen but curiously *felt* on the tip of his tongue, like a lingering aftertaste combined with the phantom sensation of silken smoothness.

"Oh *man* ... they could call it 'kiss of fire' tofu, whatever the Japanese is for that. I mostly know

kitchen-Japanese, just what my dad's people used to use when they cooked for family gatherings. That's what happens when races intermarry ... my name's more Japanese than *I* am. Guess how many nationalities I could check off on a census form?"

How to answer that? Not only was her hair autumn-leaves-on-wet-cement mingling of browns, oranges, and a hint of red, while her eyes were a sparkling green-brown hazel, but her skin was creamy pale, more so than that of mainland Chinese women. Her eyes were closer to almond than Asian, with only a slight corners-tilt of the eyelids to hint at an ancestry not wholly European. Her voice was purely Minnesotan, a closed-mouth way of speaking, with rounded "o" sounds within words. But with a lilt that reminded Masafumi of bamboo wind chimes....

"Eight." Shutting off her magic wand, she ticked off nationalities on her fingers and thumbs: "Japanese, Norwegian, English, Irish, Swedish, German, Polish, and, again on my dad's side, Chinese, from some mess during some war nobody wants to speak about. Every generation on his side, the people's hair and eyes got lighter and lighter, and their eyes got rounder. But we all go in for Japanese first names. Drives everyone else nuts. And I'm shit out of luck if I get sick and need new bone marrow or an organ transplant. No way no how they'll find a matching donor for me ... which is why I decided years ago that I'm gonna live the way *I* want, 'cause there's no turning back for me. I can't abuse myself with a backup plan of getting a new liver from someone else, so I can tear myself down all over again. I consider myself a statue I carve day by day ... if something gets hacked off, it has to stay off. I mean, some art is meant to be disposable, no?"

Another question. Not sure how to reply, he demurred, "So that is why you tattoo and brand yourself, because you are your own artwork. And what you do with your hair—"

"Yeah. I thought I'd visually add another ethnicity into the mix. 'Dreads, on account of nobody in the family hooked up with a black person. I like 'dreads. I don't have to wear a hairnet or scarf while I cook."

"You don't serve at the restaurant?"

"Do I look like I fit in with the décor?"

A rhetorical question, which could be safely ignored.

"That idea of yours, about branding the tofu ... mind if I run it past my boss, see what he says?"

A shrug, followed by a smile from her. Putting aside the gun, she got to her feet and began pulling the cheesecloth over the trays, prior to restacking them. Slipping the bottles of edible dye into her shorts pockets, Harumi stood up, and said as she lifted the trays, “You come by the back of the restaurant, later on, okay? I get a smoke break after one. Can your boss let you go for half an hour or so? I just gotta talk to someone. You’ll be there?”

So many individual questions, but thankfully, a lone answer.

“Yes ... I will be there. He’ll let me go.”

(Masafumi was still an apprentice tattooist; his main daily duty was to sterilize equipment, plus dye the batches of carbon nanotube ribbon some customers wanted implanted in their skin—an off-the-books procedure, thanks to the increased invasiveness of the implantation process—unless some skin-virgin wanted a bit of off-the-wall flash spotted onto their skin from a pre-drawn stencil ... “tourist tattoos” his boss dubbed them, basic, simple designs deemed suitable for Masafumi to ink their waiting flesh,)

“Good. See ya then.” She was gone, leaving only the smack of her flip-flops against her bare feet to echo in Masafumi’s ears.

Once she’d left, Masafumi’s boss Ignazio pushed aside the beaded doorway curtain and stood there grinning, his bare chest (embellished with flames both tattooed and carbon nanotube augmented; the flames seeming to flicker in the early morning sunlight) already sheened with a fine coat of sweat from the July heat, while his thin sushi-pale lips curled into a smile over slightly protruding front teeth.

“How ‘bout you convince her to do her thing out in the main area, where the customers could watch, huh? She’d bring in more business—”

“It is not sanitary ... there is blood, out there. There is none back here—”

“Not so literal, Masa, not so *literal* ... just wishin’. I know ‘bout health regs for the food business. I’m just sayin’ she’s one fine lookin’ woman. And yes, you can go meet her at one. Don’t go givin’ me that look, kid. Remember, this door’s got air holes.” Giving the strings of beads a clinking shake for emphasis, he went on, “I’m just yankin’ your chain. Sounds like she’s got somethin’ on her mind, and believe you me, there’s nothin’ more intimate than a woman who unloads from the inside out. Better than her takin’ off her clothes. Clothes, they come off, they’re off, but a woman who unburdens, that’s a one way ticket to *real* intimacy. Some guys don’t want no part of it when a woman dumps a mental load on them, but take’er from me, that’s when you can get *real* close to ‘em. And that one’s worth getting next to, from the inside-out. Me, I’ve done all her inkslinging, I’ve felt damn near every part of her, but do I

*know* her? She doesn't say so much as 'ouch' when I'm workin' on her, not even when I give'er the kiss of fire with the branding tool. But you, you get an e-ticket. She's gonna have A Talk with you. Tell you what's been makin' her so jumpy lately. Now that's gettin' *close*, my man. Consider yourself blessed. Uh-oh, someone's comin' in. But enjoy the flavor, man. That woman, she is how you folks say, *oishii*. Peace, man," and with that, he was gone, headed for the tattoo chairs, leaving Masafumi to his stainless steel autoclave, and his low-sided vats of dye-bathed nanotube ribbons.

Giving the nearest tub of crimson dye a slosh, to better infuse the nearly transparent ribbons (far thinner than human hairs) with a shimmering wash of color, Masafumi winced over his boss's misuse of the word "delicious" ... true, in a vulgar sense the word might apply to a woman, if one thought of her in such a crass way, but in a more elemental sense, Harumi *was* "*oishii*," if one thought of something delicious as that which leaves a beautiful memory of its flavor in one's mind. Not like his memories of Mieko, an underlying bitter emotional aftertaste. Even as she had helped him, she'd also taken something from him, which created a sour lingering unpalatability which forever clouded her good intentions in his impression of her.

But what Ignazio had said, about someone who unburdens themselves becoming more naked than those who disrobe (not that the Miami transplant had uttered anything that eloquent), only served to remind Masafumi of his former passion and nemesis, the kimono ... given that there are so many layers to a kimono, one cannot begin to remove it without first untying the obi which binds all the inner robes into one garment....

