The Lovers' Room

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Extract

Chapter One

Tokyo—autumn 1945

The autumn wind was cold and the runway slippery with rain and spilt fuel. Giant American transports landed at regular intervals, avoiding the bomb crater in the middle of the tarmac, then slowed and queued to deposit their cargoes before flying out again. As soon as the doors were opened Japanese ground workers began unloading crates and boxes of food, clothes, munitions, paper, typewriters, ink and rubber stamps.

They worked quickly, supervised by healthy, well-fed American soldiers. Calls of 'Hubba, hubba' were heard in relays as the unloading progressed. In the middle distance a detail of soldiers walked to a line of waiting buses, their uniforms pressed and cleaned, boots and buttons polished. Their pea-green helmets shone like the oily water on the runway.

Atsugi had been a kamikaze base during the last months of the war. All around the edges of the airfield, the shells of Japanese fighter planes, bombed on the tarmac before they could take off, were beginning to rust where they had been bulldozed and dumped.

Spin stood beside the transport that had just delivered him, his bag at his feet. He watched the Japanese workers, most of whom were still dressed in uniforms displaying their former rank. They worked in silence, staying stooped even when they ran back to the opened doors of the planes.

After an intensive course at London University, Spin had spent the war translating Japanese documents decoding German diplomatic messages. For most of the time he had been cooped up in a basement office near Piccadilly, watch-

ing the passing feet of commuters on the pavement above him and listening to the hushed conversations of the cryptanalysts with whom he shared the office space. Consequently, he knew the uniform of the Japanese soldier only through newsreels. From the darkness of the city's cinemas he had watched that uniform riding on bicycles, five abreast, along solid, British-built roads down the Malay Peninsula, standing in triumph outside Raffles Hotel and entering Manila. Week by week the newsreels followed their progress across a black-and-white map of the Pacific.

He watched that once-proud army now as it ran back and forth, bowing and obedient, carrying cardboard cases and wooden boxes, gathering the rubbish and papers blown about the airfield. This is the way an Occupation begins. For most of the Occupation's soldiers it was a dull job, a bureaucratic procedure. This is the way it begins, he thought. This is the way one country occupies another, almost indifferently. Atsugi was over twenty miles from Tokyo. Spin sat with the private assigned to look after him on a grimy bus with most of its windows broken. The wind blew through in gusts and they lifted their coat collars. As they neared the centre of the city and turned off towards the Imperial Palace, the private pointed towards a large, six-storey building untouched by the bombings. Spin, gazing at the palace walls, turned when the young man spoke.

'That was the Dai-Ichi Insurance Company. It's headquarters these days.'

Spin looked around at the imposing grey building on his right. It was noticeable that most of the city centre had survived the incendiary bombings. Some modern structures near the Imperial Palace had suffered no visible damage, not only because the buildings were made of brick but also, as Spin well knew, because the Allied strategy had long been to preserve the palace and the emperor inside it. Even before the war was over, the post-war politics had already been planned.

There were signs of re-emerging social life on the streets: department stores open, the odd café, and street stalls selling noodles, dolls and trinkets. He watched one of the noodle vendors standing by his stall, looking about and shuffling his feet in the gathering chill. A young man—Spin's own age, he guessed—he was dressed in army trousers with a civilian coat. Six months before he might have been fighting on one of the islands. Or had he spent the war in the suburbs of Tokyo, watching the city burn and waiting for an invasion that never came?

He turned from the passing cityscape to the American private, whom he guessed to be no more than eighteen or nineteen.

'Where are you from?' he asked him.

'Montana,' the private answered, looking out through the broken windows. 'Butte, Montana.'

'You're a long way from home,' Spin commented.

'Yeah. Everybody's a long way from home in this place.'

'You like it here?'

'It's spooky. I mean, they're such nice people. Aren't they? Nice folks,' he added, shaking his head and studying the backs of his hands. 'They'll go out of their way for you. Makes you wonder what it was all about.'

'The business, you mean,' Spin said casually. The young man stared at him, clearly puzzled.

'The business? Is that what you call it?'

