



The Kappa Child

Excerpt from a novel in progress

BY HIROMI GOTO

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATASHA PASHAK

Dad Didn't Know How To Grow Japanese Rice

Forget about the fact that you couldn't grow it in Alberta anyways. What with no water. The too short growing season. Old Man River flowing sluggish brown north of us and Milk River, chocolate, really, winding too far south. All he knew was that we needed water to make the flooded softmud of his childhood thought-place, years disremembered and half a world away.

Luckily, we arrived in high summer, too late for the

Hiromi Goto was born in Japan in 1966, moving to Canada with her family three years later. Chorus of Mushrooms, the Calgary-based author's first novel, earned her two prestigious awards — the 1995 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Best First Book, for the Canada and Carribean region; and (co-winner) the Japan-Canada Book Award.

growing season. So we left our father to hunt down a used John Deere tractor while my mother, sisters and I tried to make some sort of home.

"Please wipe inside the cupboards, the counter top, and then the floor," Okasan sighed.

Sachiko prodded her foot against a stack of boxes. Stared at her fingernails.

What a dump, I thought. A sod house would even be better, at least it was cooler. Then you wouldn't have to wipe any dust either, it was all dirt anyways.

Yuka and Mika plucked at Okasan's apron. Hungry, hungry as birds. Mika scrunching her face up for a cry, Yuka covering her ears.

"Okasan," we called, "Okasan, Okasan."

Roaring gravel and a plume of dust. Someone who drove faster than our father was coming up the drive! An enormous pick-up truck with two seats like a car and six

tires altogether instead of four, barrelled up and braked with flourish.

My sisters and I stood, eyes round and cautious. Me only capable of thinking how the Indians came to Laura Ingalls' house, took all the coffee and tobacco while the Pa was gone. Okasan wiped the front of her apron, not unlike Ma Ingalls, and stepped out into the windy sun brightness.

A small brown woman with ropey arms. She wore a ratty T-shirt and some sort of fertilizer cap with an elephant logo. She hopped from the cab of the truck like a cowboy.

"Hi neighbour!" she yelled over the wind, her voice surprisingly deep and raspy.

"Thought you might not be all that settled in yet and heard you had some kids and all, I brought you out some onigiris." She nudged the truck door shut with her shoulder, arms filled with a prairie-sized thermos, a huge tupperware container and a basket of fruit.

"The name's Shirley. Shirley Nakamura Coming Singer. Pleased to meet you!" she nodded to Okasan, then nudged around her to put the stuff on the kitchen table, me and my sister scattering to different corners of the room.

"Ara!" Okasan exclaimed, "Konna takusanno koto wa—"

"Can't speak a word and no shame about it either." Shirley shook her hand. "I'm Blood and Nisei."

My sisters and I stared at each other from our separate posts. Sachiko's mouth hung open. Shirley was one of us? But not? And so loud. Really, what Okasan would call hinganai.

"Hey, gotta son about the same age as your first two." She stuck her head out the open door and yelled.

"Hey," she yelled. "Hey, get your ass out here and introduce yourself to your new friends!"

Sachi and I stared. A grown up, a part Japanese grown up woman saying the A-word in front of us! What kind of monster would her son be?

He was small. Smaller than me, in that thin bone way. Red Smarties lips and eyes almost golden yellow. He scraped the toes of his battered runners through gravel dust and wouldn't look up at all, just stood, scrape, scarping his shoes, hands crammed in his front pockets.

"Hey, kiddo!" Shirley reached to chuck him on his chin but he scampered away before contact. Glowered at his mother from five feet away.

"This is my son, Gerald. He's got a bit of attitude I'm afraid, especially after his dad took off. But he's a good guy, aren't'cha! It would be great if he could play with your kids this summer, keep him out of my hair, I'm looking after the farm on my own now. He can show your kids around." Shirley took some thin paper and a bag of tobacco from her back pocket. Tapped brown leaves into a thin line, rolled and licked it quick before Okasan could say anything otherwise. My sisters and I stared with eyes rounded. Okasan had on her pinched mouth.

"Well, thank you. For the food." Our mother tugged her lips sideways trying to make her face smile.

"Hey, we're neighbours now. Gotta look out for each other!" Shirley winked and chuffed Okasan on the shoulder. "Why don't you stick around and visit with your new

friends,” Shirley called out, already climbing into her giant truck, the engine revving. Waved a thin arm out the open window and barrelled back to her own farm. Leaving a miserable Gerald behind.