\* \* \* \*

## II (Osode)

*"Ancora Imparo"* ("*I am still learning*")

—Michaelangelo

When she saw him walking toward her, Harumi held out two black lacquered bowls of *zaru dofu*, the mauvish-blue hued "black" variety he hadn't seen since he'd left Japan, and each bowl had a spoon stuck directly in the center of the moussé-textured tofu. Masafumi's spoon was sliding downward to the east as he took his bowl from her, but he'd grabbed the long silver handle of the utensil and shoved a frothy rounded spoonful into his mouth before the handle had a chance to fall against the side of the shiny bowl.

As he swallowed down the delectable treat, Harumi said, "I didn't know if you liked *zaru dofu*, but I figured it was way too hot out for me to bring a plate of *katsu-dou*."

Considering that most non-Asians might consider fried pork cutlets with scrambled eggs and sweet *donburi* sauce-covered rice a breakfast dish, and since Harumi was seven-eighths non-Asian, Masafumi decided she was joking. Smiling as he swallowed his next spoonful of fluffy tofu, he added shyly, “And two orders of *tekka-don* might be too messy to carry, no? The strips of raw tuna and pressed seaweed might fall off the rice?”

“I told my boss he needs to put food like that in a wrap, pita bread, or a soft taco, but the guy’s a purist. Totally jumped the couch when I suggested he put *zara dofu* into soft drink cups, and stick a straw in it. I mean the straw part was the joke—”

The image of a tall plastic cup filled with white, green, or black moussé-textured tofu was a funny one. Chuckling as he scraped the bowl clean with his spoon, Masafumi said, “Ignazio, he likes to repeat something that singer Johnny Cash said. ‘You know you’ve made it when your face is on a Slurpee cup.’”

“Ignazzy’s a cool dude. Did all my ink, he tell you? Thought so. He wants to put pictures of me on his wall, but I told him no. Last time I refused, he said he’d sign the next fineline work he does on me. Ever hear what he says about doing portraits on customers?”

Ignazio spoke so much, and so often, it was difficult for Masafumi to take in everything he said, so he merely shook his head.

“Ignazzy says, ‘If you’re doin’ a dude’s face, and it ain’t turnin’ out so hot, make it into Johnny Depp. He’s played everybody there is, so chances are whoever you inked looks like him anyhow.’ I thought he was just talking to hear himself talk, but I looked into it, and Ignazzy’s not lying. Depp was Hunter S. Thompson, George Jung, that dude who pretended to be Donnie Brasco only I don’t know who he really was, the guy who wrote *Peter Pan*, some English poet who was like a total sexual pig back when guys wore those powdered wigs, and somebody else I know I’m forgetting—”

“The chocolate maker?”

“Yeah, he was a character in a book, but Depp played him, too. He played *everybody* at some point or another. Chances are, you put his face on someone’s arm, they’re gonna be pleased, even if they wanted someone else. But you should listen to Ignazzy more often. He was smart enough to get his butt out of Miami before the big hurricane in ‘24. People didn’t learn from Katrina twenty years earlier. ‘Course, Miami wasn’t under sea level like New Orleans, but still, who’d have guessed about that category five—”



Masafumi wondered if the mental unburdening Ignazio spoke of was preceded by a woman clearing her mind of inconsequential trivia. He doubted that her concerns over portrait tattoos or a flight from Hurricane Xenia's path had made her so nervous that morning that she'd almost knocked over a tray full of freshly inked tofu.

Between blurted out observations about his boss (“—he told me that white and green *zaru dofu* would ‘give Wayne Thiebaud a boner’ and I had to go online to find out he was a guy who mainly painted desserts, cakes with layers of frosting so thick you could spoon it off the canvas—”) Harumi slid spoonfuls of the frothy tofu into her mouth, and, when her bowl was empty, she set it down on the ground alongside his, and began pawing through her shorts pockets for her pack of clove cigarettes and a lighter.

It took a few puffs to clam Harumi down, but once she began tapping fragrant ash upon the back wall of the building she was leaning against, she half-closed her eyes and asked, “Does a wanna-be donut-graveyard named Walker Ulger come into your boss's shop? Sorta fat dude, in a security guard uniform? Has this shapeless round face, like a *manju*?”

He tried to picture a man with a face that resembled a bean cake filled with red azuki bean paste and sugar, but it was difficult. Yet, her description had the vague half-remembered reality of a dream—

“If you'd seen him, you'd remember. Fat fleshy upper ears, like thick-sliced *amazū shoga*—”

Where the *manju* reference failed, the comparison to pickled pink ginger succeeded. Only Ignazio didn't use food as a point of comparison.

(“If that slug-eared rent-a-cop comes through my door again, I will personally cover his pink hide with sorry marks from my own fingernails.”)

Masafumi found the mental picture of his boss creating Aboriginal ritual scars on someone's body a disturbing one, so much so that he'd never let Ignazio know that he'd been listening in on his conversation with that customer who was getting the fine-line full back design of the Corpse Bride and her reluctant groom. The customer was a city councilman, or so Ignazio claimed, and Masafumi felt it unseemly to admit he'd been listening in when a government official—no matter how minor—was involved. But he'd still heard what the man said in reply:

(“Not to worry, Iggs. After what he did in the Mall of America, when he was assigned to the kiddie park section, no way no how is he going to get anyone to give him a nano-ribbon jacket. As if he's gonna be hired anytime soon by a real cop-shop. He's lucky to be wearing that Halloween costume and Happy

Meal badge of his—”)

Masafumi had to take something into the autoclave room that day, so he never did hear the rest of what the councilman had to say, nor did Ignazio ever discuss the matter later on, but Masafumi knew the two men had to be discussing Ulger. With his pickled pink ginger ears.

“I’ve not seen him, but I’ve heard about him. But not by name—”

“Oh, there can’t be two of *him* ... nature wouldn’t be that cruel or that damned stupid. I suppose Ignazzy still does nano-tube body armor, under the table, on real cops?”

