

Chapter One

On a mountain above the clouds once lived a man who had been the gardener of the Emperor of Japan. Not many people would have known of him before the war, but I did. He had left his home on the rim of the sunrise to come to the central highlands of Malaya. I was seventeen years old when my sister first told me about him. A decade would pass before I travelled up to the mountains to see him.

He did not apologise for what his countrymen had done to my sister and me. Not on that rain-scratched morning when we first met, nor at any other time. What words could have healed my pain, returned my sister to me? None. And he understood that. Not many people did.

Thirty-six years after that morning, I hear his voice again, hollow and resonant. Memories I had locked away have begun to break free, like shards of ice fracturing off an arctic shelf. In sleep, these broken floes drift towards the morning light of remembrance.

The stillness of the mountains awakens me. The depth of the silence: that is what I had forgotten about living in Yugiri. The murmurings of the house hover in the air when I open my eyes. *An old house retains its hoard of memories*, I remember Aritomo telling me once.

Ah Cheong knocks on the door and calls softly to me. I get out of bed and put on my dressing gown. I look around for my gloves and find them on the bedside table. Pulling them over my hands, I tell the housekeeper to come in. He enters and sets the pewter tray with a pot of tea and a plate of cut papaya on a side table; he had done the same for Aritomo every morning. He turns to me and says, 'I wish you a long and peaceful retirement, Judge Teoh.'

'Yes, it seems I've beaten you to it.' He is, I calculate, five or six

years older than me. He was not here when I arrived yesterday evening. I study him, layering what I see over what I remember. He is a short, neat man, shorter than I recall, his head completely bald now. Our eyes meet. 'You're thinking of the first time you saw me, aren't you?'

'Not the first time, but the last day. The day you left.' He nods to himself. 'Ah Foon and I – we always hoped you'd come back one day.'

'Is she well?' I tilt sideways to look behind him, seeking his wife at the door, waiting to be called in. They live in Tanah Rata, cycling up the mountain road to Yugiri every morning.

'Ah Foon passed away, Judge Teoh. Four years ago.'

'Yes. Yes, of course.'

'She wanted to tell you how grateful she was, that you paid her hospital bills. So was I.'

I open the teapot's lid, then close it, trying to remember which hospital she had been admitted to. The name comes to me: Lady Templer Hospital.

'Five weeks,' he says.

'Five weeks?'

'In five week's time it will be thirty-four years since Mr Aritomo left us.'

'For goodness' sake, Ah Cheong!' I have not returned to Yugiri in almost as long. Does the housekeeper judge me by the increasing number of years from the last time I was in this house, like a father scoring another notch on the kitchen wall to mark his child's growth?

Ah Cheong's gaze fixes on a spot somewhere over my shoulder. 'If there's nothing else. . .' He begins to turn away.

In a gentler tone, I say, 'I'm expecting a visitor at ten o'clock this morning. Professor Yoshikawa. Show him to the sitting room verandah.'

The housekeeper nods once and leaves, closing the door behind him. Not for the first time I wonder how much he knows, what he has seen and heard in his years of service with Aritomo.

The papaya is chilled, just the way I like it. Squeezing the wedge of lime over it, I eat two slices before putting down the plate. Opening the sliding doors, I step onto the verandah. The house

sits on low stilts and the verandah is two feet above the ground. The bamboo blinds creak when I scroll them up. The mountains are as I have always remembered them, the first light of the morning melting down their flanks. Damp withered leaves and broken-off twigs cover the lawn. This part of the house is hidden from the main garden by a wooden fence. A section has collapsed, and tall grass spikes out from the gaps between the fallen planks. Even though I have prepared myself for it, the neglected condition of the place shocks me.

A section of Majuba Tea Estate is visible to the east over the fence. The hollow of the valley reminds me of the open palms of a monk, cupped to receive the day's blessing. It is Saturday, but the tea-pickers are working their way up the slopes. There has been a storm in the night, and clouds are still marooned on the peaks. I step down the verandah onto a narrow strip of ceramic tiles, cold and wet beneath my bare soles. Aritomo obtained them from a ruined palace in Ayutthaya, where they had once paved the courtyard of an ancient and nameless king. The tiles are the last remnants of a forgotten kingdom, its histories consigned to oblivion.

I fill my lungs to the brim and exhale. Seeing my own breath take shape, this cobweb of air which only a second ago had been inside me, I remember the sense of wonder it used to bring. The fatigue of the past months drains from my body, only to flood back into me a moment later. It feels strange that I no longer have to spend my weekends reading piles of appeal documents, or catching up with the week's paperwork.

I breathe out through my mouth a few more times, watching my breaths fade away into the garden.

My secretary, Azizah, brought me the envelope shortly before we left my chambers to go into the courtroom. 'This came for you just now, Puan,' she said.

Inside was a note from Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji, confirming the date and time of our meeting in Yugiri. It had been sent a week before. Looking at his neat handwriting, I wondered if it had been a mistake to have agreed to see him. I was about to telephone him in Tokyo to cancel the appointment when I realised he would

already be on his way to Malaysia. And there was something else inside the envelope. Turning it over, a thin wooden stick, about five inches long, fell out onto my desk. I picked it up and dipped it into the light of my desk lamp. The wood was dark and smooth, its tip ringed with fine, overlapping grooves.

‘So short-*lah*, the chopstick. For children is it?’ Azizah said, coming into the room with a stack of documents for me to sign. ‘Where’s the other one?’

‘It’s not a chopstick.’

I sat there, looking at the stick on the table until Azizah reminded me that my retirement ceremony was about to begin. She helped me into my robe and together we went out to the corridor. She walked ahead of me as usual to give the advocates warning that *Puan Hakim* was on her way – they always used to watch her face to gauge my mood. Following behind her, I realised that this would be the last time I would make this walk from my chambers to my courtroom.

