
Opening Extract from...

The Garden of Evening Mists

Written by Tan Twan Eng

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THE GARDEN OF EVENING MISTS

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For my sister

And

Opgedra aan A J Buys – sonder jou sou hierdie boek dubbel so lank en halfpad so goed wees.
Mag jou eie mooi taal altyd gedy.

There is a goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne; but none of Forgetting. Yet there should be, as they are twin sisters, twin powers, and walk on either side of us, disputing for sovereignty over us and who we are, all the way until death.

Richard Holmes, *A Meander Through Memory and Forgetting*

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 flood 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 angsana 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 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 try 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.