Nodding, Masafumi replied, “Since it’s still a medical procedure, it is not fully legal, but considering how expensive doctors can be...” his voice trailed off, but she knew full well that inserting nano-tube ribbons into the topmost layer of flesh was a quasi-legal enterprise at best. Technically, there was no law against it, just as there were no laws against a bod-mod expert doing just about anything to a willing client—as long as no anesthetics were used. Nano-vest installations were uncomfortable, but less painful than the kiss of fire, or a full back tat. What happened was this: ultra-fine ribbons of pulled and spun nano-tube “yarn” were laid onto lightly scored flesh, along the neck, upper shoulders and outsides of the armpits, spots where a Kevlar vest failed to cover the body. He’d never seen it done, but saw a tape of the operation on public access HDTV. Akin to a hair transplant, fine shallow hash-marks and cross-hatching were incised with a raked tool, barely scoring the epidermis, then a baster-like syringe loaded with miles of “yarn” was laid down and drawn—depositing strands of “yarn”—across each incised spot, laying down an internal bulletproof webbing. Once all the scored skin had been seeded, everything was wrapped up, and, within a few days, the incisions healed, and cross-woven nano-ribbons within formed unseen body armor. The voiceover on the tape said that this application of nanotech had saved over one hundred officers from death due to bullets which missed their body armor. At the time, Masafumi thought the whole process was far more disgusting than tattooing, branding, or piercing could ever be, save for traditional Irezumi tattooing in Japan, which used to involve literally tapping the ink into the flesh with a multi-toothed stick and a mallet.

It had also reminded him of the complex process of *yuzen zome* resist dyeing, the painstaking delicacy that was an inherent part of the kimono dyeing process, or worse yet, the application of poppy-seed sized *makinori* ... he winced at the memory of arranging the minute particles on the cloth, after mixing them with rice paste, sprinkling the sticky mess onto wet silk, then coating the silk with wood wax to prevent the design from cracking, before fixing the entire swath of cloth with soy juice ... *then* picking off each piece of zinc after it was dry, just to achieve a mist-like subtle pattern in the background of the main design. Why he’d ever thought that such intense, yet nearly intangible labors were his chosen life’s work, his life’s *purpose*, now escaped him.

It made his current work, of quickly yet painfully piercing flesh, creating a fine wash of blood that constantly had to be wiped away from his work field, seem far more simple in comparison.

“—doesn’t stop Ulger from wanting his nano-armor, even if he isn’t entitled to it,” Harumi said between puffs of her second clove cigarette.

“Does he not carry a gun? That might mean getting shot—”

“Strictly a Barney—empty, no bullets ... you never watch TVLand, do you? The store owners gave it to him for window dressing. Like a security camera with no film in it, just a battery to make the red light go on. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone didn’t want to take a shot at him, for the hell of it ... or *not*,” she added with a noisy draw on the end of her smoke, before dropping the spent conical butt onto the asphalt and grinding it into the shapeless grainy mass with her flip-flop sole.

“I ... understand he made my boss angry. So he’s done the same with other people?”

“Ohhhh *yeah*, you could say that. *Again*. I don’t know for sure what he did to Ignazzy, but given that he’s a *he*, it sure isn’t what he did to *me* ... but it must’ve been equally rotten—”

“This Ulger person—”

““Walker. Walker Ulger, rhymes with ‘stalker’—”

“This Walker Ulger, he didn’t behave as a man should toward a woman?”

(Memories of his initial reaction after Mieko’s first unwelcome beyond-his-closed-door visit, when he’d punched his walls in frustration because she’d been where he hadn’t wanted her to be, came back to him in a shameful wash of crimson.)

“Uhhmm, you could say that. It started out innocently enough. I was smoking in the alley behind the restaurant, a clove jobbie, and he starts in about me smoking weed, insisting it was a joint, and I finally gave him the center finger salute, and he starts in that he’ll report me to my boss for ‘assaulting’ an officer of the law, only all he is is a play cop, and I told him as much, but then *he* goes, ‘I’m on the payroll of your boss and every other boss on this block, so that makes me the ‘law of this land’ and makes a grab for my smoke. I mash it onto his arm, he goes medieval on my ass, and ... ever since then, he’s been on my case. Riding me for not genuflecting when I see his badge. Claims that he’ll stop harassing me if I get him an in with Ignazzy, convince him to give *manju*-head a nano-yarn sweater. Which I know Ignazzy won’t do. And I don’t blame him ... whatever Ulger did to Ignazzy must’ve been as obnoxious as what

he tried with me. What I'm thinking is, old *amazu-shoga* ears must've leaned on the wrong person, which is why he feels that he needs a nano-yarn wrap. I can feel the fear on him, which makes him all the meaner. Anyhow, everyday, he comes into the restaurant for *miso zuke dofu*, never *pays* for it, even though it's an expensive dish, and while he's eating, he asks my boss about *me*, making suggestive remarks, telling him he should add a living sushi bar on Saturday nights, that I'd be better than cartoon sushi *under* the raw tuna ... crap like that. All the while, I stay hidden in the kitchen, wondering if Ulger will mention me burning his arm with the cigarette, which I know will get me canned if my boss hears about it. And every day, when I'm getting ready to go home, Ulger keeps pace with me while I'm riding my bike, saying, 'All you have to do is put in a good word with Ignazio. I know he has the extra nanoyarn in his autoclave room. Too much of it for just us cops.' Crap like that. So ... *that's* what's been making me crazy lately. Enough to dump a tray of tofu onto the floor—"

"*Tokugawashogunate*..." Masafumi found himself whispering, as he made a connection between Harumi's ongoing troubles and that fifteenth century restriction measure that ultimately created the painted kimono tradition. So simple a connection, yet it explained so much—

"*Toku*' ... *what*?"

"*Tokugawa shogunate*.' It was initiated six hundred years ago and cut down on excessive spending by the merchant class. It forbade them from wearing embroidered silk, or cloth woven with gold threads, to stop them from emulating royal classes. But the merchant class members' wives still wanted fine kimonos, so painted silk circumvented the *shogunate*. Because of this desire for finely decorated kimonos, artists like Miyazaki Yuzen switched from painting fans to painting silk meant for kimono construction. Like ... cartoon kimonos. Embroidery designs, only flat, not embroidered. But difficult to produce. Eventually, kimono painters became *ningenkokuho*, like other fine artists in Japan—"

"Remember, I'm only one-eighth Japanese—translation, *please*?"

