

Sally Ito / SHRINE MAIDEN

Hanako neatly folded the red *hakama* and placed them on the square, kerchief-like *furoshiki*. The red trousers contrasted starkly with the drab cotton cloth she used to wrap them in. Taking the ends of the *furoshiki*, she tied them together to form a neat bundle. She would return the costume to the shrine priest that day. It was the last time she would ever wear it.

Hanako gazed at the mirror in front of her. Now in her city clothes, she looked like any other ordinary Japanese woman, dressed in a white blouse with a lace collar, a tight brown skirt, and taupe stockings with reinforced toes. Only her hair looked slightly odd, its wavy bulk a little too sensuous, too voluptuous for the demure features of her face. At the shrine, Hanako kept it pulled back into a long thick braid that looked like the gnarled straw rope that hung in front of the shrine. Now that work was finished, Hanako loosened the knot at the end of the braid and shook out her hair. A trembling mass of newly permed curls swept over her back. She opened her purse, took out a brush. Languorously, she pulled it through her hair. *Shaaa. Shaaa. Shaaa.*

There was a thud of footsteps down the hall, then a flutter of red *hakama* rushed through the door, white sleeves flapping like wings into the room. *Hana-chan! Are you leaving already? Hana-chan, we'll miss you! We've got to go, the priest's waiting!* The young women hurried out of the room as quickly as they entered. Hanako suppressed a smile. They're all so young! she thought to herself. Maybe they seemed more so to her, now that she was leaving. She had announced her engagement to the priest last week. He seemed disappointed, although he tried to hide it. *Getting married, eh? That's a shame, it is, I mean, for us. But for you, my goodness, what an occasion.*

She was sorry to have to quit. It had been a good part-time job. But the shrine's position on the matter was clear. Only the unmarried could be shrine maidens.

The crunch of Hanako's shoes on the gravel path from the shrine echoed through the trees. The red cedars lining the path were like pillars in a great hall, mute wooden monuments to the primeval source worshipped in the shrine's inner sanctum. Only the head priest was allowed inside; only he could glimpse the secret of the gods. But Hanako was only vaguely curious; whatever the truth was, it was simply out of reach. Her role was to assist the priest — hand him the sacred wands with the white streamers, pass him the cups of rice wine. She was to be a perfect instrument of ritual, pure and chaste in the performance of her duties.

The wind sighed through the trees; the branches creaked and shuddered. A spray of needles fell to the ground. Hanako paused and turned back to the shrine. She could see in the distance, the lone straw rope, thickly braided, hanging down from the roof. It was swaying slightly, as if someone had shaken it to make a prayer, but no one was in sight. A dull but resonant sound, the noise of the bell when the rope was shaken, echoed through the trees. *Kah-ran, kah-ran, kah-ran.*

Hanako turned again, this time forward. She took a few steps down the path. Now she could hear the sound of traffic beyond the shrine's gates. The muffled roars, the honking, grew louder, clearer as her feet moved ahead in quick, clipped strides. At the threshold of the gate — the orange pillared *torii* — she could see the whole city spread out before her. Plunging into its midst as if into a dark stream, she let the traffic of the passing pedestrians swallow her up, carry her to the centre of the city.

Norihide was waiting at the train station.

"Oi — Hana-chan!" He called out, waving to her. "You're late." He grabbed her hand, squeezed it a little too tightly. The smell of his cologne was overpowering. He was wearing his usual date ensemble — a pair of chinos he had bought at a store in San Francisco, a polo shirt with a cardigan tastefully draped over the shoulders, dark tan loafers. Tucked under his left arm was a square leather pouch.

"It was my last day at the shrine," Hanako said.

"Gan-chan told me a good place for steak." Norihide pulled Hanako through the crowded intersection. "It's around that corner, near the west entrance."

Hanako nodded. Norihide wasn't listening. She followed his back as it wriggled through the crowds, darting in and out of the light. She saw him as an object then, the muscled back moving like a carved plank through a faceless sea of people. *I don't know him very well*, she reflected to herself. They had met at a college function only a few months ago and had gotten along rather well. They exchanged phone numbers and began dating. He was pleasant enough. At the very least, Hanako could say she did not mind him.

The only thing she regretted was losing that shrine job. But then, she could not blame him for that.

After dinner, they went to a movie. Norihide picked an American one, a romantic comedy. When the couple in the movie finally got together after all their troubles, Norihide squeezed Hanako's hand in the darkness as if in triumph. Later, after they left the theatre, they went for a walk around the station. Although it was not very chilly, Hanako felt obligated to slip her arm through Norihide's and lay her head against his shoulders as she'd seen other women do with their lovers. She was always watching other couples, even on their walks, noticing how they'd slip quietly into a darkened nook where she knew the entrances to the love hotels were hidden. Norihide and she were too timid to go to one. The most adventurous thing they had done was sit on a bench in the park together at night. He had kissed her using his tongue and attempted to touch her breasts. Hanako did not protest, but arched her back and looked at the moon. All around her, she could hear the rustling and grunting of other lovers. It was an oddly soothing sound; it made her feel as if she and Norihide were doing the right thing. They fit in splendidly.