Built nearly a century ago, the Supreme Court building in Kuala Lumpur had the solidity of a colonial structure, erected to outlast empires. The high ceilings and the thick walls kept the air cool even on the hottest of days. My courtroom was large enough to seat forty, perhaps even fifty people, but on this Tuesday afternoon the advocates who had not arrived early had to huddle by the doors at the back. Azizah had informed me about the numbers attending the ceremony but I was still taken aback when I took my place on the bench beneath the portraits of the Agong and his Queen. Silence spread across the courtroom when Abdullah Mansor, the Chief Justice, entered and sat down next to me. He leaned over and spoke into my ear. ‘It’s not too late to reconsider.’

‘You never give up, do you?’ I said, giving him a brief smile.

‘And you never change your mind.’ He sighed. ‘I know. But can’t you stay on? You only have two more years to go.’

Looking at him, I recalled the afternoon in his chambers when I told him of my decision to take early retirement. We had fought about many things over the years – points of law or the way he administered the courts – but I had always respected his intellect, his sense of fairness and his loyalty to us judges. That afternoon

was the only time he had ever lost his composure with me. Now there was only sadness in his face. I would miss him.

Peering over his spectacles, Abdullah began recounting my life to the audience, braiding sentences in English into his speech, ignoring the sign in the courtroom dictating the use of the Malay language in court.

‘Judge Teoh was only the second woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court,’ he said. ‘She has served on this Bench for the past fourteen years. . .’

Through the high, dusty windows I saw the corner of the cricket field across the road and, further away, the Selangor Club, its mock-Tudor facade reminding me of the bungalows in Cameron Highlands. The clock in the tower above the central portico chimed, its languid pulse beating through the walls of the courtroom. I turned my wrist slightly and checked the time: eleven minutes past three; the clock was, as ever, reliably out, its punctuality stolen by lightning years ago.

‘. . . few of us here today are aware that she was a prisoner in a Japanese internment camp when she was nineteen,’ said Abdullah.

The advocates murmured among themselves, observing me with heightened interest. I had never spoken of the three years I had spent in the camp to anyone. I tried not to think about it as I went about my days, and mostly I succeeded. But occasionally the memories still found their way in, through a sound I heard, a word someone uttered, or a smell I caught in the street.

‘When the war ended,’ the Chief Justice continued, ‘Judge Teoh worked as a research clerk in the War Crimes Tribunal while waiting for admission to read Law at Girton College, Cambridge. After being called to the Bar, she returned to Malaya in 1949 and worked as a Deputy Public Prosecutor for nearly two years. . .’

In the front row below me sat four elderly British advocates, their suits and ties almost as old as them. Along with a number of rubber planters and civil servants, they had chosen to stay on in Malaya after its independence, thirty years ago. These aged Englishmen had the forlorn air of pages torn from an old and forgotten book.

The Chief Justice cleared his throat and I looked at him. ‘. . . Judge Teoh was not due to retire for another two years, so

you will no doubt imagine our surprise when, only two months ago, she told us she intended to leave the Bench. Her written judgments are known for their clarity and elegant turns-of-phrase. . .’ His words flowered, became more laudatory. I was far away in another time, thinking of Aritomo and his garden in the mountains.

The speech ended. I brought my mind back to the courtroom, hoping that no one had noticed the potholes in my attention; it would not do to appear distracted at my own retirement ceremony.

I gave a short, simple address to the audience and then Abdullah brought the ceremony to a close. I had invited a few well-wishers from the Bar Council, my colleagues and the senior partners in the city’s larger law firms for a small reception in my chambers. A reporter asked me a few questions and took photographs. After the guests left, Azizah went around the room, gathering up the cups and the paper plates of half eaten food.

‘Take those curry puffs with you,’ I said, ‘and that box of cakes. Don’t waste food.’

‘I know-*lah*. You always tell me that.’ She packed the food away and said, ‘Is there anything else you need?’

‘You can go home. I’ll lock up.’ It was what I usually said to her at the end of every court term. ‘And thank you, Azizah. For everything.’

She shook the creases out of my black robe, hung it on the coat-stand and turned to look at me. ‘It wasn’t easy working for you all these years, Puan, but I’m glad I did.’ Tears gleamed in her eyes. ‘The lawyers – you were difficult with them, but they’ve always respected you. You listened to them.’

‘That’s the duty of a judge, Azizah. To listen. So many judges seem to forget that.’

‘Ah, but you weren’t listening earlier, when Tuan Mansor was going on and on. I was looking at you.’

‘He was talking about my life, Azizah.’ I smiled at her. ‘Hardly much there I don’t know about already, don’t you think?’

‘Did the *orang Jepun* do that to you?’ She pointed to my hands. ‘Maaf,’ she apologised, ‘but . . . I was always too scared to ask you. You know, I’ve never seen you without your gloves.’

I rotated my left wrist slowly, turning an invisible doorknob. 'One good thing about growing old,' I said, looking at the part of the glove where two of its fingers had been cut off and stitched over. 'Unless they look closely, people probably think I'm just a vain old woman, hiding my arthritis.'

We stood there, both of us uncertain of how to conduct our partings. Then she reached out and grasped my other hand, pulling me into an embrace before I could react, enveloping me like dough around a stick. Then she let go of me, collected her handbag and left.

I looked around. The bookshelves were bare. My things had already been packed away and sent to my house in Bukit Tunku, flotsam sucked back to sea by the departing tide. Boxes of Malayan Law Journals and All England Reports were stacked in a corner for donation to the Bar Library. Only a single shelf of MLJs remained, their spines stamped in gold with the year in which the cases were reported. Azizah had promised to come in tomorrow and pack them away.

I went to a picture hanging on a wall, a watercolour of the home I had grown up in. My sister had painted it. It was the only work of hers I owned, the only one I had ever come across after the war. I lifted it off its hook and set it down by the door.

The stacks of manila folders tied with pink ribbons that normally crowded my desk had been reassigned to the other judges; the table seemed larger than usual when I sat down in my chair. The wooden stick was still lying where I had left it. Beyond the half-opened windows, dusk was summoning the crows to their roosts. The birds thickened the foliage of the angasana trees lining the road, filling the streets with their babble. Lifting the telephone receiver, I began dialling and then stopped, unable to recall the rest of the numbers. I paged through my address book, rang the main house in Majuba Tea Estate and asked to speak to Frederik Pretorius when a maid answered. I did not have to wait long.