There Was No Water

Well, there was water enough, copper brown and tasting like blood. Enough, at least, for the needs of the household, but not enough water to irrigate the land for any growing thing. Let alone any attempt to fill the gasping dry prairie earth into rice-lush, mudsoft.

Dad started by plowing up the fields. The chalky soil all chunky with clay, wedges of sandstone encrusted with tiny seashells. Sachiko stood, back to the wind, her skinny girl arms hugging her middle. I crouched in the broken



seam and ran my short bratwurst fingers through pieces of geography past. Dad roared by again, dust pecking my eyes gritty. I ran my arm over my muddy tears and spat out a gob of clay. Who would have thought that the prairie was just an ancient ocean? And felt a little comfort in my recognition. Short-lived. Dad spluttered by again, his nasal spray reaching deep and far into his left nostril. God, such a pathetic addiction. If I bashed the bottom of the bottle hard enough, would the plastic tip burst into his brain?

Dad lobbed the nasal spray and it bounced off the side of my big head. Pick up the rocks! The big pieces! Not a picnic. And he billowed away to crack open another row in the brittle ground.

We bent our backs to the slabs of sandstone. The chunks of clay turned rock. Heaved them into the flat-bed that never seemed to fill. The bend of back, the strain of

childish muscles straining into cramps. All summer long, the days even longer than we had ever remembered, could have ever dreamt. At least my body was built for the work, at least my peasant shortness and girth could turn into gristly muscle, resistant to gravitational deterioration. My ugly salvation. Sachi wasn't so lucky, her slender bones almost to the point of snapping, her fingers blue-bruised and her collarbones brittle.

“Ow,” she moaned, “Oweeeeeee,” sniffing as she lagged further and further behind on her side of the field, me heaving grunting, sand in my eyes and the bones of the sea in my mouth.

The put put roar of the tractor chugging into stillness. Our ears rang without.

“Sachiko!” Dad roared. “Isoge!”

“I'm sorry.” How I hated that. How her and Okasan were always apologizing for things that weren't their fault, their weakness. “I'm sorry Dad. But I can't anymore,” she started blubbing in earnest. Gobs of snot turning into muddy streaks beneath her nose. So weak, so sad, she didn't deserve this kind of life, she didn't. But how could she stand and bawl like that? How could she show him he won? I'd smack some pride into her if I thought it would help.

Dad charged down from his pathetic tractor and cuffed Sachi across the back of her head. She staggered. Dust. And salt rose like fury in my mouth, to my eyes. Ashamed that I, for one instant, had felt like striking my sister too.

He smacked her butt, dust billowing from her jeans, and he pointed to the direction of the house. Sachi bawling all the way home, fists to her eyes like she was still two or three years old.

Tell your Okasan to get out here! You better watch the kids! Make dinner! Dad bellowed after her.

Me hoping she wasn't wailing so loud that she didn't hear him.

Okasan with a red kerchief on her head. She brought with her a thermos of mugicha, the tinkling of tiny bits of ice cooling me even before the tea has been poured, brought to my lips. Dad pulled off dusty gloves and cap and gulped hard, the barley tea running down the sides of his mouth. His gapped teeth gleaming whitely in his dust-brown face. Smiling. I sipped. Prolonging the cool liquid passage through lips, mouth, throat, chest, belly. Savouring the cool spread ache of slow chill. It was so good. Okasan smiled her gentle smile, the dimple in her right cheek. Brief.

Dad started up the engine. And we bent to pick what was meant to lie in the first place.



The Sun Was Blasting Senseless

And Sachi and I almost reeled in it, still unused to the intensity, the dusty blur of wind turned sound. Gerald didn't seem to mind at all, only turned to face the wind full on and opened his mouth to gulp it in. Sachiko and I giggled. And he shyly smiled back. He tipped his head to one side and started trotting towards a neighbouring field. Sachi and I glanced at each other and I shrugged. Trot/ran in my flat-footed way, after him. Sachiko mincing in the tall grass behind us.

Gerald moving so gracefully ahead of me, farther and farther. Despite my childish pride, I had to call out.

“Gerald! Wait up!”

He waited up. And I trot/ran until I reached him, panting and sweating in a way pride could no way hide.

“Thought you couldn't speak English,” he muttered.

“Thought you couldn't speak,” I retorted, between gasps.

“Hmmp,” he acquiesced.

We both roofed our hands over our eyes, looked for Sachi's mincing figure in the wave of fallow grass and dismal sky. Couldn't see her for nothing. We kept on walking, through the endless roll of grass and barbed wire fences. There were undersounds beneath the roar of eternal wind. The chik chik chik of locusts, trilling meadowlarks and the piercing cry of gophers telling each other to duck. The prairie was far from empty and I was disagreeably attracted. So what, I thought. Big deal. It was a nothing place and nothing was going to make me like it.

