PART ONE

RELATIONS

Ume no mi mo
Irozuku koro ya
Satsuki ame

Even the plums blush ripely
Around the time
Of the late spring rains.

Beginning phrase of a kouta

ONE SISTERS

DEATH OF A GEISHA

April in Kyoto is a glorious season. Cherry trees blossom along the river banks and envelop the wooded mountainsides in a thin pink mist. In Maruyama Park, Japanese come at night to drink beer and sake under the blossom-dripping boughs of an ancient weeping cherry. This huge tree stands spotlighted in pale unearthly splendor amid the noisy carousers.

April is also one of the busiest months in the Kyoto geisha quarters. Every afternoon the Pontochō theater fills with spectators who have come to see the geisha perform the spring Kamo River Dance. In the evenings the "teahouses" and restaurants where geisha entertain are crowded with guests from Tokyo and other cities who have journeyed to Kyoto for the cherry blossoms and the geisha dance festival.

At night, students and young couples walk along the wide stone flanks of the Kamo River, where the only light is that reflected from the Pontochō teahouses on the embankment above. The river is always alluring, and the scent of a spring night makes it irresistible. The geisha and their well-to-do patrons look down at the crowd of young romantics drifting alongside the slow-moving river. Much of the charm of Pontochō is due to its location, but whereas the customers of the geisha pay dearly for their privileged river views and charming companions, the students and young lovers below them stroll for free.

Some teahouses keep a spyglass in the banquet room overlooking the river, and a geisha will tease an elderly customer to look for illicit couplings under the dark shadows of the bridges. A young geisha may

gaze out past the gray heads of her guests and, inhaling the spring night air, wish that she too were walking with a young man along the river below.

On one of those balmy late-April nights in 1978, a tendril of smoke drifted from the west bank of the Kamo River. Nobody noticed it issuing lazily from one of the closely spaced wooden buildings in the area where the geisha of Pontochō live and work. By four in the morning, a raging blaze had destroyed several houses. Distraught geisha clutched their cotton sleeping kimonos against the river breeze and splashed their roofs with buckets of river water in an effort to halt the spread of Japan's most feared natural catastrophe, fire. At daybreak, a dozen houses lay in smoldering ruins and one young geisha was dead.

Her mother and two sister geisha had managed to escape the house before the acrid smoke became poisonously thick, and in the smoky confusion of the narrow alley no one realized that the young woman was still inside. When the story was recounted to me three months later, one elderly geisha said she still had nightmares about a pitiful voice faintly crying "*okāsan*"—mother—though she couldn't be sure whether she had heard or imagined it.

THE GEISHA FAMILY

Geisha call the women who manage the teahouses okāsan. They call any geisha who has seniority by virtue of an earlier debut into the geisha world *onēsan*, older sister. Both are used as general terms of respect. When a geisha speaks of one particular older sister, however, she is referring to a senior geisha with whom she once "tied the knot" in a ceremony uniting them as sister geisha.

During the time I spent studying the flower and willow world by living within it, a geisha named Ichiume took the role of my older sister. Ichiume was twenty-two at the time and I was twenty-five. The fact that she was three years younger than I posed no problem in the kinship of the geisha world because actual age is not as important as experience. When we met, Ichiume had been a *maiko*, or apprentice, for four years and a full-fledged geisha for a year and a half.

As Ichiume's "younger sister," I went by the name Ichigiku. Ichiume had not had a younger sister before, but she did her best to help me learn the intricate etiquette of geisha society—to the extent, that is, that she had mastered it herself. "Blind leading the blind," sighed one of the mothers after having scolded us both for being late to an engagement. It was probably because Ichiume was something of a jokester that she was charged with sistering the American geisha in the first place. But eventually things worked out better than the mothers had dared hope. When it was time for me to leave Japan, they even told me that I had been a good influence on Ichiume. Having a younger sister, even an odd one like me, was, for Ichiume, a step toward greater responsibility as a member of the geisha community.

After a year in Pontochō as Ichigiku, I returned to the United States to write my thesis on geisha. I missed my geisha family and wrote or telephoned them often. I would occasionally get letters from my okāsan with a quick scribble appended by Ichiume. I was very sorry to miss the ceremony, about six months later, in which Ichiume celebrated the bond of sisterhood with a new, more legitimate, younger sister. At that time, the geisha of Pontochō threw themselves an elaborate party to welcome the new apprentice to their ranks. Okāsan sent me pictures of the affair, which included a coolly elegant new face—a face I remembered as that of the unsophisticated Midori, a junior high school girl who had been studying classical dance in preparation for her debut as a maiko.