Spin looked the young man up and down, not sure if it were merely an innocent question or whether he'd been ticked off. Until then he'd simply looked upon him as a fresh-faced kid, but, of course, he wasn't. Chances were that this kid, whose clear skin and wide-eyed stare implied an innocent world of milk shakes and Mid western Saturday nights, had learnt to kill on the way to fetching up here. And the island war Spin had just referred to as the 'business' had been fought by kids like this one seated in front of him.

'Silly phrase, really. Funny how these things stick.'

The young man nodded without replying and Spin quietly contemplated the twists and turns, the human error, the urgent last-minute peace missions and the ultimate diplomatic failure that had brought a teenager from Butte, Montana, to the walls of the Japanese Imperial Palace.

He was pulled from his reverie by the bus's arrival at the wide roadway that led into the barracks at Yoyogi Park, rows of curved, temporary huts that looked like dissected soup cans.

The private showed him to his quarters. 'Welcome to Washington Heights.' He grinned, extending his hand.

Spin shook it, thanked him and watched the young man stride purpose-fully back to the bus. Then he lifted his bag and entered his new home.

Chapter Two

One evening a week later Spin was walking around the remains of the Shibuya district. Before the war this had been a busy residential centre, filled with restaurants, geisha houses and the regular comings and goings of trams loaded with shoppers and visitors.

Now most of the place was flattened, with only the odd structure standing out here and there against the sky. There were few lights and virtually no sound. Tokyo was a city of silences. There were no motor cars to be heard, nobody on the streets; only the distant hum of a transport passing over the coastline.

Spin stopped in front of a door that led to nowhere, an odd, surreal sight amidst the rubble. He stared at it, then started to slide it open. Where there had once been walls and a roof, there was now a clear sky of stars.

He thought it so odd that the door and the front of the house should have survived that he turned to take it in one last time before reaching the bottom of the street. He followed the tram tracks, listening to the sound of his boots as the heels hit the road, then suddenly he stopped.

How it came to be there so soon after the general destruction was difficult to comprehend. But it was definitely a restaurant, there among the gutted and flattened buildings. The flags proclaiming the name of the establishment hung above the low doorway and the distinctive red lantern that denoted the less expensive eating houses hung at the front of the building. The windows were made of frosted glass, rendering the interior invisible, but it looked clean and well lit, and would be warm inside.

After deliberating as to whether he ought to intrude upon that world, Spin

crossed the street, slid the door open and stepped inside. There was a brazier by the window, and the room was as meticulously cared for as he'd imagined it would be. There was a counter at the front of the restaurant and a number of low tables. The restaurant was indeed small, but the tables had been artfully arranged to convey the illusion of space. The owner and his customers looked up from their conversations and stared at this officer of the occupying army, a pistol at his hip, as he slid the door closed behind him.

The owner emerged from behind the counter, bowed, and Spin returned the bow. Then the owner said hello in English and pointed to a free table. Spin sat down uneasily and ordered tea. Conversation slowly resumed around him and he was glad he had ordered in English, for he could now listen without attracting suspicion. The man at the next table was moving to the country to join his wife and two children. His friend was complaining about the cold. Everybody talked about food. Nobody spoke about the scores of transport planes that flew daily over the city, or the well-fed occupying army. Nobody spoke about him nor did they look at him. Spin was not sure whether to be relieved or insulted. It wasn't as though he had been graciously accepted; he simply had the distinct impression that he didn't exist. But, all the same, there was an air of reassurance about the place. The flag with the name of the restaurant painted upon it, the red lantern at the front door, proclaimed that normality had resumed. Whatever may have happened had now passed, and commerce, communication, drinking and laughter could begin again. In the midst of the rubble the restaurant appeared as an affirmation that all would be well again. The owner had beer, almost a luxury outside the Occupation army bases and, glory of glories, this man had fish. Fresh fish.

When the tea arrived Spin bowed, said thank you and took out a Japanese translation of Macbeth. He sipped tea and began making notes in the margins. He had volunteered to contribute to the cultural re-education programme, and when he had suggested Macbeth be produced for radio there had been grumbles, but they let him do a shortened version.