"It means 'holder of an intangible cultural property,' an honor—"

"Oh, like those Kennedy Center Awards they give to old people?"

"I ... suppose. It is something to be strived for, within any artistic community. To be named *ningenkokuho* implies more than mere mastery of one's craft—"

"Like, you're the best of the best?"

Wondering if she meant “you’re” to signify *him*, or if she was merely being linguistically imprecise, he slowly replied, “You are beyond ‘best’ ... you’re interwoven with the entire culture of Japan. What you have done has become part *of* Japan. Something that cannot be disconnected from its origins.”

“Oh. Like sticking nano-ribbons into someone, and there’s no way to pull them out once they’ve been healed?”

Glancing down at his watch, Masafumi saw that they’d spent far more time in the alley than he’d been allotted, so he avoided comment on her incorrect analogy by nodding vaguely and saying, “Break time is over—”

“Yeah, mine too. Old Ulger should be in soon, mooching *misozuketofu*. I swear, I should substitute a slice of old rubber tire for the *konbu* wrapping, just to see if the oaf knows the difference between retread and dried kelp. Now *that* would be a dish with some ‘bite’ to it!”

Glad that Harumi could make even a weak joke about her tormentor, he picked up the empty bowls and handed them to her, saying, “Tell your boss it was *oishii*—and thank you again.”

“Anytime, Masa,” she smiled, then smacked back to the restaurant, the echo of her hard soles hitting the rubbery insides of her flip-flops following him as he walked to the back to his job.

He didn’t know if Ignazio would consider this encounter “gettin’ close” to Harumi, but in his own mind, Masafumi decided that the meeting was the equivalent of freeing a woman’s big-sleeved outer *osode* kimono from the remaining layers of kimono beneath. Even as that unveiling had served to reveal emotional layers of his own psyche that he’d tried to keep pinned down, much like the weights placed on freshly made tofu, in order to squeeze out the remaining *nigari*, that salty congealing agent that both created tofu and threatened to ruin its taste if not expelled from the cured form. Just as his own thwarted creative urges had to be expelled from his being, lest they dilute his present artistic course.

Yet, as he let himself into the back door of the shop, he realized for the first time since he’d ended his years of *hikikomori* that he’d actually managed to come back to, and not distance himself from, that which had made him retreat into himself in the first place. Always that maddening conundrum: How to make that which is merely worn into something that comes alive because it is worn?

He’d thought that his new vocation, inkslinging, was more direct than kimono painting—spot the stencil on someone’s body, ink it in, wipe away the blood, and bandage it, job’s finished. But after spending time with Harumi, taking sly glances at her tattooed body (an *Irezumi*-like covering from collarbones to elbows, and down to the bottoms of her thighs, a swirl of native Japanese flowers, clouds, and distant

mountains, surrounded by foamy-crested curlicue waves), and listening to her rant about that fat-eared security guard, Masafumi had come to realize that with each movement of her body, each rapid fuming breath between words, her tattoos ceased to be ink imbedded in flesh, and became an additional garment. An article of indelible clothing that had no doubt helped to make her a target of that goon with the toy gun, who nonetheless wanted her to procure him a suit of nano-armor. For Masafumi doubted that Harumi was the only person in the city who smoked clove cigarettes (which even he realized smelled nothing like cannabis).

“My man, you score?” Ignazio’s sweaty face was open-eyed and leering, showing virtually all his teeth in a tight stacked-stone line. Masafumi debated about mentioning Ulger, but decided not to. Instead, he slipped past Ignazio and walked into the tattooing room with the various paper-on-a-roll covered chairs and padded tables, whose walls were covered with glass-fronted flash design displays, and print-outs of digital photos of most of their customers’ tattoos. Sitting down in one of the chairs, he said carefully, “I learned what has been bothering her. It’s a private matter, but one she could share, in part. She brought me some black *zara dofu*. It was very good.”

“I’ll bet it hit the spot. Me, I like the green and white kind better. Why don’t you go in there, where she works? I’ve never seen you in that place—”

There was no way to explain that back in Japan, Masafumi would’ve eaten the same dish at a *riyori*, a tofu restaurant, and not at a place that served a multitude of dishes, from sushi to *katsu-don* to *yudofu*, plus a wide variety of sakes to go along with the simple *manju* dessert. Extreme mixing of culinary disciplines was far more alien to him than the fast-food hamburger place down the block, where he chose to eat instead. There, the mixing of unsuited foods was a normal thing, and thus *not* bewildering.

“This is my country, now. So I eat what others eat. Going back to my origins in one way would mean wishing to go back to them in all ways.”

“You’re one weird duck, kiddo. But cool. Seriously cool, my man. Best worker I’ve had since this place opened. Know what? You’ve been doin’ flash for too long. Time to branch out. Start learnin’ how to work the nanoribbons. Insert’em, the whole ball o’ wax. Now I’m aware you still can’t brand nobody, and as far as piercing goes, you’re still gonna have to take some classes I’m not gonna pay for, but seein’ that there ain’t no place you’re officially gonna learn how to work the nano-ribbons, class starts as soon as someone comes in here wanting some work done, okay?”

Biting his lip so that he couldn’t ask about Ulger and his thwarted efforts to “get some work done.” Masafumi nodded, before saying, “You’re the boss ... you want me to learn the ribbons, I will learn them.”

—even as his mind began whirling like *suminagashi*, leaving whorls of half-formed ideas and urges to

settle like ink swirls on marble paper, as he realized how he *might* be able to solve Harumi's problem ... not to mention the central puzzle of his own creative existence.

*If* he told her next to nothing beforehand...

\* \* \* \*

III (kosode)

*"Art is a matter of life and death. This may be melodramatic, but it is also true."*  
—Bruce Nauman

"So you've never worn a kimono?"

Harumi worked the tattoo gun over the tray of *momengoshi* without speaking for a few seconds, then said, without looking up, "No, in my family, we were lucky to know what tofu was when I was a kid. I have an old picture of my great-great-to-the-I-don't-know-*what* power grandma-san wearing one, but that's it. The picture wasn't in color, so I don't know what it really looked like. There were clusters of birds on it, I think. Plus this big sash around her middle, with what looked like a flat pillow on her back. The whole kimono trailed onto the ground in back of her—"

"Obi. The sash was an obi."

