

# TADASHI

*by Kirsten Krauth*

As he sat on the train and watched eucalypts straggle by, the gentle light of dawn hitting their leaves, he thought of his mother, how she had loved this part of the train ride. He liked to ride the mountains train when it was quiet: on the weekends, late night, early morning, free from the noisy school kids and loud drunks. Today, he had packed his battered suitcase with food, rice balls filled with umeboshi and green tea, like his mother used to do when they travelled together.

They had always shared a love of nature and she was happiest when she discovered the bush and rainforest on the fringes of Sydney, the ferns and trickling streams, certain spots she believed were sacred. For her birthday each year they would catch the train out to Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains, and walk to the Blue Pool, a quiet waterhole where he forced himself to swim in the freezing water after those first icy steps. She would sit on the sun-warmed rocks with her shoes by her, eyes closed. Afterwards they would travel to lunch in Leura, big stodgy meals of potatoes and overcooked lamb that neither enjoyed, and would then walk the streets arm in arm, where the blossoms were beginning to come out, and she would be melancholy on the trip home, talking about beauty and the way it never lasts, her parents, his father, and the swift passing of their lives.

In all the days spent together, his mother never missed the daily rituals. She was obsessed with water, would make him take a bath every day after dinner, even if it meant he was late for bed. Early each morning she would wash her hands and rinse out her mouth before perching to look up at her *kamidana*—a shelf lined with precious objects: tall vases, bottles of sake, a bowl of washed rice and a small plate of salt. She'd also collected a number of dolls, ones she'd loved as a girl, and a pair of prince and princess dolls, still side by side in their original glass case, the bright colours of their kimonos gradually fading. She'd treasured this wedding present most of all, worshipped the dolls to protect her from harm; they'd become witnesses to her years of joy and heartbreak. He'd guessed that caring for the dolls was her way of remembering her family and husband, a connection to Japan in this strange culture that she never really got used to.

As a child Tadashi had made friends with these dolls, creating other worlds that he looked forward to entering when he came home from school, hiding away, always careful to return the dolls to their case as he was not

supposed to touch them. When his mother died Tadashi created his own altar on a high shelf, unable to throw away the pair of dolls she had loved so much, remembering that she had always said that to give them away would bring down a curse.

Next to the dolls was a statue of a pair of *koma-inu*, lion-dogs, guarding her. He had always thought that her ancestral spirit would be strong but he never had a sense of her in this stainless-steel apartment, its surfaces polished and always clean. Perhaps it was too slippery for her to settle here. Perhaps he was lucky because she had reached the other side.

His mother had told him about his first shrine visit. How each newborn child was taken to the Shinto shrine, to be placed under the protection of the *kami*. The shrine was on the island of Hokkaido, where his mother was born. It was the first of his initiation ceremonies, she said, and his grandmother took him, 32 days after the birth, because he was a boy. *If you were a girl it would have been 33 days*, she said. He'd always wondered about the extra day for girls. But his mother did not welcome questions so he never asked.

Like his mother, he could sense a strong *kami* whenever he went walking in the mountains. He'd always felt this way. It was rare that something was only an object to him. As a child, trees had come alive, whispered quietly to him. Like in *The Wizard of Oz*, the first film he'd seen on video at school. He'd always had a huge love of robots, too, their sad metallic faces and eagerness to help humans out with mundane tasks. His favourite cartoon had been *Astro Boy*, the sweet faced little android who would fight monsters high up in the sky. He remembered clearly the professor, a father so driven to grief by the death of his son, that he preserved his son's image in the form of a super robot who could live forever. He'd imagined this man as his own father.

His other favourite story was the one his mother told him whenever he had been naughty or when she didn't want him to go swimming. It was about the evil Kappa, a spirit that lives in rivers and streams and ponds. She described a frightening monster, with a head like a monkey, a body like a tortoise carrying a shell on its back, long hair, and limbs like a lizard, wet and slippery, with yellow-green skin. And best of all, he stank like old fish. Sometimes this creature could change colour like a chameleon so you could never see it in the depths of the water, so strong, his mother told him in a whisper, that it could pull horses and cattle and grown men off river banks, suck the blood out of them and pull out their entrails. But most of all, the Kappa liked to drown little children while they played by the river.

She explained that the Kappa had a cavity like a saucer on its head and when you poured water into it, it became stronger and stronger, and liked to challenge humans to a sumo wrestle. But there were clever ways to beat this spirit. The Kappa really loved cucumbers and could be made happy if you gave him cucumber sushi. Also, if you were really polite when you first came across a Kappa and bowed low to him, like when you respected your ancestral spirits, the Kappa would bow back and spill the water out of his cavity. This made his power weaker and he would have to return to his water kingdom.

It had taken Tadashi years after hearing Kappa stories to find the courage to learn to swim. His mother would not get into the water so he taught himself at the local pool. Floating, floating, on his back then front, then with arms and legs splashing, with her sitting on the grass conspicuous under her umbrella, fully clothed in the blinding sun, nervous behind sunglasses. After the swim he'd go to the canteen and buy a Splice, it's sharp pineapple mingling with creamy vanilla.

He still had to muster all his courage to take those first steps into a murky ocean or deep waterhole where he couldn't see below the surface, waiting for the camouflaged Kappa to appear out of the depths.