

Introduction

“But Mameha-san, I don’t want kindness!”

“Don’t you? I thought we all wanted kindness. Maybe what you mean is that you want something more than kindness. And that is something you’re in no position to ask for.”

It is New York, in 1985. A Professor of Japanese History, Jakob Haarhuis, has persuaded an old Japanese woman to tell him the story of her life. The old woman eventually agrees, and what you will read here is the unforgettable result: *Memoirs of a Geisha*. In this story you will follow Nitta Sayuri on an unbelievable journey, from her early years as a child in a small fishing village, through her time as a great geisha in the golden age of Gion, the geisha area of Kyoto, to her old age in New York.

Memoirs of a Geisha is set against the background of what the Japanese call *kuraitani*—the valley of darkness; the terrible years of the economic Depression of the 1930s and, later, World War II. It is one woman’s story of survival in a hard world where men have all the power and women are expected to be nothing more than beautiful toys. Sayuri suffers greatly at the hands of Hatsumomo, a beautiful but evil geisha who is determined that Sayuri will spend the rest of her life as a humble maid. Sayuri is cruelly and unjustly treated until one day another geisha, Mameha, mysteriously enters her life and helps her in her war against Hatsumomo.

This is not, however, only a story of a woman’s survival. It is also the story of her refusal to give up her secret love for a man who once offered her a small sign of kindness. This man is one of the most important men in Kyoto, and seems completely out of reach, but Sayuri never loses her love for him, and is determined

never to betray her heart. This determination, however, leads to a complex moral and emotional problem. If she wishes to become a geisha, Sayuri needs somehow to defeat Hatsumomo. But what happens if the only way to defeat Hatsumomo involves losing, forever, the chance of being with the man she loves? This struggle between the need to survive and the need for love is the central issue in Sayuri's life and provides the dramatic heart of her fascinating story. It leads to many heart-breaking situations, which Sayuri learns to handle with a calm bravery. However, as her power in the geisha world gradually increases, the object of her heart's desire still remains as out of reach as ever. She becomes desperate, but never loses hope, and we see another, more calculating, side of her character. We may not agree with everything that Sayuri has to do to achieve her dream, but she never loses our sympathy. In a cruel, unforgiving world, survival is considered the only success and love is thought of as an unobtainable luxury. Sayuri disagrees, and it is the description of her search for both that gives this story its power and beauty, and makes *Memoirs of a Geisha* one of the great stories of our time.

One of the interesting features of this story is the detailed description of the different stages that a girl must pass through in order to become a geisha. Many people believe that part of a geisha's work involves having paid sex with their clients, but this is untrue. Geisha are traditional female Japanese entertainers whose skills include conversation; playing Japanese instruments such as the *shamisen* (Japanese guitar) or *tsutsumi* (a small drum); the famous tea ceremony, and formal dance. Their appearance is also very important, and geisha usually have professional assistants to help them put on their clothes. They have to wear several layers of *kimono* (a loose piece of clothing with wide sleeves), and their *obi* (belt) is more than a simple band of cloth. Sayuri describes how heavy and difficult to wear these clothes are when she is training to be a novice. A novice's *obi* is much longer than

the one that older people wear—it can stretch from “one end of a room to the other.” All geisha need help with their *obis* because they have to be tied at the back (unlike women who have sex with their clients, who tie their *obis* at the front).

Sayuri also describes having her hair done as the first step to being a novice. The process is so complicated that geisha dare not sleep on an ordinary pillow afterwards—they have to sleep with a special pillow (a *takamakura*) under their necks.

In the 1920s, when this story takes place, there were over 80,000 geisha in Japan. Today, however, there are very few. It has been estimated that there are between one thousand and two thousand geisha in modern Japan. Kyoto (where Sayuri’s story takes place) is the city where the geisha tradition is the strongest today. One reason for the gradual disappearance of geisha in modern-day Japan is the decline of interest in traditional arts. Many of the activities and traditions described in the story are much rarer today. For example, much of the story in *Memoirs of a Geisha* centers around Sayuri’s search for a *danna* (a wealthy man who will provide for her financially on a long-term basis). A visitor to Japan today can still see geisha in the street, but these “geisha” are often tourists who have paid to be dressed up as one!