"Ohhh ... be. OK. And the sleeves were huge, and hung down—"

"The *osode* ... they resemble dewlaps, the sleeves. The *osode* goes on over the *kosode*, the undergarment. That picture had to be very old. By the Edo period, *kosode* was no longer thought of as a mere undergarment, but as a thing to be worn alone. Years before that, women wore up to twelve kimono, each one positioned so as to reveal just a bit of the one underneath. By the time I left Japan, most women who still wore the kimono for important functions wore only the *kosode*, as a main garment."

"I can't see how anyone could move in that many layers—they must've looked like sumo wrestlers." Shutting off the gun, Harumi began stacking the wooden trays, but, as she got to her feet, something in Masafumi made him shout past the beaded doorway, "Ignazio, do you mind if I help Harumi carry these

to the restaurant?”

Above the drone of his own needles, Ignazio shouted back, “Go on, kid. Get yourself a bite while you’re there. I’ll be a while with this guy,” and as easily as that, Masafumi, two trays in hand, left the shop and followed Harumi to her workplace. As she walked ahead of him, he wondered how her arms and legs would look, if she were to add additional designed bands just under her existing torso-and-upper-limbs tattoos, in a different pattern, like layered *kosode*—

“Awww, Queen Mary Jane has a court now.” A brief sideways glance past Harumi’s stiffening back revealed a bulky tan-suited shape, surmounted by a blob of a face topped with limp bristles of short-cut dull brown hair, and balanced on each side by thick slug-meaty ears.

Walker Ulger. He of the empty pistol and the unfulfilled longing for unseen armor. From what Harumi had been telling Masafumi over the last few weeks, ever since she’d opened up to him in the alleyway, Ulger had been making more and more stops at her employer’s restaurant. No longer content to settle for his free meal of saffron-hued *momengoshi* steeped in fermented *miso* wrapped in *konbu*, he’d begun to wait around the inside of the place while others ate, watching them, making strange comments about the food, and the people eating it. But since this part of the city was seldom, if ever, visited by the police (whose budget cuts were legendary), the shop owners put up with their private security guard’s antics, lest he, too, turn on them, as the Vietnamese street gangs in the Twin Cities had gutted those two cities back in the teens.

And always, whenever he saw Harumi, Ulger would bring up the nano-yarn sweater, as she dismissively dubbed the body armor he so persistently sought. Daily, she’d tell Masafumi, who sat and nodded, waiting for the autoclave to finish sterilizing the implements of his trade, even as he stole glances at the vats of nano-ribbons steeping in the brilliant pigments. Harumi liked to talk, so Masafumi seldom had much to say to her, and he never mentioned the lessons in nano-implantation Ignazio had been giving him. One customer was a worker at a sporting goods company whose products (athletic balls) used nanotechnology, and whose workers made ribbons of the stuff in their spare time by attaching a small slip of sticky paper to a patch of nanotubes one third of a millimeter high. They then pulled the ‘tubes, which clung to each other and formed a long transparent sheet, into ribbons. In exchange for a full-body tattoo, the customer would “pay” for his tattoo with bundles of the stuff. These home-made ribbons weren’t like the ones produced by automated factories. Those were always two meters long. The hand-rolled ones were about half that length. The official nano-ribbons resulted in a denser armor, because the person laying it down was able to work for a longer period with the same continuous strand before going on to the next piece.

For their purposes, the shorter lengths of “yarn” worked out exceptionally well ... once Masafumi became used to wearing the magnifying goggles needed for such minute work, he soon became adept at judging just how much “ribbon” he needed to augment a body design. All he had to do was score the flesh, a shade harder than a fingernail scrape, then drop on the nano-ribbons, and let them settle down onto the waiting depression in the skin. The work reminded him of the African and South Pacific body ornamentation that resulted from opening wounds on a body, then rubbing something into the wounds to



prevent them from healing flat and smooth.

Once the ribbons were in place, their inherent capacity to store solar energy made even the most basic tattoo (or raised brand) look alive. As he studied under his boss, Masafumi wondered if that was part of the allure of body armor for this Ulger person. The subtle sheen of augmented flesh was like a badge that could never be removed or a pistol that never needed to be polished. It was sad, how lacking Ulger had to be, to desire such outward amplification of his being, of his status, such as it was....

When Harumi said nothing, but kept on walking, Ulger moved directly in front of her, blocking the sidewalk with his big spread-apart feet and his elbows-jutting arms, his hands placed on both hips. The restaurant was only half a block away, but Masafumi knew that even if he and Harumi were to try and walk in the street, alongside the passing cars, Ulger would find some other way to block their path, perhaps one that would leave Harumi's morning's work lying in fleshy piles on the heat-shimmered asphalt.

“You want to carry these? Because if you do, I already have help.”

“Yeah, I see ... he your new tattoo boy? He gonna finish up your arms and legs for you? Or is he gonna outline what you do have with nano-yarn? He gonna quilt you? I think he's gonna turn you into a coloring book, black outlines around everything—”

“Yes, he *is*. Satisfied? Or do you intend to stick around and watch him do it?”

“I *thought* he was a tattoo-boy. Only he don't like what he does to others, does he?” Ulger looked at him with a chin-first thrust of his shapeless, bristled head, peering at the Japanese man's ink-free arms and lower legs.

Considering Ulger's law-enforcement skills, Masafumi decided that giving the city over to a street gang, of any ethnicity, would be a more pleasant option.

“I wouldn't know. I haven't seen him naked. But my friend here is full of surprises, so I'm not assuming anything about him.” Harumi shifted her tray of tofu from one arm to the other, then made a break for it in the narrow space between Ulger's left elbow and the brick façade of the storefront next to the Japanese eatery. Masafumi likewise slipped past the rent-a-pseudo-cop, albeit making sure that he grazed the man's mushrooming waistline with the corner of one of the wooden trays. Noticing that Ulger failed to flinch at the glancing blow, Masafumi smiled, and followed Harumi into the pungent-smelling interior of the restaurant. Behind him, he felt the heavier footfalls of Ulger, so he didn't startle when he heard the blatty voice say in his ear, “And where do you think *you're* going, huh?”