I almost gasped in astonishment. The spread of prairie so suddenly a curvey edge I could almost have kept on walking without ever noticing. Not a spectacular dip, not a monumental dip, but a pleasing comfortable dip all the same. The land suddenly rolled downward into a tiny creek, green choked with thirsty grass and wriggling back on itself as far as the eye could see.

We heeled our way down, the dust from the grasses rising, making me sneeze. The tiny cricking of thumbnail-sized frogs stilling quiet to our approach. My mouth uncontrollably spread, revealing my ugly teeth.

“Wow,” I murmured. And Gerald blushed like he'd made it all.

We crouched beside the sweet greenish water, the air cooler and almost comfortable. Sat so still and silent that minute frogs poked their noses from bent blades of grass, from batches of algae, skitter of long bent insect legs racing in pools of liquid surface. The roaring wind I was so busy resenting blew mosquitos into Saskatchewan. The land was beautiful, had been beautiful before Laura Ingalls had ever noticed. I tipped from my crouch to lie on my back. The prairie grass jabbed but I didn't care, the sky floated so high I was sucked upward with the vertigo and didn't ever want to come back.

“You a boy or a girl?” Gerald inquired.

“You Blood or Japanese?” I retorted.

“Hmmp,” he acquiesced. And we didn't say anything more, never noticing the sun finally curving towards the tiny teeth of the Rockies until we heard the distant roar of Dad's kendo voice calling my name.



Never Enough Water

What could Dad have possibly been thinking? Thinking still? There was no goddamn water. None running through our property, no sweet creek filled with the trill of satiated birds, cricking frogs. No irrigation canals for miles around and the well we were lucky enough to dig had only enough water for drinking and a shared bath every Saturday, the laundry washed in the left-overs.



Not being bestowed water wasn't going to stop our father from his rice-growing obsession. He spent a lot of his time stealing the precious liquid from his neighbours. Winters were spent devising fool-proof plans for his pioneering pursuits. He didn't steal from our closest neighbour, Shirley, because even though she was hinganai, she was still one of us. I didn't care what his reasons were, only thankful that I wouldn't have to die of mortification when he was caught. And Shirley's son, Gerald, being my best and only friend.

Dad's favourite target was the Snyders' half a quarter section away. They had a gorgeous windmill, all painted glossy blue in their lush chemically fertilized field. That shiny blue windmill must have been a beacon calling Dad and he muttered and snorted to himself, tape measure in hand and nasal spray up his nose. He designed blueprint after blueprint of underground pipes.

A system that would siphon their precious water into the gaping dry mouths of his rice fields.

Dig, he'd hiss, the moonful night and stars so loud in the prairie sky they almost clattered. Dig quietly. Dig faster!

"Ow," Sachiko started to moan after a half hour or so. "Oweeeee. I'm getting blisters." And she would. Big fat blisters all salt-filled and covered with a thin bulge of translucent skin. I wanted to pop them like the sheets of plastic bubbles that sometimes came with the packages from Japan.

"Get away," she moaned, seeing my greedy eyes.

"Damare!" Dad spat, smacked the back of Sachiko's head.

She started blubbing, arm covering her eyes. Poor Sachiko. She always got hit. She whined too much, then bawling to top it off. When will she figure out that he won as soon as she cried out loud?

I just turned my back to her and dug, the slow steady pace of someone who had to dig all night. Sachiko no use at all, blubbing, hiccuping, snot hanging from her nose. Dad booted her in the butt and pointed back to the house. Her wailing all the way.

The soil at the Snyders was almost pleasant to dig through, moist, dark and easy to turn over. But after crossing the fence, the ground was chalky crumble and concrete ugly. Dad was laying the pipe in the thin trench, then was covering it up trying to make the newly turned soil look like badger or gopher. But he caught up to me soon after I had started digging on our side of the fence.

"Chikushyo!" he swore. The shovel bouncing off the ground in a shower of sparks. "Kuso!" His fists clenched into rocks, I slowly backed out of swinging reach, watched him jump up and down in a fit of frustration so intense the veins in his head almost glowed in the darkness. Please, oh please, oh pleading, that he would suffer a massive stroke. And free us all.

He didn't. After his spasm of anger he smacked at his pockets until he felt the reassuring shape of his nasal spray, inserted, snorted back into the recesses of his head.

"Aaaaaaaa," he sighed, and snorted, hacked at the back of his throat, the pit of his nose and gobbled up some phlegm.