'Yun Ling?' he said when he came on the line, sounding slightly out of breath.

'I'm coming to Yugiri.'

Silence pressed down on the line. 'When?'

'This Friday.' I paused. It had been seven months since we had

last spoken to each other. 'Will you tell Ah Cheong to have the house ready for me?'

'He's always kept it ready for you,' Frederik replied. 'But I'll tell him. Stop by at the estate on the way. We can have some tea. I'll drive you to Yugiri.'

'I haven't forgotten how to get there, Frederik.'

Another stretch of silence connected us. 'The monsoon's over, but there's still some rain. Drive carefully.' He hung up.

The call to prayer unwound from the minarets of the Jamek Mosque across the river to echo through the city. I listened to the courthouse empty itself. The sounds were so familiar to me that I had stopped paying attention to them years ago. The wheel of a trolley squeaked as someone – probably Rashid, the registrar's clerk – pushed the day's applications to the filing room. The telephone in another judge's chambers rang for a minute then gave up. The slam of doors echoed through the corridors; I had never realised how loud they sounded.

I picked up my briefcase and shook it once. It was lighter than usual. I packed my court robe into it. At the door I turned around to look at my chambers. I gripped the edge of the doorframe, realising that I would never again set foot in this room. The weakness passed. I switched off the lights but continued to stand there, gazing into the shadows. I picked up my sister's watercolour and closed the door, working the handle a few times to make sure it was properly locked. Then I made my way along the dimly-lit corridor. On one wall a gallery of former judges stared down at me, their faces changing from European to Malay and Chinese and Indian, from monochrome to colour. I passed the empty space where my portrait would soon be added. At the end of the passageway I went down the stairs. Instead of turning left towards the judges' exit to the car park, I went out to the courtyard garden.

This was the part of the court buildings I loved most. I would often come here to sit, to think through the legal problems of a judgment I was writing. Few of the judges ever came here and I usually had the place all to myself. Sometimes, if Karim, the gardener, happened to be working, I would speak with him for a short while, giving him advice on what to plant and what ought to be taken out. This evening I was alone.

The sprinklers came on, releasing the smell of the sun-roasted grass into the air. The leaves discarded by the guava tree in the centre of the garden had been raked into a pile. Behind the courts, the Gombak and Klang rivers plaited together, silting the air with the smell of earth scoured from the mountains in the Titiwangsa range up north. Most people in Kuala Lumpur couldn't bear the stench, especially when the river was running low between the monsoon seasons, but I had never minded that, in the heart of the city, I could smell the mountains over a hundred miles away.

I sat down on my usual bench and opened my senses to the stillness settling over the building, becoming a part of it.

After a while I stood up. There was something missing from the garden. Walking over to the mound of leaves, I grabbed a few handfuls and scattered them randomly over the lawn. Brushing off the bits of leaves sticking to my hands, I stepped away from the grass. Yes, it looked better now. Much better.

Swallows swooped from their nests in the eaves, the tips of their wings brushing past my head. I thought of a limestone cave I had once been to, high in the mountains. Carrying my briefcase and the watercolour, I walked out of the courtyard. In the sky above me, the last line of prayer from the mosque drifted away, leaving only silence where its echo had been.

Yugiri lay seven miles west of Tanah Rata, the second of the three main villages on the road going up to Cameron Highlands. I arrived there after a four-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur. I was in no hurry, stopping at various places along the way. Every few miles I would pass a roadside stall selling cloudy bottles of wild honey and blow-pipes and bunches of foul-smelling petai beans. The road had been widened considerably since I last used it, the sharper turns smoothened out, but there were too many cars and tour buses, too many incontinent lorries leaking gravel and cement as they made their way to another construction site in the highlands.

It was the last week of September, the rainy season hovering around the mountains. Entering Tanah Rata, the sight of the former Royal Army Hospital standing on a steep rise filled me

with a sense of familiar disquiet; Frederik had told me some time ago that it was now a school. A new hotel, with the inevitable mock-Tudor facade, towered behind it. Tanah Rata was no longer a village but a little town, its main street taken over by steam-boat restaurants and tour agencies and souvenir shops. I was glad to leave them all behind me.

The guard was closing the wrought iron gates of Majuba Tea Estate when I drove past. I kept to the main road for half a mile before realising that I had missed the turn-off to Yugiri. Annoyed with myself, I swung the car around, driving more slowly until I found the turning, hidden by advertisement boards. The laterite road ended a few minutes later at Yugiri's entrance. A Land Rover was parked by the road side. I stopped my car next to it and got out, kicking the stiffness from my legs.

The high wall protecting the garden was patched in moss and old water stains. Ferns grew from the cracks. Set into the wall was a door. Nailed by the doorpost was a wooden plaque, a pair of Japanese ideograms burned into it. Below these words was the garden's name in English: *Evening Mists*. I felt I was about to enter a place that existed only in the overlapping of air and water, light and time.

Looking above the top of the wall, my eyes followed the uneven treeline of the ridge rising behind the garden. I found the wooden viewing tower half hidden in the trees, like the crow's nest of a galleon that had foundered among the branches, trapped by a tide of leaves. A path threaded up into the mountains and for a few moments I stared at it, as if I might glimpse Aritomo walking home. Shaking my head, I pushed the door open, entered the garden and closed it behind me.

The sounds of the world outside faded away, absorbed into the leaves. I stood there, not moving. For a moment I felt that nothing had changed since I was last here, almost thirty-five years before – the scent of pine resin sticking to the air, the bamboo creaking and knocking in the breeze, the broken mosaic of sunlight scattered over the ground.

Guided by memory's compass, I began to walk into the garden. I made one or two wrong turns, but came eventually to the pond. I stopped, the twisting walk through the tunnel of trees

heightening the effect of seeing the open sky over the water.