“The kitchen, where do *you* think the tofu goes?” Harumi snapped over her shoulder, and then Masafumi and the young woman were in the kitchen, past the swinging doors that smacked into Ulger’s belly as they shuddered to a stop. The room was hot, filled with sizzling, boiling, and sputtering meat noises, and lest he be overcome by a torrent of culinary nostalgia for his homeland, Masafumi asked, “Where’s the back door?” Following Harumi’s pointing finger, he hurried past the stooped black-haired cooks hovering over flaming burners, and quit the room for the less humid alleyway beyond.

It wasn’t until he was a couple of back-doors from Ignazio’s shop that Masafumi realized he had company, there in the alley. Ulger. Waddle-stomping toward him from between two buildings, *manju*-shaped face worked into a doughy frown. Before the man could speak, Masafumi said quietly, “Sir, you do not wish to harass me. Not if you desire a ... what do you call it, ‘nano-yarn sweater’? I’m more than a tattoo boy. I am a learner, in the process of learning.

Real cop or play cop, nothing Masafumi said now would give Ulger cause to harm him, or so he hoped, and counted on.

“Harumi, she tell you—”

“Harumi? No, she’s said nothing about it. Nothing at all. But this desire of yours, it is known to others. Who have in turn enabled me to fulfill your wish. If you still desire it be made so—”

“You sure Harumi didn’t tell you?”

“Very sure. As I said, others have mentioned it, in passing. And I have heard them. Just as I’ve heard that doctors will not do this for those who don’t carry an official badge and wear loaded guns, but there are others who will perform such a service—”

“Not that Miami reject boss of yours—”

“I didn’t mention him. But there are others who will perform this service, regardless of whether one’s pistol fires bullets or air—”

“I know Harumi said—”

“No. Nor does she know how to ... knit such a garment. But I do. And I would be happy to do so, upon request.”

“‘Upon request’ like you’d do it for free?”

“Being an apprentice, I’m not in the position to require a fee ... but one must consider the worth of that which costs nothing. It is your choice. Excuse me, I must get back to work,” and before Ulger could speak again, Masafumi was inside the autoclave room, and over the now comforting drone of Ignazio’s needle, he heard his boss shout, “You two have a nice walk?”

Giving the nearest low-walled vat of dye-bathed nano-tubes a gentle shake, watching the wave-like undulation of the transparent fibers within, Masafumi smiled and yelled past the curtain, “Nice ... you could say that.”

“That’s my kiddo. Next time she comes in for more ink, I’ll let you do the slinging, okay by you?”

Images of narrow bands of patterned flesh warred with more graphic, if equally finespun, mental pictures of oozing human cross-hatching within Masafumi’s brain, as he echoed, “Okay by me....”

\* \* \* \*

“Masa, remember what you said about women wearing layered kimono, how a little bit of each kimono showed ... were you joking?”

Pretending to be engrossed in the spiking arcs of onion peel juiced lines Harumi inked into the firm tofu surface, Masafumi shook his head slightly, then said, “The Heian period, around the late seven hundreds, through the eleventh century. If you can find the novel *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki, she describes the nobility of Kyoto and Nave wearing layered kimono. I read it in Japan.... It’s one of my mother’s favorite books. I think she still has her copy.”

“You think?”

“She and I seldom write, or call. She and my father, they were eager for me to leave the house, to leave Japan. It was an ... understandable parting of the ways.”

“Oh. Like they kicked you out?”

“Not precisely. But it is partly true. They kicked me out of my room, within their house. Your family, when they gather, do they speak of *hikikomori*? Someone on your father’s side may have witnessed this ... disorder. It is common, in Japan, less so in Taiwan, South Korea.”

Sliding her finished tray his way, Harumi uncovered the next slab of fleshy-firm tofu and ventured cautiously, “You mean those guys who used to stay in their rooms, for months, years even? Not talking or eating with their folks? My dad’s dad mentioned something like that. So ... you’re ... one of them?”

“Was one. My parents, they hired a woman, a ‘rescue sister’ to come to my door and lure me out of my room. Once I came out, she took me to this place, in Tokyo, called New Start. A meeting place for fellow *hikikomori*. Here, you might call it a boy’s club. There was one female *hikikomori* there, while I was in attendance. But she was an aberration. Far more males do ... what I did.”

“So one morning you decided to hide. Not get up, or leave the room? I think everyone I know has felt that way at least once—”

“Not the same ... not at all. For me, for *us*, the staying-in is a response to pressure, to expectations. When one cannot fulfill one’s destiny, it is better to retreat than to exist as a failure.”

“If that’s the case, Ulger should be hiding under his futon in his apartment. I can’t think of anything worse than running around pretending to be a cop, down to wanting body armor to take up the slack from a bulletproof vest that he doesn’t even own—”

“Walker is not Japanese. And I doubt many expectations were placed upon him,” Masafumi said succinctly.

Harumi mentally digested what she’d heard, then said, “To me, he’s a more likely candidate for being a hicky-whatever than you could be. You’re just a kid now, and you said you were locked away in your folks’ house for *how* long?”

“I didn’t say how long. It was enough time. I was at an age where my future should have been set, but ... my doubts diluted my artistic destiny. My parents, my teachers, they were sure of what I was to be, but me ... the uncertainty, the inexactitude of my calling, all of this served to render me unable to do anything

more than simply *be*, in my room. It's difficult to explain further. The people at New Start, they advised me to change paths, seek other outlets for what minimal talents I possessed.

"I've seen your work, 'Fumi ... there isn't much more that Ignazzy can teach you about inkslinging that you don't already know. How long have you been working for him, two, three years? Your work's fine, just fine ... in fact—" here her voice took on a different tone, less conciliatory, more eager, "—what you said about the layered kimono thing got me to thinking ... what I have on me right now is sort of like a short kimono, no? But what if I add bands along each arm, and each leg, with a suggestion of the pattern of some more kimonos underneath? Y'know? With thick bands of black to delineate the difference between each 'sleeve.' Sort of like what that pretend-cop suggested, a quilting type of thing."