Their walk that night led them back to the station with its bright lights, its bustle of people. Norihide walked Hanako to the platform where her train was waiting. She rode the *futsu*, a regular train that made all the stops on the line. Her station was a minor one near the end called SAKURANOMICHI. The area was given its name a long time ago during the spring when its narrow streets were covered with fallen cherry petals.

Norihide gave Hanako a swift peck on the cheek. Hanako's head dropped deferentially, properly, as if out of habit. She could see the glint on her engagement ring; it was as bright as a star.

The trainmaster blew his whistle. Quickly Hanako boarded the crowded train, letting the bustling throng draw her inside. As the train pulled away, she could see Norihide through the cracks between the bodies of those standing in front of her. He stood stiff as a board waving his right hand.

Hanako took hold of a handstrap as the train speeded up. She felt suddenly tired. The day had been long — working at the shrine all afternoon, then meeting Norihide in the evening. She leaned her head on her upright arm. Norihide, she thought, will make the perfect husband. He came from a good family that was not the meddling type and he was a graduate of a prestigious university. That was all that really mattered to Hanako. She closed her eyes, remembering the way the temple priest's eyebrows arched approvingly when she told him Norihide was a Keio man. Everyone was *so* pleased. Hanako smiled to herself. Things could be the way one wished.

At the next stop, a rush of people flooded out of the train, leaving it suddenly empty. The velvet, wine-colored length of seating was now plainly visible, a plush invitation to sit down. Hanako sat in the corner at the end of the car. The trainmaster blew his whistle. *Peee-eet*. There was a lurch and a rumble as the train pulled out of the station. The stark, harsh light of the platform was suddenly engulfed by the gloom of the night sky. Hanako stared straight ahead at the black glass where her face was dimly reflected. She looked pale, ghostly — a silhouette against the passing darkness of the city.

The train picked up speed, rushing ahead to its inevitable terminus. Hanako's eyes fluttered and fell between the glass and the empty red seat in front of her. The reflection dipped and bowed, the head dropping forward onto the chest. The breathing slowed into small, deep ohs, the sound of sighs in a row.

She did not hear him getting on. He was just suddenly *there* as if he had been in that seat across from her all the time, a relic from the past now visible. He sat upright in his seat, legs set apart, arms crossed over his chest. Black hair, dark and coarse, bristled on his head. His hands, tucked inside the flaps of his sleeves, made dark bulges in the stiff

fabric of his kimono.

He did not look like anyone Hanako had ever seen before. But that he was a *man*, she sensed immediately.

He was staring at her. Quickly Hanako lowered her head. She noticed to her chagrin, that her knees had spread slightly. She promptly pulled them together. A warm flush crept into her skin, reddening her cheeks.

She could see his feet. They were squarely mounted on a pair of wooden *geta*. Between the *geta*'s thick black cords was a broad plain of skin, sparsely covered with wiry strands of hair. Two ankles, sharply defined, stood completely parallel, the rest of the legs disappearing into the dark cotton of the kimono trousers. Hanako's eyes lingered on the hem; she could look no higher. Her eyes moved back to her own feet, tucked into white shoes with golden buckles. There was a mud stain on her left shoe. Hanako frowned. Norihide had inadvertently trod on her foot in the movie theatre, and the stain was dark and obvious, the color of dried blood. Hanako had to fix it. She felt for her purse and quickly pulled out a tissue. Carefully bending, she neatly brushed away at the stain until it had almost disappeared. Then she folded the soiled tissue into a small bundle so that the stained part would not show. She put the tissue back into her purse.

Feeling somewhat satisfied, Hanako looked up. The man was still staring at her. Quickly she looked down again. She felt panicky but it wasn't an unpleasant feeling; a vague excitement seemed to accompany it. It was similar to the way she felt standing in the wings behind the priest as he waved the mysterious wand that summoned the gods. Everything and yet nothing was about to happen. *Sha-ka, sha-ka, sha-ka*. The sound of the wand. Then silence.

Slowly the priest would turn around, and his transformed presence would become hard and sure as the man in front of her now was — a dark material being fleshed out of the ether; hair, bone, skin suddenly there so that she, too, might taste of transformation, find breath to speak of it.

Startled by the thought, Hanako's eyelids snapped open, the eyes jerking down from their sockets into the harsh light of the empty train. There in the window was her pale reflection. The night that had shaped things out of the darkness fell back behind the glass and once

more became an invisible stream.

Sakuranomichi — *next stop, Sakuranomichi*. The trainmaster's tinny voice floated over the intercom. Hanako stood up. As she walked towards the door, she noticed the stain on her shoe. *Didn't I wipe that off?* she thought absently. She raised her head, looked through the glass of the window as the train pulled into the station. A lone man stood on the platform waiting to get on to the car she was about to leave. When the train stopped, they brushed past each other without a word.