A voice addressed him and he looked up to see the owner bowing slightly before him and holding a platter of sliced tuna. Beside the fish was a porcelain cup that Spin knew would contain sake, and it was apparent that this was a gesture of goodwill on the part of the owner. Spin knew that the eyes of everybody in the place were on him. Surprised and flattered, he was halfway through accepting the dish when he realised he was speaking Japanese. There was a sudden hush in the restaurant and the owner spoke again, as if his ears were testing what they had just heard, that the young officer spoke Japanese.

The owner pointed out the various ingredients on the platter as if talking to a ghost. When Spin lifted a slice of the raw fish to his mouth, deftly held by the wooden chopsticks, swallowed it and pronounced it wonderful, the owner smiled and bowed, and the mood of the restaurant relaxed. But when Spin casually asked how it was that the owner could serve such fresh fish the atmosphere suddenly became tense again, and the owner paused uncertainly without answering. Spin quietly reassured him that he was merely curious and the man eventually replied that his brother was a fisherman.

'And the beer?' Spin asked, clearly in admiration.

'That,' the owner said, with an air of mystery, 'that is business.'

Spin told him that the establishment was a marvel, and the owner backed off, accepting the compliment, and tended to the rest of his patrons. To Spin their mutual suspicions had been broken down, if ever so slightly, and there seemed to be a genuinely puzzled look in the eyes of those around him, as if they were entertaining the hitherto unthinkable possibility that the invaders might not be barbarians, after all.

The next morning Spin stood in a production booth at National Broadcasting. The recording studio was crowded with actors, and through the studio speakers he heard loud, stirring music that was like a Hollywood soundtrack. It was familiar, and he was idly wondering what it was when the music suddenly stopped.

'The Japanese people must now hear the names of the war criminals.'

A man in a suit, white shirt and tie stood close to a microphone, reading from the script he held in his hand. Behind him five actors, all formally attired, stepped forward to a separate microphone.

'Yes, yes. We must know. What are their names,' they chanted, like a Greek chorus.

The narrator waved his hand dismissively, sweat running down the side of his face, and silenced them.

'Wait, wait.'

'What are their names?' the chorus repeated.

'Give us the criminals' names.'

'Yes, yes. Here are their names.'

In the production booth the Japanese producer sat hunched over a desk, watching intently. Behind him, the production assistant leaned against the wall, watching the actors, a clipboard in her hand. Spin looked around the booth and noticed that the woman with the clipboard was staring at him. When he caught her eye she quickly looked away.

The recording finished. Spin turned to check the producer's reaction and saw the woman staring at him again with the same puzzled expression. This time, when he returned her gaze, she didn't look away, but spoke to him in impeccable, polished English.

'Excuse me. I didn't mean to stare, but I'm sure I know you.'

Spin studied her. 'I'm sorry…?'

'London. Just after everything started.'

He stared at her, puzzled.

'You must think I'm mad,' she said, smiling briefly. 'It was a government building of some sort. I've forgotten.' She laughed. 'And I've forgotten your name. I'm dreadful with names. But I am good with faces.' She leaned forward slightly.

Spin looked back at her, still confused. 'My name's Bowler,' he said. 'Allen Bowler.' She looked puzzled again. 'But they call me Spin.'

'Yes, Spin,' she said, a smile returning to her lips.

'And you?'

'I'm Momoko,' she said.

That night, in an old five-storey building, the converted restaurant that served as a press club in the city centre, Momoko re-constructed, in astounding detail, the evening when they had first met over six years earlier. They had, in fact, met twice, but over time the two meetings had fused into one. Still, Momoko's memories were vivid. It was the first time she had accompanied her father, Toshihiko, a diplomat, to an official function and she'd felt quite adult. At first Spin had been bemused by her recollection, but her descriptions of the night brought it back to him. Yes, of course. But she'd been a chubby-faced teenager then, not the elegant young woman with him now who had arrived in London with her family at the age of seven and left at seventeen when her father was recalled. During that time she got the best, the City of London School for Girls, and her English was as impeccable as her Japanese. She had—and this was a sentiment she often repeated—two cities. Two lives.