Masafumi felt emotionally, creatively, naked, sitting there on the tatami mat next to Harumi. Ignazio had also suggested that he work on Harumi, and now, she herself was requesting that he ink her, a most personal, even intimate request. As if his own wishes had been made flesh.... But as he pictured her future body illumination, his mind echoed with another imagined transformation, that of a lowly play-badge for hire into something slightly more legally augmented. That the two creative works were so thoroughly linked in his consciousness somehow tainted the former while increasing the repugnance of the latter.

But she was expecting an answer ... just as that slug-eared thug had been badgering him for the last few days, constantly requesting a specific date—and suitable price—for his own transformation.

Realizing that to honor one request must invariably mean fulfilling the other as well, Masafumi said slowly, "Would you be open to a form of barter, as payment for my work? It's not the most pleasant option, but one that I think will turn out to be satisfying for you ... in, how do you say it, 'the long run'?"

"By 'not the most pleasant option' do you mean unpleasantness, as in ... say, that Ulger freak?"

Nodding, Masafumi anticipated her refusal, but was pleasantly shocked when she said, "Do whatever you want to me in front of him, as long as it culminates in getting him off my back...."

\* \* \* \*

"So, you kids sure ole Iggy-nazzy won't come back, spoil our little inkslinging party?"

Outside the lowered shades of the tattoo parlor windows, the last rays of the setting sun cast narrow deep orange shafts of light on Harumi's body as she stood in the middle of the room, while Masafumi

spotted the freshly inked narrow stencils around each of her upper arms above the elbows, and encircled each thigh with a two-inch wide band of intricately patterned freehand flash. Once he was done rubbing the transfer paper against her skin, Masafumi stepped back to make sure all the elements of each design were successfully spotted onto her skin. For his part, Ulger squirmed around in one of the tattooing chairs, eyes narrowed, upper lip curled back over his flat-bottomed, oyster white teeth, breath coming in noisy hitches through his flaring nostrils. He'd accepted Masafumi's terms readily; if he was allowed to watch "Tattoo Boy" apply four around-the-limbs tattoos on Harumi, he'd be given that elusive nano-yarn sweater ... *if* he never bothered Harumi again. If he were to break that promise, and continue to harass her, the real police would get a call reporting a non-official bearer of the restricted body armor nano-weave.

Luckily, Harumi's limbs were thin and the single-needle black outlining of her tattoos went quickly, if awkwardly (for him to tattoo the backs of her thighs and arms, she had to lie face down on the tattooing bed, resting on her already tattooed limbs), and once the outsides of each new leaf and flower were inked, he switched to a seven needle cluster, to create the background wash of color. Given that his needles touched his previously incised inked lines with every pass, Harumi's eyes began to water, even as she defiantly refused to let out a sound, lest she increase her audience's pleasure at her discomfort. Masafumi heard Ulger's panting breaths over the drone of the tattoo gun, and when he was done laying down the pale greenish white background, he gave Harumi an *I'm so sorry* wince, as he put a three-needle tip onto his tattoo gun, and began inking in all the deep green leaves.

Five colors later, and countless swipes of his now-bloodied wipe cloth, Harumi's limbs shone with brilliant, slightly raised bands of color, the merest hints of a far more intricate design not quite fully seen "beneath" her previous tattoos. But her fleshy kimono was now layered. As she gingerly walked toward the mirror on the back wall of the shop, ignoring Ulger's wolf-whistles, Masafumi pictured her wearing a real kimono over her tattoos. One that was made of a transparent fabric, gauze, or perhaps even uncut sheets of that nano-fabric those factories made in bulk. This was the answer to his imponderable quandary, that unbridgeable gap between the artistic vision and the material reality. A design that literally moved as the woman wearing it moved, even as she still maintained the formality of the now outdated kimono's restrictive T-shape. In his excitement, he almost forgot about Ulger sitting there, waiting for his "payment." Harumi was so beautiful in all her inked glory. Only her pale shorts and narrow tube top marred the perfection of her fleshy garment. Yet hadn't Ignazio told him that the people who attended those tattoo and Body Art conventions often took the judging stage all but naked, to better show off their ink? If Harumi would allow him to create additional "layers" of kimono on her skin, could she not wear a transparent kimono when taking the stage?

"Masa, you're the man ... and Walker—what can I say? You *ain't*," Harumi hissed through a tightly puckered pair of red-shaded lips, then, after blowing Masafumi a kiss, quit the parlor, stepping raw and bandageless into the early evening street beyond. Sure that she'd be able to tend her own fresh tats, Masafumi slowly turned his attention to Ulger, who was busy fishing something out of his breast pocket ... a syringe, filled with a pale clear liquid. Grinning and squinting at him, Ulger said, "I do guard duty for the pharmacy down the block ... I know they ain't gonna miss this. Just like I know you ain't gonna say squat about me using it, right?"

Realizing that Ulger had stolen anesthetic, the one thing forbidden to anyone undergoing non-medically sanctioned body modifications, Masafumi merely shook his head, disgusted by the man's cowardice, yet simultaneously elated by the sight of Ulger feeling his own neck for a vein, then shooting the contents of the syringe into his body. From what Ignazio had told Masafumi, nano-ribbon implantation was far less painful than getting a small tattoo. Wanting to snap, *Too bad you didn't bring enough to share with Harumi*, he instead waited until Ulger's eyes grew dazed and his head lolled before saying succinctly, "Remove your shirt. And put your arms on the armrests. Another thing—don't speak as I work."

With the cheerful obedience of a cow marching along a slaughterhouse tunnel, Ulger started to say "okay" then substituted the finger sign for okay instead. Before his eyelids drooped over his eyes, Masafumi told himself, This ... will be *so* good.

\* \* \* \*

Through the magnifying goggles, the skin of Ulger's neck became a landscape of raked sand and occasional rock-like protuberances, dotted with short scruffy shafts of kelp-dark hair. As he minutely scored and hash-marked that barren soil of enlarged pores and pliant flesh, Masafumi forced himself to think of rough fabric, not supple enough for a kimono, but perhaps suitable for an obi, to surround and bind the layers of a kimono into a whole ... and as he worked, incising, and laying down strands of nano-ribbon that looked nearly hair-thick under the most extreme magnification his lenses allowed, artistic urges took over utilitarian purpose. His realization that this was not a job meant to protect, but merely a prop meant to prolong Ulger's delusions of legal servitude, began to guide his hand. His efforts transcended their agreed-upon boundaries....