Six tall, narrow stones huddled into a miniature limestone mountain range in the centre of the pond. On the opposite bank stood the pavilion, duplicated in the water so that it appeared like a paper lantern hanging in mid-air. A willow grew a few feet away from the pavilion's side, its branches sipping from the pond.

In the shallows, a grey heron cocked its head at me, one leg poised in the air, like the hand of a pianist who had forgotten the notes to his music. It dropped its leg a second later and speared its beak into the water. Was it a descendant of the one that had made its home here when I first came to Yugiri? Frederik had told me that there was always one in the garden – an unbroken chain of solitary birds. I knew it could not be the same bird from nearly forty years before but, as I watched it, I hoped that it was; I wanted to believe that by entering this sanctuary the heron had somehow managed to slip through the fingers of time.

To my right and at the top of an incline stood Aritomo's house. Lights shone from the windows, the kitchen chimney scribbling smoke over the treetops. A man appeared at the front door and walked down the slope towards me. He stopped a few paces away, perhaps to create a space for us to study one another. We are like every single plant and stone and view in the garden, I thought, the distance between one another carefully measured.

'I thought you'd changed your mind,' he said, closing the space between us.

'The drive was longer than I remembered.'

'Places seem further apart, don't they, the older we get.'

At sixty seven years old, Frederik Pretorius had the dignified air given off by an antique art work, secure in the knowledge of its own rarity and value. We had kept in touch over the years, meeting up for drinks or a meal whenever he came down to Kuala Lumpur, but I had always resisted his invitations to visit Cameron Highlands. In the last two or three years his trips to KL had tapered off. Long ago I had realised that he was the only close friend I would ever have.

'The way you were watching that bird just now,' he said, 'I felt you were looking back to the past.'

I turned to look at the heron again. The bird had moved further

out into the pond. Mist escaped from the water's surface, whispers only the wind could catch. 'I was thinking of the old days.'

'For a second or two there I thought you were about to fade away.' He stopped, then said, 'I wanted to call out to you.'

'I've retired from the Bench.' It was the first time I had said it aloud to another person. Something seemed to detach from inside me and crumble away, leaving me less complete than before.

'I saw it in yesterday's papers,' said Frederik.

'That photograph they took of me was dreadful, utterly dreadful.'

The lights in the garden came on, dizzying the flying insects. A frog croaked. A few other frogs took up the call and then more still until the air and earth vibrated with a thousand gargles.

'Ah Cheong's gone home,' said Frederik. 'He'll come tomorrow morning. I brought you some groceries. I imagine you haven't had time to go to the shops yet.'

'That's very thoughtful of you.'

'There's something I need to discuss with you. Perhaps tomorrow morning, if you're up to it?'

'I'm an early riser.'

'I haven't forgotten.' His eyes hovered over my face. 'You're going to be alright on your own?'

'I'll be fine. I'll see you tomorrow.'

He looked unconvinced, but nodded. Then he turned and walked away, taking the path I had just come along, and disappeared into the shadows beneath the trees.

In the pond, the heron shook out its wings, tested them a few times and flew off. It circled the area once, gliding past me. At the end of its loop the bird opened its wings wide and followed the trail of stars that were just appearing. I stood there, my face turned upwards, watching it dissolve into the twilight.

Returning to my bedroom, I remember the plate of papaya Ah Cheong brought me. I make myself eat the remaining slices, then unpack my bags and hang my clothes in the cupboard. In the last few years I have heard people complaining that the highlands' climate is no longer as cool as it used to be, but I decide to put on a cardigan anyway.

The house is dark when I emerge from my room, and I have to

remember my way along the twisting corridors. The tatami mats in the sitting room crackle softly when I walk on them, parched of oil from the press of bare soles. The doors to the verandah are open. Ah Cheong has placed a low, square table here, with thin rattan mats on each side of it. Below the verandah, five dark grey rocks, spaced apart, sit on a rectangular bed of gravel covered in leaves. One of the rocks is positioned further away from the others. Beyond this area, the ground slopes gently away to the edge of the pond.

Frederik arrives, looking unhappy about having to sit on the floor. He drops a manila folder onto the table and lowers his body into a cross-legged position, wincing as he makes himself comfortable on the mat.

‘Does it feel strange to be back here?’ he asks.

‘Everywhere I turn, I hear echoes of sounds made long ago.’

‘I hear them too.’

He unties the string around the folder and arranges a sheaf of papers on the table. ‘The designs for our latest range. This one here. . .’ a forefinger skates a sheet across the table’s lacquered surface to me, ‘. . . this is for the packaging.’

The emblem used in the illustrations is familiar; what initially appear to be the veins of a tealeaf transform into a detailed drawing of the valleys, with Majuba House mazed into the lines.

‘From the woodblock print Aritomo gave Magnus?’ I say.

‘I’d like to use it,’ Frederik says. ‘I’ll pay you, of course – royalties, I mean.’

Aritomo had bequeathed Yugiri and the copyright in all his literary and artistic works to me. With rare exceptions I have never allowed anyone to reproduce them. ‘Use it,’ I say. ‘I don’t want any payment.’

He does not hide his surprise.

‘How is Emily?’ I cut him off before he speaks. ‘She must be what, eighty-eight?’ I try to remember how old his aunt had been when I met her all those years ago.

‘She’ll have a fit if she hears that. She turned eighty-five this year.’ He hesitates. ‘She’s not well. Some days her memory would shame an elephant’s, but there are also days. . .’ His voice tapers away into a sigh.

‘I’ll see her once I’ve settled in.’ I know that Emily, like so many older Chinese, places great importance on having a younger person visit them first, to give them face.

‘You’d better. I’ve told her you’re back.’

I wave a hand out to the garden. ‘Your workers have been taking good care of Yugiri.’