The writer of this story, Arthur Golden, was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the United States. He studied at Harvard and Boston Universities and worked on a magazine in Japan before returning to the United States. He wrote *Memoirs of a Geisha* after interviewing a number of geisha for background information about their world. The book was published in 1997, and spent two years on The New York Times bestseller list. Since then, it has sold more than four million copies in English and has been translated into thirty-two languages. In 2005, *Memoirs of a Geisha* was made into a prize-winning film, with Chinese actress Ziyi Zhang playing the central part of Nitta Sayuri.

Translator's Note

by Jakob Haarhuis, Professor of Japanese History,
New York University.

I first met Nitta Sayuri[★] in 1985, although she came to live in the United States in 1956. For the next forty years of her life she lived in elegant rooms, decorated in the Japanese style, on the thirty-second floor of New York City's Waldorf Towers.

If she had stayed in Japan, her life would have been too full for her to tell it in her memoirs. But here in New York she had time, and one day I asked if she would allow me to write her story.

"Well Jakob-san,"[†] Sayuri said to me. "I might tell my story if I can tell it to you."

This was because I knew Japan and I knew its history. Sayuri was clear that she wanted to *tell* me her story, not write it down. As a geisha, she would always talk to people, face-to-face; that was her life. She couldn't write a story in an empty room; she needed somebody with her, listening, talking to her. I suggested that she should talk into a tape-recorder, and she agreed.

But there were conditions. She wanted her story to be published only after her death and after the deaths of the men in her life. She did not want anybody to be embarrassed by her memoirs. That is also why she hides the identities of certain people behind names like "Pumpkin," although geisha use these names all the time in their work.

A geisha's work is to entertain men: geisha train for years to sing and dance and play instruments at parties. The men at these parties pay to have the geisha there. In Sayuri's time a really

[★] In Japanese the family name, *Nitta*, comes before the first name, *Sayuri*.

[†] In the polite Japanese way, Sayuri always called me *Jakob-san*—*san*, after the first name, is used like Mr., Mrs., or Ms.

popular geisha could earn one *ohana*—three Japanese yen—for every fifteen minutes that she spent at a party. That was enough to buy two bottles of wine in Kyoto in the 1930s.

The geisha, however, did not keep all the money herself. Some of it went to the teahouse where the party was held, some went to her dresser, some went to the *okiya*—the house where geisha live.

But the real money, at least for a top geisha, came from having a *danna*. No man could buy a top geisha for just one night. A man who wanted to be with a geisha for maybe six months or more could become her *danna*—if she was available and if he agreed fees with the mistress of her main teahouse. A *danna* paid a lot of a geisha's expenses. He paid for her make-up and maybe her lesson fees—because she never stopped learning to dance and to play instruments. And he still paid her fee (*ohana*) when she entertained him, but she went home with him afterwards.

Geisha usually don't talk about these things. Sayuri could only tell me about her life because she had left Japan and nobody in Japan had power over her any longer. So she talked into the tape-recorder and I listened.

Sometimes, still, I play her tapes during the evenings in my study and find it very difficult to believe she is no longer alive.

Chapter 1 The Little Fish Girl

I wasn't born and brought up to be a Kyoto geisha. I wasn't even born in Kyoto. I'm a fisherman's daughter from a little town called Yoroido on the Sea of Japan. We lived in a tiny house, high above the sea, and my father smelled like the sea even after he washed.

One day, many years ago, I was entertaining at a party in Kyoto and a man said he was in Yoroido only last week. I felt like

a bird that has flown across the ocean and finds another bird that knows its nest. I couldn't stop myself—I said:

“Yoroido! That's where I grew up.”

The man didn't believe me.

“You can't mean it,” he said, and laughed. “You, growing up in Yoroido! That's like making tea in a bucket.”

Well, I'd never thought of Yoroido as a bucket, though it's not pretty. In those days, the early 1930s, it had only one road leading to the Japan Coastal Seafood Company, which sold all the fish that my father and the other fishermen caught.

My father was a very old man. I was twelve then, but from the day I was born I never looked like him at all. I always looked like my mother. We had the same strange eyes; you hardly ever saw eyes like ours in Japan. Instead of being dark brown like everyone else's, my mother's eyes were a shining gray and mine are just the same. It's the water in both our personalities. My father had wood in his personality; mother and I were full of water.