The sounds of the press club swirled all around them, jukebox music, laughter and shouted greetings coming in waves and sudden gusts. But gradually the sound of clinking glasses, the laughter, the greetings and the popular songs faded to a low hum as Momoko relived the past.

Soon, she was back in Knightsbridge. Her father was seated in front of her. With his pinstripe suit, his spectacles, his short hair parted to the side and his grave expression—a flicker of irony forever behind his tired eyes—he seemed to resemble the Son of Heaven himself. She closed her eyes and leaned back

in her seat a moment, for the memory of the night she met Spin was now so clear. 'Why,' she could again hear her young voice saying, 'do they call you Spin?'

'My surname is Bowler.'

'As in the hat?'

'As in the man who stands at the end of a cricket pitch and rolls his arm over.'

'Do you play?'

'No.'

'Shouldn't you?' she remembered asking, then watching Spin as he gazed about him and answered without looking at her, 'Your name, it means peach. Does that make you edible?'

'I never said any such thing.'

Momoko looked directly at him, the hint of a playful smile in her eyes. 'When you're seventeen, and a young man tells you you're edible, I can assure you, Spin, you remember it.'

It had been a small dinner for British and Japanese departmental staff, as well as their academic advisors. There'd been talk of the 'phony war', the black-out, getting lost in once-familiar streets, China and the death of Yeats the previous winter. At some stage during this the two interpreters had been introduced. Throughout the evening when they weren't talking he'd watched the delicacy of her hand movements as she lifted a spoon, sipped from a glass or arranged her napkin. She was self-conscious but assured. Her skin had all the clarity and smoothness of a young girl's, and images of dolls, of translucent porcelain and paint had risen in Spin's thoughts. And by the time the dinner had been completed he'd transformed her into something at once sensuous and brittle.

What Momoko didn't mention about that night was that she'd come away with quite a crush on this young lieutenant. And, if she'd got it right, this young lieutenant had spent the night trying to impress her.

Spin had little knowledge of women, and virtually none of Japanese women. But he knew enough to recognise that ten years in London had left its mark and that Momoko didn't conform to anybody's idea of what a young Japanese woman ought to be.

'Then my father was recalled,' she said, her mood darkening, 'and we came back to Tokyo.'

To lighten the mood, Spin told her what he knew about the club. It was even more crowded and noisy than when they had arrived, and he took pleasure in being able to point out some of the characters of that world:

diplomats with their wives or mistresses, journalists, intelligence officers both American and Japanese. There was even displaced royalty from the sub-continent, and an assortment of dodgy types who'd been up to heaven only knows what during the war and were now seeking to reinvent themselves as good, solid citizens.

Spin ordered drinks, and they talked about London before the war, finding points of common interest. Momoko reminisced about the old family house in Knightsbridge and speculated as to whether it had survived the bombings.

'Did you like London?'

'I loved it. I grew up there. Not that I saw enough of London,' she added wistfully. 'My parents were very strict about where I went. I was never allowed to use the underground or the buses.'

Spin, eager to share some of his life with her, spoke of his time at Cambridge. He'd topped Classics at Melbourne and gone on to Cambridge. Even though he came from a family of shop-keepers who had little time for books, his local minister had recognised the scholar in Spin and encouraged his reading. In time, it wasn't just the texts but the books themselves that Spin came to love: the style of print, the jackets and the feel of the paper. And the smell of them. Some were fresh, their pages crisp like a roll of new pound notes still smelling of ink. Others were pleasantly musty, the paper brittle, the corners folded by previous owners. The local minister's study was, more or less, a private library, and all four walls, almost to the ceiling, were lined with categorised shelves, the books alphabetically placed, as if the room, in its order, were a model of how the universe ought to be.

Spin, an only child, came to regard this study as a second home. He would ask about a particular book and the old man would bring the wooden ladder round, climb to the specified title, and while still perched on the steps give a brief dissertation on its contents and style. He would finish with an evalution, then snap the book shut. It was at these moments that Spin learnt to appreciate the sound of books. Some closed like a dull clap in an empty theatre, the larger volumes with a weighty thud.