‘Judges aren’t supposed to lie.’ The smile on Frederik’s face sinks away a second later. ‘We both know my boys don’t have the skills to maintain it. And besides – as I keep telling you – I honestly don’t have the knowledge – or the interest, or the time – to make sure they do their work properly. The garden needs your attention.’ He stops, then says, ‘By the way, I’ve decided to make some changes to Majuba’s garden.’

‘What kind of changes?’

‘I’ve hired a landscape gardener to help me,’ Frederik says. ‘Vimalya started her gardening service in Tanah Rata a year ago. She’s very much a fan of indigenous gardens.’

‘Following the trend.’ I do not bother to sieve the disdain from my voice.

His face twitches with annoyance. ‘We’re going back to everything nature intended. We’re using plants and trees native to the region. We’ll let them grow the way they would have done in the wild, with as little human assistance – or interference – as possible.’

‘You’re removing all the pine trees in Majuba? And the firs, the eucalyptuses . . . the roses, the irises . . . the . . . the strelitzias?’

‘They’re alien. All of them.’

‘So is every single tea bush here. So am I. And so are you, Mr Pretorius. Especially you.’

It is none of my concern, I know, but for almost sixty years, ever since Frederik’s uncle Magnus established Majuba Tea Estate, its formal gardens have been admired and loved. Visitors have been coming from all over the country to enjoy an English garden in the tropics. They walk among the meticulously shaped hedges and voluptuous flowerbeds, the herbaceous borders and the roses Emily planted. It pains me to hear that the garden is to be transformed, made to appear as though it forms part of the tropical rainforest crowding in around us – overgrown and unkempt and lacking any order.

‘I’ve told you before, a long time ago – Majuba’s gardens are too artificial. The older I get, the more I don’t believe in having nature controlled. Trees should be allowed to grow as they please.’ Frederik swings his gaze to the garden. ‘If it were up to me, all of this would be taken out.’

‘What is gardening but the controlling and perfecting of nature?’ I am aware my voice is rising. ‘When you talk about “indigenous gardening”, or whatever it’s called, you already have man involved. You dig out beds, you chop down trees, and you bring in seeds and cuttings. It all sounds very much planned to me.’

‘Gardens like Yugiri’s are deceptive. They’re false. Everything here has been thought out and shaped and built. We’re sitting in one of the most artificial places you can find.’

Sparrows rise from the grass into the trees, like fallen leaves returning to their branches. I think about those elements of gardening Frederik is opposed to, aspects so loved by the Japanese – the techniques of controlling nature, perfected over a thousand years. Was it because they lived in lands so regularly rocked by earthquakes and natural calamities that they sought to tame the world around them? My eyes move to the sitting room, to the bonsai of a pine tree that Ah Cheong has so faithfully looked after. The immense trunk the pine would have grown into is now constrained to a size that would not look out of place on a scholar’s desk, trained to the desired shape by copper wire coiled around its branches. There are some people, like Frederik, who might feel that such practices are misguided, like trying to wield Heaven’s powers on earth. And yet it was only in the carefully planned and created garden of Yugiri that I had found a sense of order and calm and even, for a brief moment of time, forgetfulness.

‘Someone is coming to see me this morning,’ I say. ‘From Tokyo. He’s going to look at Aritomo’s woodblock prints.’

‘You’re selling them? Are you short of money?’

His concern touches me, cools my anger. In addition to being a garden designer, Aritomo had also been a woodblock artist. After I admitted, in an unguarded moment during an interview, that he had left me a collection of his woodblock prints, connoisseurs in

Japan tried to convince me to part with them, or to put them on exhibition. I have always refused, much to their resentment; many of them have made it clear that they do not see me as their rightful owner.

‘Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji contacted me a year ago,’ I say. ‘He wanted to do a book on Aritomo’s prints. I declined to speak to him.’

Frederik’s eyebrows spring up. ‘But he’s coming here today?’

‘I’ve recently made enquiries about him. He’s a historian. A respected one. He’s written articles and books about his country’s actions in the war.’

‘Denying that certain things ever took place, I’m sure.’

‘He has a reputation for being objective.’

‘Why would a historian be interested in Aritomo’s art?’

‘Yoshikawa’s also an authority on Japanese wood-block prints.’

‘Have you read any of his books?’ Frederik asks.

‘They’re all in Japanese.’

‘You speak it, don’t you?’

‘I used to, just enough to get by. Speaking it is one thing, but reading it . . . that’s something else.’

‘In all these years,’ Frederik says, ‘all these years, you’ve never told me what the Japs did to you.’ His voice is mild, but I catch the seam of hurt buried in it.

‘What they did to me, they did to thousands of others.’

I trace the lines of the leaf on the tea packaging with my finger. ‘Aritomo once recited a poem to me, about a stream that had dried up.’ I think for a moment, then say, ‘*Though the water has stopped flowing, we still hear the whisper of its name.*’

‘It’s still hard for you isn’t it?’ Frederik says. ‘Even so long after his death.’

It never fails to disconcert me whenever I hear someone mention Aritomo’s ‘death’, even after all this time. ‘There are days when I think he’s still out there, wandering in the mountains, like one of the Eight Immortals of Taoist legend, a sage making his way home,’ I say. ‘But what amazes me is the fact that there are still people who keep coming here, just because they have heard the stories.’

‘You know, he lived here for – what, thirteen years? Fourteen?’

He walked the jungle trails almost every day. He knew them better than some of the forestry guides. How could he have gotten lost?

‘Even monkeys fall from trees.’ I strive to recall where I have heard this, but it eludes me. It will come back to me, I try to reassure myself. ‘Perhaps Aritomo wasn’t as familiar with the jungle as he thought he was.’ From within the house I hear the bell ringing as someone pulls the rope at the gate. ‘That should be Yoshikawa.’

Frederik presses his hands on the table and gets up with an old man’s grunt. I remain seated, watching the marks his palms have left on the table fade away. ‘I’d like you to be here, Frederik, when I speak to him.’

‘I have to rush. Full day ahead of me.’

Slowly I unfold my body until I am eye to eye with him. ‘Please, Frederik.’

He looks at me. After a moment he nods.