I turned my head away in absolute disgust. Got a smack for letting down my guard.

No one said anything about stopping, he hissed, shoved the shovel at me. I grabbed it without looking at him, my eyes so hateful I could barely see. Getting

the pick-axe, keep digging, and he jogged toward the spot of light across the field.

I stopped digging.

The stars were so loud they were almost buzzing in their brightness and the summer breeze cooled the sweat sticky along my hairline. Only then noticed the yasashii sounds of the crickets. Breathed in deeply the fresh scents of corn ripening into peaches and cream, summer grass turning into hay.

**Salt seeped to my eyes, I never cried,
never, blinked and blinked and the tears
pooled inside my mouth, the back of
my throat. I furiously bit my lower lip,
didn't notice that I'd broken skin
until I tasted the salty metallic
edge of blood.**

How beautiful it could be, I thought, and trembled, I don't know why. Plunked down in the sea turned desert and laid in brittle grass. Huge shiny crickets crawling across my body, they paused and played their hind legs for me. I stared at the incredible night sky, so richly dense I was almost dizzy just watching, the stars winking blinking and hoped to catch one falling.

I lay there and thought about my options. There were none. I was eleven years old and I didn't have any money. I knew what happened to little kids who ran away — they were either found cut up into little pieces or sold to monsters. Okasan would never leave Dad, she'd never save us and that was that. Because going to white outsiders wasn't an option for people like us. If you ditched the family, there was absolutely nothing left. I was eleven years old and something was better than nothing, even if something had a hand faster than the words forming in my head, let alone my mouth.

I pinched my lips like Okasan and got to my feet so Dad wouldn't come back and catch me blatantly disobeying him. Saw a bright long arc of star falling. Emotionlessly. Didn't wish for anything.

Heard the crunch of dry grass beneath boots, I turned my shoulders to work and kicked at my useless shovel.

"Whaddya doing?"

"Jeez!" I spun around, "What are you doing up?"

Gerald with wide-awake eyes, his delicate lips. He

was wearing pyjamas not because his mother made him, but because he thought it was the proper way to go to bed.

"Can't sleep, Mom's looking after personal matters."

"Oh," I could only say. He crouched a few feet away from me.

"If you're stealing water, you better be more quiet. I could hear you from my house."

"Jeez! I wonder if the Snyders heard us."

"Probably not," he was matter-of-fact. "I'm down wind. But you're still awfully noisy. Especially your sister."

I leaned on my shovel like I'd seen on TV and flexed prematurely well-developed forearms. Wanting to impress my quiet friend, for some strange reason unknown to me. Gerald reached with a slim-boned hand and patted my muscles encouragingly.

"You're strong."

Salt seeped to my eyes, I never cried, never, blinked and blinked and the tears pooled inside my mouth, the back of my throat. I furiously bit my lower lip, didn't notice that I'd broken skin until I tasted the salty metallic edge of blood.

"Don't," Gerald whispered. Awkwardly pulled me close and licked my lip with his small neat tongue.

I scrambled back, shocked, embarrassed, elated, I don't know what. And not knowing what made me furious. Chin pushed out, my head aggressively thrust forward, I drew my hands back then shoved with all my peasant farmer strength. Gerald smashing into the ground.

"Hey, baby," I sneered. "I don't let little baby boys touch me. Ever." This hateful coil twisting in my gut, the

words stinging something inside me, but couldn't make me stop. "Why don't you get your wimpy butt home."

Gerald scrambling to his feet, his beautiful eyes wet. He carefully brushed the grass bits and soil from his pyjamas, and my heart clenched. I almost lifted my hand, palm upward, something, say something— but Gerald turned his back, and walked determinedly away. The breeze picking up bits of grass that still clung to his clothes. The night was over, the stars gone. The horrible sun was rising and the green glow of dawn offered no comfort.

And I was alone from my own doing.

"Yah!" I yelled, Gerald's slender back striding through brittle grass. "Go on! Sissy! Pansy! Go on home to your slut mother!" I screamed until I was hoarse and gasping.

A heavy hand on my shoulder, I almost fell out of myself, squeaked in sudden fear.

Good for you, my father nodded approvingly, shouldn't be friends with sissy boys.

Dad was proud of me.

And it caved in. I tipped my head backward and howled, howled, to the indifferent sky, my father stunned to see me wailing, just stood and stared. The fat sun rising keen and relentless, I howled until my mouth was parched and cracked upon my face. I howled until my voice had left and salt grained upon my skin. I howled until there was nothing left.

I dropped the shovel at my father's feet and walked slowly back to the house. 