...and when he was finished, and had slathered the freshly laid nano-ribbons with ointment, and bandaged over his creation, he kicked the bottom of the chair, to rouse Ulger.

"All through."

"Uhhmmmp? Done? I got my armor?"

"It's within you. Although the addition of an actual vest will greatly augment the protective element."

Oblivious to Masafumi's irony, Ulger shakily got up off the chair, and as he gingerly felt the bandages criss-crossing over his neck, shoulders, and under his arms, said, "Y'know where Harumi went to?"

That Ulger would ultimately seek to break his promise had been a given to Masafumi, but the quickness

of turnaround did rankle him, as Masafumi replied, “No. And if I may remind you—”

“Nope, I didden say you could say squat to me.”

Masafumi watched as Ulger labored to pull on his shirt, offering no help to him as he struggled, other than to suggest, “A beer might make whatever pain comes later go away.”

“Nah, I’m gonna get me some sake ... and Harumi will be there to serve it to me, won’t she?”

Harumi had said nothing about her post-tattooing plans, but he doubted that she would consider working another shift that night. Smiling, he said, “Perhaps she will be. You should go then?”

“Damn right ... and I’m gonna show everyone there what I got goin’ for me now. Teach ‘em not to take me serious as a security guard. Once they see what I’m packing, they’ll take me real serious...”

With that, Ulger stepped out the door, but when Masafumi hurried over to peer through the sides of the drawn shades, he saw the enforcer wannabe ripping and tearing at his bandages, until they trailed over his shoulders like the fluttering tail of a squid.

It took all the resolve Masafumi had to resist the urge to follow the man into the restaurant, to watch the horrified reactions of those Japanese-reading patrons and workers when they saw what was nano-embroidered into Ulger’s flesh ... precisely drawn symbols for “I despise Japan and all that is Japanese” across his neck, or, if he managed to get his shirt off (or if it was removed for him), the phrase “I seek to defile all Japanese women” and “Death to Japanese men” on each shoulder, or the best ones of all along the bottom of each armpit: “I am worthless slime” and “I am unworthy to live.”

Just as the long-ago Tokugawa shogunate inevitably spawned a far different, yet equally—if not far more—involved form of kimono decoration, so Masafumi decided that the current ban on non-police officers obtaining a suit of nano-body-armor should also trigger a more decorative, if less protective, variant. Using bundles of nano-ribbon, vat-dyed to a brilliant, unmissable shade of crimson, made the individual characters stand out vividly and unmistakably under Ulger’s exposed flesh, much as embroidery stands out above that which is to be embroidered.

Patient, and sure in the knowledge that his creation would be seen and subsequently read, Masafumi busied himself cleaning up the shop, putting away bottles of ink, placing the used equipment in the autoclave, scrubbing down the chair Ulger had sat in, just in case any invisible blood mists should still be clinging to the vinyl surfaces, until he heard the ever-closer wail of the sirens. Be they police or an



ambulance, it did not particularly matter to Masafumi.

That which he had been forced to create would soon be hidden, perhaps forever, either in a jail or in a morgue. But Harumi, and her growing collection of fleshy kimono, of close-fitting skin kosode, she would continue to be seen, if she would allow Masafumi to augment her three-dimensional garment, once she learned of Ulger's inevitable fate.

Pedaling to his small apartment that night, he swerved just in time to avoid the chalked outline of a large, beefy body on the sidewalk in front of the Japanese restaurant not long before the real police had cordoned off the area with black-lettered yellow plastic tape. Preoccupied, Masafumi wondered which might be more suitable—an *osode* of finest gauze, or the more daring nano-fabric.

\* \* \* \*

#### IV (Heian kosode)

*"...what is a kimono ... if it ceases to be a thing worn?"*  
—Kunihiko Moriguchi, 2005

*"When no one chooses to wear kimono, might they not choose to become the kimono?"*  
—Masafumi Saikaku (1999-2073) From: "The Lives They Lived" ("Emperor of the Epidermal Kimono"), Sunday, January 2074, The New York *Times* Magazine.

The next morning, Masafumi wasn't too surprised when Harumi didn't show up with her customary trays of *momengoshi*, ready for her hand-worked embellishment, but when Ignazio didn't show up for work either, he first grew puzzled, then ... as he worked through each layer of their most recent words and actions, dwelling in particular on the seeming happenstance of their wants and needs, which managed to merge with *his* own artistic needs and wants, he became angry, shamed to the bone by their tandem deception, their dual interplay of common desire for him to act in their stead (the unspoken upset on Harumi's part, Ignazio's urgings to find out what was wrong, the revelation of their common foe ... and Ignazio's sudden urge to play nano-Master to his unsuspecting Apprentice). But his anger washed away like unwanted dye from a resist painting when he ventured for the second time into the restaurant where Harumi had worked, past the dew-blurred chalk-outline of Ulger's body. One of the recent immigrant waitresses hurried over to him and said, "Harumi, she say for me to tell you something. She say thank you, and she hope you not angry at her and her boyfriend. She say, they cannot be free unless common enemy is gone. But they cannot be ones to stop enemy. She hopes you understand, and forgive. And she say, she love new *kosode*. When they come back, she want more. If you wish to make for her."

“Did she say ... did they say where they are going?”

“Las Vegas. They have Skin Show there. She go show off *kosode*, tell everyone *you* make. Oh, she also say to get rid of the ribbons, she say you know what mean. Okay? You have meal now?”

“I’m not hungry—”

“Not hungry, is okay. I put in box later. Harumi, she pay ahead. She say serve you special dish ... you sit, I go get,” and so Masafumi sat, surrounded by scents and memories and distant sounds of cooking, until the waitress placed a plate of *kinugoshi* before him, and the scent of the deep-fried “silken” tofu filled his nostrils. As he picked up his chopsticks, he noticed in the dim light that there was a design, deeply branded, in the center of the slab of *kinugoshi*:

The ancient symbol for a kimono....

Lifting the *oishii* treat to his lips, prior to savoring the warm custard-like interior, Masafumi decided that no matter what it might cost him, or how many free tattoos he might give that nanotech factory worker, he’d somehow get the thirteen yards worth of transparent nanofabric for Harumi’s *osode* ... under the circumstances, no other cloth would do. m

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