Chapter Two

The historian has arrived precisely at the appointed time, and I wonder if he has heard of how I dealt with advocates who appeared late in my court. Ah Cheong shows him to the verandah a few minutes later.

‘Professor Yoshikawa,’ I greet him in English.

‘Please call me Tatsuji,’ he says, giving me a deep bow, which I do not return. I nod towards Frederik. ‘Mr Pretorius is a friend of mine.’

‘Ah! From Majuba Tea Estate,’ Tatsuji says, glancing at me before bowing to Frederik.

I indicate Tatsuji to the customary seat for an honoured guest, giving him the best view of the garden. He is in his mid-sixties, dressed in a light grey linen suit, a white cotton shirt and a pale blue tie. Old enough to have fought in the war, I think; an almost subconscious assessment I apply to every Japanese man I have met. His eyes roam the low ceiling and the walls and the wooden posts before looking to the garden. ‘Yugiri,’ he murmurs.

Ah Cheong appears with a tray of tea and a small brass bell. I pour the tea into our cups. Tatsuji looks away when I catch him staring at my hands. ‘Your reputation for refusing to talk to anyone in our circles is well known, Judge Teoh,’ he says when I place a teacup before him. ‘To be honest, I was not surprised when you refused to see me, but I *was* taken aback when you changed your mind.’

‘I have since discovered your impressive reputation.’

‘Notorious would be a better description,’ Tatsuji replies, looking pleased nonetheless.

‘Professor Yoshikawa has the habit of airing unpopular subjects in public,’ I explain to Frederik.

‘Every time there is a movement to change our history textbooks, to remove any reference to the crimes committed by our troops, every time a government minister visits the Yasukuni shrine,’ Tatsuji says, ‘I write letters to the newspapers objecting to it.’

‘Your own people. . .’ Frederik says, ‘how have they reacted to that?’

For a few moments Tatsuji does not speak. ‘I have been assaulted four times in the last ten years,’ he replies at last. ‘I have received death threats. But still I go on radio shows and television programmes. I tell everyone that we cannot deny our past. We have to make amends. We have to.’

I bring us back to the reason for our meeting. ‘Nakamura Aritomo has been unfashionable for so long. Even when he was still alive,’ I say. ‘Why would you want to write about him now?’

‘When I was younger, I had a friend,’ Tatsuji says. ‘He owned a few pieces of Aritomo-sensei’s *ukiyo-e*. He always enjoyed telling people that they were made by the Emperor’s gardener.’ The historian kisses the rim of his cup and makes an appreciative noise. ‘Excellent tea.’

‘From Majuba estate,’ I tell him.

‘I must remember to buy some,’ Tatsuji tells Frederik.

‘Ooky what? The stuff Aritomo made?’ Frederik says.

‘Woodblock prints,’ Tatsuji replies.

‘Did you bring them?’ I interrupt him. ‘Those prints your friend owned?’

‘They were destroyed in an air-raid, along with his house.’ He waits, and when I do not say anything he continues, ‘Because of my friend, I became interested in Nakamura Aritomo. There is nothing authoritative written on his artworks, or his life after he left Japan; I decided to write something.’

‘Yun Ling doesn’t just give anyone permission to use Aritomo’s artworks, you know,’ Frederik says.

‘I’m aware that Aritomo-sensei left everything he owned to you, Judge Teoh,’ Tatsuji says.

‘You sent this to me.’ I place the wooden stick on the table.

‘You know what it is?’ he asks.

‘It’s the handle of a tattooing needle,’ I reply, ‘used before tattooists switched to electric needles.’

‘Aritomo-sensei produced a completely different type of artwork, one he never disclosed to the public.’ Tatsuji reaches across the table and picks up the handle. His fingers are slender and his nails, I notice, manicured. ‘He was a *horimono* artist.’

‘A what?’ Frederik says, his cup halted halfway to his lips. His hand has a slight tremor. When was it that I began noticing these little signs of age in people around me?

‘Aritomo-sensei was more than the Emperor’s gardener.’ Tatsuji shapes the knot of his tie with his thumb. ‘He was also a *horoshi*, a tattoo artist.’

I straighten my back.

‘There has always been a close link between the woodblock artist and the *horimono* master,’ Tatsuji continues. ‘They dip their buckets into the same well for inspiration.’

‘And what well is that?’ I ask.

‘A book,’ he says. ‘A novel from China, translated into Japanese in the eighteenth century. *Suikoden*. It became wildly popular when it was published.’

‘Like one of those fads that regularly drives your schoolgirls into a frenzy,’ Frederik remarks.

‘It was much more than that,’ Tatsuji says, raising a forefinger at Frederik before turning to me. ‘I prefer that we speak in private, Judge Teoh. If we can arrange to meet another time. . .’

Frederik moves to get up, but I shake my head at him. ‘What makes you so certain that Aritomo was a tattoo artist, Tatsuji?’ I say.

The historian glances at Frederik then looks at me. ‘A man I once knew had a tattoo on his body.’ He stops for a few seconds, gazing at emptiness. ‘He told me it had been done by Aritomo-sensei.’

‘And you believed him.’

Tatsuji stares into my eyes and I am struck by the pain in them. ‘He was my friend.’

‘The same friend who had the collection of Aritomo’s woodblock prints?’ I ask. Tatsuji nods. ‘Then you should have brought him here with you today.’

‘He passed away . . . some years ago.’

For an instant I see Aritomo’s reflection on the surface of the table. I have to restrain from turning around to see if he is standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. I blink once, and he is gone. ‘I agreed to see you on the matter of Aritomo’s woodblock prints,’ I remind Tatsuji. ‘Are you still interested in them?’

‘You will let me use his *ukiyo-e*?’

‘We’ll discuss which of his prints will go into your book once you’ve finished examining them. But there will be no mention of tattoos supposedly created by him.’ I hold up my hand as Tatsuji is about to interrupt. ‘If you breach any of my terms – any of them – I will make sure all copies of your book are pulped.’

‘The Japanese people have a right to appreciate Aritomo-sensei’s works.’