But all the water was running out of mother because of her illness. You could see every bone in her face getting harder and harder as the water dried out. Dr. Miura visited her every time he came to our village.

“Chiyo-chan,” my father would say to me, “get the doctor a cup of tea.”

My name back then was Chiyo. It was many years before I was known by my geisha name, Sayuri.

“Sakamoto-san,” said the doctor to my father, one time, “you need to have a talk with one of the women in the village. Ask them to make a new dress for your wife. She shouldn't die in that old dress she's wearing.”

“So she's going to die soon?” asked my father.

“A few more weeks, maybe,” said Dr. Miura.

After that I couldn't hear their voices for a time. And then . . . “I thought I'd die first,” my father was saying.

“You’re an old man, Sakamoto-san. But you might have another year or two.”



One afternoon I came home from school and found Mr. Tanaka Ichiro walking up the path to my house. Mr. Tanaka’s family owned the Japan Coastal Seafood Company. He didn’t wear peasant clothes like the fishermen. He wore a man’s kimono with kimono pants.

“Ah, Chiyo,” said Mr. Tanaka. “Dr. Miura told me that your mother’s sick. Give her this.” He handed me a packet wrapped in rice paper, about the size of a fish head. “It’s Chinese medicine,” he told me. “Don’t listen to Dr. Miura if he says it’s worthless.”

He turned to go but then turned back again. “I know a man,” he said. “He’s older now, but when he was a boy about your age, his father died. The following year his mother died. Sounds a bit like you, don’t you think?”

Mr. Tanaka gave me a look that meant I had to agree with him. “Well, that man’s name is Tanaka Ichiro,” he continued. “I was taken in by the Tanaka family at the age of twelve. They gave me a new start.”

The next day I came home from school and found Mr. Tanaka sitting across from my father at the little table in our house.

“So, Sakamoto, what do you think of my idea?”

“I don’t know, sir,” said my father. “I can’t imagine Chiyo living anywhere else.”

Part of me hoped desperately that Mr. Tanaka would adopt me, but I was also ashamed that I wanted to live anywhere except my little house above the sea. As Mr. Tanaka left, I heard my father crying.



The next day Mr. Tanaka came to collect me in a little cart pulled by two horses. I thought we were going to his house but we drove to the train station. A tall, thin man met us there.

“This is Mr. Bekku,” said Mr. Tanaka. And then he drove away again. Mr. Bekku gave me a look of disgust.

“Fish! Ugh! You smell of fish,” he said.

When the train came, Mr. Bekku and I got on. As soon as we sat down he took out a comb and started pulling it through my hair. It hurt a lot and although I tried not to cry, in the end I did. Then he stopped doing it. The train went on and on, away from my home.

“Where are we going?” I asked, after a time.

“Kyoto,” said Mr. Bekku. It was the only word he said to me on the long train journey. Kyoto sounded as foreign to me as Hong Kong or even New York, which I’d once heard Dr. Miura talk about.

I could see little of the city as we neared Kyoto station, but then I was astonished to see rooftop after rooftop, all touching, as far as the distant hills. I could never have imagined a city so huge.

Back in the 1930s there were still rickshaws in Kyoto. Mr. Bekku led me by the elbow and we climbed into a rickshaw. “Gion,” Mr. Bekku said to the rickshaw driver. It was the first time I ever heard the name of the famous geisha area of Kyoto.

I fell back in the seat as the rickshaw driver picked up the poles and ran through the streets.

“Won’t you please tell me where I’m going?” I said to Mr. Bekku.

For a moment I thought he wasn’t going to reply. Then he said, “To your new home.”

Soon we turned onto a street that seemed as broad as the whole village of Yoroido. I could hardly see the other side because of all the people, bicycles, cars, and trucks. I’d never seen a car or a truck before—except in photographs.

After a long time the rickshaw turned down an alley of wooden houses. We stopped and Mr. Bekku told me to get out. There in the doorway stood the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, wearing a kimono more perfect than anything I'd ever imagined. It was water blue with white lines that curled like the current in a stream when she moved. It was pure silk. And her clothing wasn't the only extraordinary thing about her; her face was painted a kind of rich white, like a cloud lit by the sun.