To be a maiko, with the trailing embroidered kimono and high clogs with bells, had been a romantic dream for Midori. Many people think of the life of a maiko as old-fashioned, constricting, and boring—even some of the other maiko privately feel that way. Midori, however, was enthusiastic at the prospect. The mothers of the Pontochō teahouses were very proud of her and had high hopes for her future as a geisha. I had talked to them often about Midori.

The number of maiko has dwindled alarmingly in recent years. A couple of years before I had arrived, in fact, maiko had disappeared altogether from Pontochō, but when I was there in 1975 there were four. Midori, under her professional name of Ichitomi, would make

five. Even in Kyoto a woman does not have to be a maiko before becoming a fully qualified geisha, but those who follow this traditional path of entrance into the profession enjoy higher prestige later as the true geisha of Kyoto.

Midori's natural mother was a retired geisha in the nearby area of Miyagawa-chō, one of the six recognized geisha communities (*hanamachi*) in Kyoto. Why didn't Midori become a geisha there? I wondered. This was the sort of thing one could not inquire about directly but about which my okāsan, ex-geisha, mistress of an elegant inn, and pillar of the Pontochō community, could enlighten me as we had tea in the afternoon or snacks late at night after a party at her establishment, the Mitsuba.

"You're making a study of this, Kikuko," she said, using my ordinary and familiar Japanese name, "so you should know about Miyagawa-chō. There's a word called 'double registration'—that's what many of the geisha in areas like that are. You can call them geisha if you like, but they do a bit more than dance for the customers."[1]

"Is that why Midori didn't want to work there?" I asked.

"This was her mother's idea, actually," replied my okāsan. "And it was a smart decision, in my opinion. When I was a girl, you had to be born in Pontochō to become a geisha here, but these days one can hardly insist on that. The customers love to have young maiko attend the banquets. This *is* Kyoto, after all. Having a maiko pour sake for you really makes you feel you're in Kyoto. Tokyo customers especially insist on it. There just aren't enough maiko to keep up with the demand. So when someone like Midori wants to work in Kyoto, why should she stay in Miyagawa when she can make her debut in Pontochō? She'll get better training here, and she'll meet a better class of customer."

So in her last year of junior high school, Midori left her mother's house in Miyagawa-chō to live in the house called Hatsuyuki in Pontochō. At sixteen, she became the pampered pet of the other two geisha who lived there. Ichiume was closest to her in age; the other geisha, Ichihiro, was their senior by almost twenty years.

Midori called the mistress of the Hatsuyuki, a fifty-five-year-old woman who had once been a geisha herself, okāsan. Like most of the

mothers of teahouses in Pontochō, this woman's knowledge of etiquette, speech, feminine deportment, classical dance, and music—that is, her knowledge of those things necessary for a geisha to know—is firsthand. As a geisha in her early twenties, she had found a patron; as is usual in such affairs, he was a much older man. She became his mistress, retiring from geisha life to live in relative ease. But when he died, she was left with a young son and barely enough money to purchase a small teahouse in Pontochō. That is where she had worked as a geisha, and she still knew important community figures. She began this second phase of her life in the geisha world by managing the Hatsuyuki, slowly building up a clientele and eventually bringing in geisha to train. I liked to visit this house, where I was always made to feel welcome by the bustling and energetic family of women. The son of the house, the one blood relation of its mistress, was never much in evidence. I had been introduced to him once, only after I inquired about the young man walking upstairs as if he belonged there.

SONS AND LOVERS

In the geisha world, men may claim the night, but women dominate the day. The son of the proprietress of the Hatsuyuki was one of a very few men who actually live in this quarter, and he spent as much time as possible with his cronies, away from what he found to be the suffocatingly female atmosphere of daytime Pontochō.

The hours between 6:00 P.M. and early morning are the business hours here. The long, "narrow-as-an-eel's bed" block of Pontochō is illuminated by the rosy neon displays of bars interspersed with the more discreet monochrome signs of teahouses. Customers' voices drift down to the street, mingled with the plangent sounds of *shamisen* music. The cramped street is full of men, who in the small hours of the morning are often supported by a geisha or a hostess in their unsteady progress from bar to taxi. The customers (or anyone else who glimpses this scene during business hours) think that Pontochō is an entire world created for the delectation of men. That is the point, of course: to make them feel that way.