I point to my chest. ‘I will decide what the Japanese people have a right to.’ I get to my feet, wincing at my rusting joints. The historian stands up to assist me, but I brush his hand away. ‘I’ll get all the prints together. We’ll meet again in a few days’ time for you to look through them.’

‘How many pieces are there?’

‘I have no idea. Twenty or thirty perhaps.’

‘You have never looked at them?’

‘Only a few.’

‘I am staying at the Smokehouse Hotel.’ The historian writes down the telephone number on a piece of paper and gives it to me. ‘May I see the garden?’

‘It hasn’t been properly looked after.’ I ring the brass bell on the tray. ‘My housekeeper will show you out.’

The day is turning out to be cloudless, with a strong, clear light pouring into the garden. The leaves of the maple tree by the side of the house have begun to turn, soon to become heavy with red. For some inexplicable reason this maple has always defied the lack of changing seasons in the highlands. I lean against a wooden post, my knuckles kneading the pain in my hip. It will take me a while to get used to sitting in the Japanese style again. From the corner of my eye I catch Frederik watching me.

‘I don’t trust that man, whatever his reputation,’ he says. ‘You should let other experts look at the prints as well.’

‘I don’t have much time here.’

‘But I’d hoped you’d stay for a while,’ he says. ‘There’s our new tea-room I want to show you. The views are magnificent. You can’t leave again so soon.’ He looks at me and a slow realisation slackens his face. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

‘Something in my brain, something that shouldn’t be there.’ I pull my cardigan tighter over my body. I sense him waiting for me to explain. ‘I’ve been having problems with names. There were occasions when I couldn’t think of the words I wanted to use.’

His hand brushes the air. ‘I have those moments too. That’s just age catching up with us.’

‘This is different,’ I say. He looks at me, and I wonder if I should have kept quiet about it. ‘Sitting in court one afternoon, all of a sudden I couldn’t make head or tail of what I had written.’

‘The doctors, what did they say?’

‘The neurosurgeons ran their tests. They told me what I had suspected. I’m losing my ability to read and write, to understand language, any language. In a year – perhaps more, probably less – I won’t be able to express my thoughts. I’ll be spouting gibberish. And what people say, and the words I see – on the page, on street signs, everywhere – will be unintelligible to me.’ For a few seconds I am silent. ‘My mental competence will deteriorate. Dementia will shortly follow, unhinging my mind.’

Frederik stares at me. ‘Doctors can cure anything these days.’

‘I don’t want to discuss this, Frederik. And keep this to yourself.’ My palm stops him, my palm with its two stubs. A moment later I close my three fingers and draw them back, holding them tight in a bud. I feel as though they have captured something intangible from the air. ‘The time will come when I lose all my faculties . . . perhaps even my memories,’ I say, keeping my voice calm with an effort.

‘Write it down,’ he says. ‘Write it all down, the memories that are most important to you. It shouldn’t be difficult – it’ll be like writing one of your judgments.’

I glance sidelong at him. ‘What do you know about my judgments?’

He gives me an embarrassed smile. 'My lawyers have instructions to send a copy to me, every time the Law Reports publish them. You write well – your judgements are clear and engaging. I can still remember the case about the cabinet minister who used black magic to murder his mistress. You really should compile them into a book.' The lines on his forehead deepen. 'You once quoted an English judge. Didn't he say that words are the tools of a lawyer's trade?'

'Soon I won't be able to use those tools anymore.'

'I'll read them to you,' he says. 'Whenever you want to hear your own words again, I'll read them aloud to you.'

'Don't you understand what I've been trying to tell you? By then I won't be able to know what anyone says to me!' He doesn't flinch from my anger, but the sorrow in his eyes is unbearable to look at. 'You'd better go,' I say, pushing myself away from the post. My movements feel slow, heavy. 'I've already made you late.'

He glances at his watch. 'It's not important. Just some journalists I have to show around the estate, charm them into writing something complimentary.'

'That shouldn't be too difficult.'

A smile skims across his face, capsizing an instant later. He wants to say something more, but I shake my head. He takes the three low steps down from the verandah, then slowly turns around to face me. All of sudden he looks like an old, old man. 'What are you going to do?'

'I am going for a walk.'

Ah Cheong hands a walking stick to me at the front door of the house. I shake my head, then take it from him. The stick has a comfortable heft. I look at it for a moment and then return it to him. Three or four steps later I stop and glance back over my shoulder. He is still standing there in the doorway, looking at me. I feel his eyes pinned on me all the way until I reach the opposite side of the pond. When I look back across the water, he has gone back inside the house.

The air is clean, as if it has never been breathed by any living thing. After the clammy heat of Kuala Lumpur, the change is

welcome. It is almost noon, but the sun has slunk behind the clouds.

Lotus pads tile the surface of the pond. There are too many of them; I had not noticed it the previous evening when I arrived. The hedges on the opposite side of the pond had originally been shaped to resemble the waves of an ocean surging to the shore, but they have not been properly clipped and their lines are blurred. The pavilion's roof beams are sagging. The entire structure seems to be melting, losing the memory of its shape. Leaves and dead insects and bark peelings cover the floor. Something slithers among them and I step back.

The track leading into the garden is paved with rings of slate cut from drill cores discarded from the gold mines of Raub. Each turn in the path reveals a different view; at no point is the entire garden revealed, making it appear more extensive than it actually is. Ornaments lie half-hidden among the overgrown lallang grass: a granite torso; a sandstone Buddha's head with his features smoothened by mist and rain; rocks with unusual shapes and striations. Stone lanterns, their eaves curtained with tattered spider webs, squat among the curling ferns. Yugiri was designed to look old from the first stone Aritomo set down, and the illusion of age he had created has been transformed into reality.

Frederik's workers have been looking after the place, following the instructions I have given them. The garden has been maintained by untrained hands: branches that should have been left to grow pruned away; a view that should have been obscured opened up; a path widened without consideration to the overall harmony of the garden. Even the wind streaming through the shrubs sounds wrong because the undergrowth has been allowed to grow too densely and too high.

