

Fiction Excerpt 1: The Samurai's Daughter: A Tale of the Oki Islands

This story is set during the feudal period of Japanese history, around the year 1300 CE.

Many years ago in Japan there lived a samurai named Oribe Shima. By some misfortune, Oribe Shima had offended the emperor and been banished to one of the Oki Islands, a group of rocky islands off the coast of Japan.

Oribe had a beautiful daughter, of whom he was as fond as she was of him. Her name was Tokoyo, and she was eighteen years old. When Oribe was sent away, Tokoyo wept from morning till night, and sometimes from night till morning. At last, unable to stand the separation any longer, she decided to risk everything to try to reach her father, or else die in the attempt. She had learned many of the virtues of the samurai, including bravery and loyalty.

Tokoyo sold everything she had and set out on her long journey. After many days of travel, she arrived in the province that was closest to the Oki Islands. She tried to persuade the local fishermen to take her to the islands, but she had spent most of her money, and, moreover, no one was allowed to land on the islands.

The fishermen laughed at Tokoyo and told her to go home. But the brave girl was not to be put off. She spent the last of her money on some food and supplies. That very night she went down to the beach, found an abandoned boat, and pushed it with difficulty into the water. Then she started sculling. After several hours, Tokoyo reached the Oki Islands. Cold and exhausted, she stumbled ashore and, finding a sheltered spot, lay down to sleep.

In the morning, she ate the last of her food and began asking if anyone knew of her father's whereabouts. The first person she met was a fisherman. Tokoyo asked the fisherman if he knew her father.

"No," he said. "I have never heard of your father. Take my advice: do not ask for him! If he has been banished, it may lead you to trouble and him to death!"

Poor Tokoyo wandered from one place to another, asking about her father but never hearing any news of him. One evening she came to a little shrine near the edge of the ocean. After bowing before a statue of the Buddha and imploring his help, Tokoyo lay down, intending to pass the night there, for it was a peaceful, holy spot and well-sheltered from the winds.

Tokoyo had slept for a few hours when she was awakened by the sound of a girl weeping and wailing. As she looked up, she saw a young girl sobbing bitterly.

Beside the girl stood a man who seemed to be the priest who kept the shrine. He was clapping his hands and mumbling a prayer. Both the man and the girl were dressed in white. When the prayer was over, the priest led the girl to the edge of the rocks. He moved to push her over the edge and into the sea, when Tokoyo ran and grabbed the girl's arm. The old priest looked surprised but was not angry.

"It would seem that you are a stranger to our island," said the priest. "Otherwise you would know that this unpleasant business is not at all to my liking. On this island we are cursed by an evil god called Yofuné-Nushi. He lives at the bottom of the sea, and once a year, demands a girl fifteen years of age. This sacrifice must be made on this morning every year. If we do not do this, Yofuné-Nushi becomes angry and causes great storms, which drown many of our fishermen. By sacrificing one young girl each year, we can avoid this evil. For the last seven years, it has been my sad duty to perform the ceremony, and it is that which you have interrupted."

Tokoyo listened to the priest, and then said, "Holy priest, if these things be as you say, then it seems there is sorrow everywhere. Let this young girl go. She may stop her weeping, for I am more sorrowful than she. I will willingly take her place and offer myself to Yofuné-Nushi. I am the sorrowing daughter of Oribe Shima, who has been exiled to this island. I came here to find my father, but he is so closely guarded that I cannot get to him, or even find out where he has been hidden. My heart is broken, and I have no desire to go on living. Please take this letter, which is addressed to my father. All that I ask, is that you try to deliver it to him."

Tokoyo took the white robe off the younger girl and put it on her own body. She knelt before the figure of Buddha and prayed. Then she pulled out a small, beautiful dagger, which had belonged to one of her ancestors. She placed the dagger between her teeth and dove into the roaring sea. The priest looked after her with wonder and admiration, and the girl with thankfulness.

When she was young, Tokoyo had spent many days diving with the older women in her village, holding her breath, and swimming down to the ocean floor to look for the valuable pearls and oyster shells. Because of this, she was a perfect swimmer. She swam down through the clear water, which was illuminated by bright moonlight and sparkling with schools of silvery fish. At last she reached the bottom, where she found an underwater cave. As Tokoyo peeped in, she thought she saw a man seated in the cave. Fearing nothing, willing to fight and die, she approached, holding her dagger ready to strike. Tokoyo took the man for Yofuné-Nushi, the evil god of whom the priest had spoken. The god gave no sign of life,

however, and Tokoyo soon saw that it was not a god, but only a wooden statue of the emperor, the man who had exiled her father. At first she was angry and wanted to strike the statue with her weapon; but, what would be the point of that? She decided it would be better to rescue the statue.

Tokoyo took hold of the statue and was about to carry it to the surface, when a horrible creature appeared in front of her. It was pale and scaly, and shaped like a snake, but with a head and claws like a dragon. It was more than twenty feet long, and its eyes burned with hatred.

Tokoyo gripped her dagger with renewed determination, feeling sure that this was the evil god, Yofuné-Nushi. No doubt, Yofuné-Nushi took Tokoyo for the girl that was sacrificed to him. Well, she would show him who she was, kill him if she could, and so put an end to the sacrifices.

The monster approached, and Tokoyo braced herself for combat. When the creature was within six feet of her, she ducked sideways and struck out his right eye. Now the monster was half blind and clumsy in his movements, so the brave and agile Tokoyo was able to strike him again, this time on the left side, near the heart. Yofuné-Nushi lurched forward, gave a hideous gurgling shriek, and sank lifeless to the ocean floor. Tokoyo placed her dagger between her teeth, took the monster in one hand and the statue in the other, and swam to the surface.

In the meantime the priest and the young girl were still gazing into the water where Tokoyo had disappeared. Suddenly, they noticed a struggling body rising awkwardly toward the surface. The young girl cried, "Why, holy father, it is the girl who took my place and dove into the sea! I recognize my white clothes. She seems to have a man and a huge fish with her."

The priest also realized that it was Tokoyo who was coming to the surface, and he dashed down the rocks and pulled her ashore. He lugged the hideous monster up onto the shore and placed the carved image of the emperor on a rock beyond reach of the waves. Soon other people arrived, and everyone began talking about the brave girl who had killed Yofuné-Nushi.

The priest told the story to the lord who ruled the island, and he, in turn, reported the matter to the emperor. The emperor had been suffering from a strange disease that his doctors could not cure, but as soon as the statue of him was recovered from the lair of Yofuné-Nushi, he recovered. Then, it was clear to him that he had been laboring under the curse of someone he had banished to the Oki Islands—someone who had carved a statue of him, put a curse on the statue, and

sunk it in the sea. Now that the statue had been recovered, the curse had been broken. On hearing that the girl who had cured him was the daughter of Oribe Shima, the emperor ordered the noble samurai released from prison immediately.

Now that Yofuné-Nushi had been slain, the islanders were no longer afraid of storms and bad weather, and no more girls were offered to the evil god. Tokoyo and her father were reunited and returned to their homeland, where they lived happily ever after.