This was Hatsumomo. I didn't know it then but she was one of the most famous geisha in Gion. She was a tiny woman; even with her black, shiny hair up high she came only to Mr. Bekku's shoulder.

"Mr. Bekku," said Hatsumomo. "What is that strong smell of fish? Could you take the garbage out later, please. I want to pass by."

There was no garbage there; she was talking about me.

Mr. Bekku led me past Hatsumomo into the small, elegant house. It was built up on stones, with enough space under it for a cat to crawl under. Inside, the hall had a wooden floor that shone in the yellow light of electric lamps.

A door slid back and a woman came out, smoking a pipe.

"This is the new girl, Mrs. Nitta," said Mr. Bekku.

"Ah, yes. The little fish girl," said the woman. "Come closer, I want to have a look at you. Heavens! What amazing eyes! You're a beautiful girl, aren't you?"

She spoke with the same peculiar accent as Mr. Bekku and Hatsumomo. It sounded so different from the Japanese spoken in my village that I had a hard time understanding her. I couldn't look at her, so I kept my eyes down on the wooden floor.

"There's no need to worry, little girl. No one's going to cook you. My name is Mrs. Nitta and this is the Nitta *okiya*."

I raised my eyes a little. Her kimono was yellow, with smooth, brown branches carrying lovely green and orange leaves. It was

made of the most beautiful, delicate, thin silk. Then I raised my eyes higher and almost cried out in shock. The colors of her face were all wrong. Her eyelids were red like meat and her gums and tongue were gray. I later learned that this was due to a problem with her diet, but at the time I just stared in horror.

“What are you looking at?” said Mrs. Nitta, as smoke from her pipe rose from her face.

“I’m very sorry, ma’am. I was looking at your kimono,” I told her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

This must have been the right answer—if there was a right answer—because she laughed, though the laugh sounded like a cough.

“So you like it, do you,” she said, continuing to cough or laugh, I didn’t know which. “Do you have any idea what it cost?”

“No, ma’am.”

“More than you did, that’s certain.”

A young girl came out into the hall, carrying a wooden bucket full of water. She was a little older than me, thirteen or fourteen. Her body was thin, but her face was round. Even when she was a geisha in Gion many years later, everybody called her Pumpkin.

“Ah, Pumpkin,” said Mrs. Nitta. “Get the little fish girl clean and get her out of those peasant clothes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Pumpkin.

She led me through the hall to a courtyard in the back. The bucket was heavy for her and when she put it down half the water spilled out over the dirt floor.

“Where on earth did you come from?” she said.

I didn’t want to say I’d come from Yoroido. Pumpkin’s accent was as strange to me as everybody else’s. I was sure she wouldn’t know where Yoroido was. I said instead that I’d just arrived.

“I thought I’d never see another girl my age,” she said to me. “Why are your eyes that color?”

I didn't answer that, but took my clothes off so Pumpkin could wash me with a cloth she took out of the bucket. After that, she went to a room in the courtyard and got me a kimono. It was made of rough cotton in a simple dark blue pattern, but it was certainly more elegant than anything I'd worn before.

"I don't even want to know your name yet," said Pumpkin. "I have to learn new names all the time. Mrs. Nitta didn't like the last girl who came and she was only here a month."

"What will happen if they don't want to keep me?"

"It's better for you if they keep you."

"Why? What . . . what is this place?"

"It's an *okiya*. It's where geisha live. Our geisha is called Hatsumomo and we look after her and do everything for her. She earns all the money for the *okiya*. If you work very hard, you'll grow up to be a geisha yourself. But it takes years of training."

I had a sudden image in my mind of my poor, sick mother in bed, pushing herself up on one elbow and looking around to see where I'd gone. Tears came into my eyes before I could think how to stop them.

Chapter 2 No Escape

During those first few weeks in that strange place, I couldn't have felt worse if I'd lost my arms and legs, rather than my family and my home. I was confused and miserable, and I had no doubt that life would never again be the same.

But, strangely, during all that time, I felt an unreasonable warmth for Mrs. Nitta—something like the feeling that a fish might have for the fisherman who pulls the hook from its lip. Probably this was because I saw her no more than a few minutes each day while cleaning her room. She was always there, sitting at