The omissions and errors are like the noise generated by a collection of badly tuned musical instruments. Aritomo once told me that of all the gardens he created, this one meant the most to him.

Halfway in my walk through the garden, I stop, turn around and head back to the house.

The fourteenth-century bronze Buddha in the study has not grown older; his face is unmarked by the cares of the world. Ah Cheong

has opened the windows to air the room all day, but the smell of mildew from the books on the shelves ages the twilight filling up the house.

The feeling that something was wrong with me surfaced five or six months ago. I was often awakened by headaches in the night, and I began to tire easily. There were days when I could not summon up any interest in my work. My concerns sharpened into fear when I began to forget names and words. It was not merely the unfolding of age, I suspected, but something more. I was frail when I had emerged from the slave-labour camp, and my health had never recovered completely. I had forced myself to pick up the life I had known before the war. Being an advocate, and later on, a judge, had given me solace; I had found enjoyment in working with words, in applying the law. For over forty years I had succeeded in staving off this exhaustion of the body, but I had always feared that a day would come when there was nothing left to be depleted from me. What I had not expected was how soon, how swiftly that moment had arrived.

I have become a collapsing star, pulling everything around it, even the light, into an ever-expanding void.

Once I lose all ability to communicate with the world outside myself, nothing will be left but what I remember. My memories will be like a sandbar, cut off from the shore by the incoming tide. In time they will become submerged, inaccessible to me. The prospect terrifies me. For what is a person without memories? A ghost, trapped between worlds, without an identity, with no future, no past.

Frederik's suggestion that I write down the things I do not want to forget has rooted itself into the crevices of my mind. It is futile, I know, but a part of me wants to make sure that, when the time comes, I will still have something that gives me the possibility, however meagre, to orient myself, to help me determine what is real.

Sitting at Aritomo's desk, I realise that there are fragments of my life that I do not want to lose, if only because I still have not found the knot to tie them up with.

When I have forgotten everything else, will I finally have the clarity to see what Aritomo and I have been to each other? If I can

still read my own words by then, with no knowledge of who had set them down onto the page, will the answers come to me?

Outside, the mountains have been drawn into the garden, becoming a part of it. Aritomo had been a master of *shakkei*, the art of Borrowed Scenery, taking elements and views from outside a garden and making them integral to his creation.

A memory drifts by. I reach for it, as if I am snatching at a leaf spiralling down from a high branch. I have to. Who knows if it will ever come back to me again?

During the Emergency, some of the people who were given a private tour of Majuba Tea Estate would also ask to see Yugiri. And sometimes Aritomo allowed it. On such occasions, I would be waiting for them at the main entrance. Most of the visitors were senior government officials taking a holiday with their wives in Cameron Highlands before going back to waging war on the communist-terrorists hiding in the jungles. They had heard about the garden in the mountains and wanted to see it for themselves, to boast to their friends that they had been one of the privileged few to have walked in it. Murmurs of anticipation would warm the air as I welcomed the group. ‘What does Yugiri mean?’ someone – usually one of the wives – would ask, and I would answer them, ‘Evening Mists.’

And if the hour was right and the light willing, they might even catch a glimpse of Aritomo, dressed in his grey *yukata* and *hakama*, raking out lines on white gravel, moving as if he were practising calligraphy on stone. Observing the expressions on the visitors’ faces, I knew that some, if not all of them, were wondering if their eyes had made a mistake, if they were seeing something that should not have been there. That same notion had entered my mind the first time I saw Aritomo.

He never accompanied these people on the tour of his garden, preferring that I entertain them. But he would stop what he was doing and talk to the visitors when I introduced him to them. I was certain that the questions had all been asked before, over the long years since he had first come to these mountains. Nevertheless, he would answer them patiently, with no hint of weariness that I could detect. ‘That is correct,’ he would tell them, prefacing his answers with a slight bow. ‘I was the

Emperor's gardener. But that was in a different lifetime.'

Invariably, someone would enquire as to why he had given it all up to come to Malaya. A puzzled look would spread across Aritomo's face, as though he had never been asked that particular question before. I would catch the flit of pain in his eyes and, for a few moments, we would hear nothing except the birds calling out in the trees. Then he would give a short laugh and say, 'Perhaps someday, before I cross the floating bridge of dreams, I will discover the reason. I will tell you then.'

On a few occasions one of the visitors – usually someone who had fought in the war, or, like me, had been imprisoned in one of the Japanese camps – would grow belligerent; I could always tell who these would be, even before they opened their mouths to speak. Aritomo's eyes would become arctic, the ends of his mouth curving downwards. But he would always remain polite, bracketing all his answers with a bow before walking away from us.

Despite the intrusive questions, I had always felt there were times when Aritomo liked to think that he, too, was one of the reasons people came to visit Yugiri; that they hoped for a sight of him, as though he were a rare and unusual wild orchid not to be found anywhere else in Malaya. Perhaps that was why, in spite of his dislike of them, Aritomo had never stopped me from introducing the visitors to him, and why he was always dressed in his traditional clothes whenever he knew a group would be coming to see his garden.

Ah Cheong has already gone home. The house is still. Leaning back in the chair, I close my eyes. Images fly across my vision. A flag flutters in the wind. A water wheel turns. A pair of cranes takes off over a lake, hauling themselves with beating wings higher and higher into the sky, heading into the sun.

The world seems different, somehow, when I open my eyes again. Clearer, more defined, but also smaller.

It will not be very much different from writing a judgment, I tell myself. I will find the words I require; they are nothing more than the tools that I have used all of my life. From the chambers of my memory I will draw out and set down all recollections of the time I spent with Aritomo. I will dance to the music of words, for one more time.

Through the windows I watch the mists thicken, wiping away the mountains borrowed by the garden. Are the mists, too, an element of shakkei incorporated by Aritomo? I wonder. To use not only the mountains, but the wind, the clouds, the ever changing light? Did he borrow from heaven itself?