'I went to Cambridge intending to study Classics,' he said, his tone more serious than he really intended. 'I always thought that literature was something you kept for your leisure hours, but when I arrived there the best were studying it. It was an enormously exciting time. We weren't just enrolling in a discipline, we were inventing it.'

'You make it sound like a religion.'

'Yes, I suppose I do. It's hard to believe in anything now, isn't it?'

Momoko gave a slight shrug. 'I haven't thought about that for a long time.'

Spin caught what he thought to be a slight dismissiveness in her manner. 'You think I'm talking nonsense?'

'Good heavens, no.'

'Most people just live from day to day. Don't laugh, but—'

'I'm not laughing, honestly,' she assured him.

'But people could turn to poetry as a kind of faith. Is it so ridiculous to believe that reading a book, or a single poem, can make you a better person?'

Again Momoko noted that controlled but infectious fervour in his voice, that undergraduate bounce in his walk when he went to the bar. Those affected mannerisms she had noticed in London—the impatient tapping of the cigarette end and the thoughtful pause—returned to amuse her. Even the cowlick in his hair was still there. Only now he was far more practised and the mannerisms could even have looked natural, except that she had seen them when they weren't. He was a little older, a little subtler, but she was pleased to realise that he was still trying to impress her.

They leaned towards each other. Momoko was aware that she hadn't allowed herself to think in this manner, let alone speak in it, for a long time. Were they both talking nonsense? Probably. She told herself she didn't care. Spin watched the delicate gestures and hand movements he had all but forgotten and found himself remembering the dinner at which they had met more clearly. Momoko's hair was now brushed back from her forehead in the American style and held by a dark clip. Spin watched it catch the glow of the makeshift lights. She had never been in the club before and was constantly being distracted. Twice she had turned from him while he was speaking. Spin was overcome by a feeling that his conversation had been far too ponderous for the occasion.

'Do I go on too much?'

Momoko turned to him and reached out a reassuring hand. 'No. No, you don't,' she said.

'You're sure? It's a bit of a pet topic,' Spin said, suddenly feeling awkward and uncomfortable, not sure what to say now, and convinced that her interest in him had vanished, that he had gone on too much. Laughter broke out from the bar and Spin watched Momoko's face light up as she smiled at the Americans.

Why weren't they laughing, too? He should be able to amuse her. But he hadn't and her attention had wandered. His earlier ease had left him and he concluded that it would be forced to attempt humour now.

She left when two Americans joined them. Spin watched her go, picking her way through the tables, and only vaguely listened to the latest talk the two

Americans offered.

At home, Momoko stood by her window and watched a branch of a sycamore rising and falling outside in the street. It was casting shadows on to the wall of the building opposite, playfully waving like a cut-out figure from a children's book. She smiled. At first she wasn't aware of the fact that she was smiling, and she didn't know how long she'd been smiling for, but she felt as though it was the first time she'd really smiled in years.

Her sleep was restless and she recalled the evening in fragmentary dreams. Once again she sat with the young Australian, the noise of the club a background babble. A cowlick fell across his forehead and she woke briefly in the act of brushing it back, the warmth of his forehead still on her fingertips. She even looked drowsily about her room in her half-sleep as if he might actually be there, then fell back on to her futon.

Spin caught a lift with the two Americans back to his hut in Yoyogi Park, where he lay on his bunk, mulling over the night. It was Momoko's calm that he now recalled from their first meeting all those years before, for it was still there, as was the delicacy of her movements—the way she lifted a glass or smoothed her hair. At one time, when she was watching the rest of the room, he had been free to observe and speculate. After studying the peculiar blue and green of her eyes and the line of her eyebrows, his gaze came to rest on her jet-black hair, shining under the press-club lights, tied in a bun and fastened with a deep-brown clip.

On the drive home, he had convinced himself that he'd made a botch of the evening and he fell asleep rewriting the whole encounter and wondering how her laughter would have sounded.

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