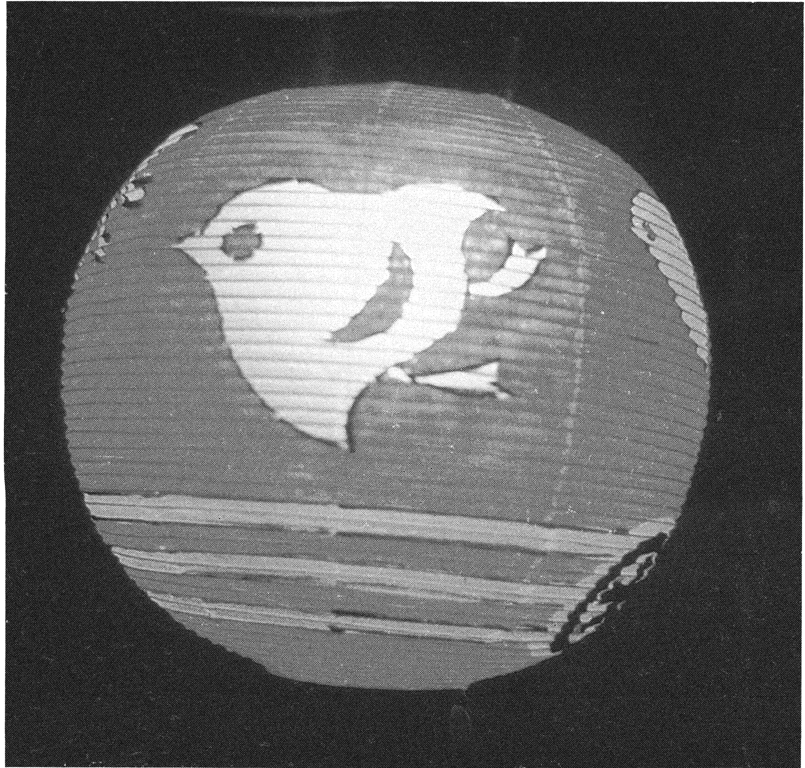
Nighttime Pontochō. At the time of the Kamogawa Dances, the eaves of the teahouses are hung with red lanterns.

Few of these evening guests ever see the daytime side of this world, the geisha quarters when the customers have gone home. Even those who patronize geisha usually have only the vaguest idea of the realities of this professional community, whose members are linked one to another by the idiom of kinship. The "mothers" of the teahouses, where geisha are employed, are the real businesswomen and entrepreneurs. The geisha are the "daughters" of these women, living their private and their professional lives as older and younger sisters to each other. There are a few positions for men whose services are necessary to the professional life of Pontochō, such as the lone wig stylist, the kimono dressers, and perhaps the hired accountants at the registry office. But the position of men, when they are not customers, is basically precarious in the ongoing everyday life of the geisha quarters.

Japanese men are accustomed to having women wait on them. This is not the only mode of male/female interaction in Japan, but Japanese men feel that there is nothing unusual about it. The cultural style of masculinity in Japan tends to demand female subservience (at least pro forma), and many things contribute to an ideology in which men are the sources of authority. As a consequence, life is notoriously hard on the egos of men who live within the geisha world. The refined nuances of exquisite service in which geisha are trained are not meant for them.

The pampering of the male ego, which geisha think of as one of their most important skills, does not extend to family. For men of geisha families, it is their mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives who are the principals of this world in terms of actual work and socially recognized authority.[2] The stigma, if there is one, of being the child of a geisha (and thus illegitimate) is felt far more keenly by male than by female children. In almost every case I am familiar with, males manifest their resentment by becoming wayward and profligate. Whereas a girl will fit easily into such a community of capable and self-supporting women, a boy will have endless trouble. This is perhaps the only place in Japanese society where the birth of a baby girl is always more welcome than that of a boy.

The okāsan of the Hatsuyuki, however, doted on her lackadaisical son. It was her fond hope that he would marry someone sensible and



Paper lantern with Pontochō's special mark, the plover.

capable, a girl at home in the "flower and willow world" who would be able to take over as mistress of the Hatsuyuki when she retired. A geisha, for example, who would be willing to entertain customers in her altered role of proprietress, would be ideal. If her son's bride were not the sort who could handle teahouse business, that would probably end his chances of managing the establishment. As a man, he could not run it himself even if he were so inclined. At the time, I thought the okāsan of the Hatsuyuki was pinning false hopes on this sleepy-eyed son of hers. Better to depend on one of the daughters—even the mischievous Ichiume, it seemed to me.

Ichiume.