

The Sushi Master

Tony Strong

1: A Bell Rings Out

I bite into a persimmon.

From the nearby temple

A bell rings out.

- Masaoka Shiki

On the chopping board is a sea bass, fat as a man's bicep, the glittering grey-and-pewter skin shading to white at the belly. As he lines it up, prodding it into position, the flesh is firm and cold against his fingers. It has only recently been removed from its bed of crushed ice.

Taking a *tako-biki*, a long straight knife like a samurai's sword, he places it against the skin and draws the blade towards him. The scales open easily to the sharp steel. One, two movements, almost casual in their grace, and the precious sashimi falls onto the board.

He transfers it to a plate, adds strips of white radish, a coiled lace of cucumber. Nothing more; just these brief, almost translucent slices of uncooked flesh, fanned out like cards in a suit. With a quick, courteous bow he places it before the customer.

"Where does it come from?" Her Japanese is accurate but slow, as if she has learnt the whole phrase by rote.

"From Tsugaru. Caught yesterday."

She picks up the first slice with her chopsticks. A long moment while she chews, her eyes half-closed in pleasure.

"*Oishii.*" Delicious.

He acknowledges the compliment with another quick movement of his head. His hands are already busy with the next dish: tuna belly, thick and dense and rich, the flesh as bloodily purple as a beetroot. He brushes each slice with *nikiri*, a sweet rice-wine sauce, before arranging it on a plate studded with bright green shiso leaves.

He is aware that she is watching him work; so intently, she has not even finished her sea bass. But he is used to customers watching his hands, the tools of his trade, the fast confident gestures as he turns raw seafood into these delicate compositions, like landscapes on the plate, as precise and symbolic as temple gardens.

Only when she lifts her gaze to study his face instead does he start to feel unease. Doesn't she understand that just by sitting here, at the counter, she has already risked offending any other customers who might come by? It is fortunate she has come now, in the quiet of early evening, or he might have had to ask her to sit at a table instead. Some of his older, more traditionally-minded patrons still cling to the belief that a woman's scent, or the creams she uses on her face, can cloy the air, temporarily ruining the delicate palate that is needed to appreciate fine sashimi. This woman is not wearing perfume – he sniffs discreetly to check – but there is something about her, some strange hunger or intensity, which nevertheless puts him on his guard.

At last, as if remembering her manners, she lowers her eyes. He relaxes and shoots another glance in her direction. From her dark features, she could almost be Japanese. But that accent has the honking cadence of some other tongue behind it: American or Cantonese. An *ainoko*, perhaps, a half-and-half. Yes: that would explain her brashness, her failure to understand the unwritten etiquette of the *sushi-ya*. Although he has to admit that so far, she has not exactly behaved like a *gaijin* either. She hasn't rubbed her chopsticks together, or put soy sauce on her rice, or committed any one of the thousand and one other blunders westerners usually make. And she has ordered *okamase* – that is to say, she has paid him the compliment of asking him to serve whatever he thinks is best. But she is young; much too young to eat alone in a place like this, where the bill might come to many thousands of yen.

Perhaps she is a mistress, he thinks, a *joufu*, and the rich businessman who keeps her will be joining her in a few minutes. That too would make sense. A half-caste courtesy-wife; a plaything, a person of no importance. He glances at her face again as he works, looking for the evidence that will confirm it.

Without warning he finds himself meeting her eyes. Her gaze is direct, defiant even, with a kind of fiery determination in her expression. Startled, he makes an involuntary movement – a tiny recoil, but it is enough: the forged steel in his hand slips, sinking deep into his flesh. He looks down, appalled. A flap of brown skin hangs from the ball of his thumb. There is no blood; at least, not for a moment – but then, around the edges of the cut, a necklace of tiny red beads, berries that swell and ripen and burst before his eyes, filling his cupped palm with their juice. He hasn't cut himself in front of a customer since he was an apprentice. With a sharp intake of breath he steps back from the board, gesturing for one of his assistants to take over.

In the washroom, he fills the sink and plunges his hand into it. Blood unfolds in the clear liquid like feathers; *kanji* characters written in water. Wrapping the cut in a white face towel, pulled tight to stop the flow, he takes a moment to compose himself before returning to the restaurant. He will tell her to go. She has no right to be here.

Where the woman was sitting there is now only an empty place and a small pile of yen.

2: *The Days Before I Met Her*

I think of the days

Before I met her

When I seemed to have

No troubles at all.

- Fujiwara No Atsutada

Exactly one week later, she returns. Monday, five PM; the quietest time of the quietest day. Once again there are no other customers to witness her as she takes a seat at the counter.

“*Irashamasai,*” he says without warmth.

“*Konbanwa, itamae-san,*” she says politely. Good evening, sushi-master.

Once again she asks for *okamashe*. He begins by serving her *amaebi*, sweet raw shrimp. As he shucks off the heads and flips out the single vein running along the back he sees that she is watching his hands with the same rapt attention as before. He sets the plate before her and she sighs with pleasure as she sucks the sweet, jelly-like flesh from the tails.

She glances at his thumb, the blue plaster that is the badge of his shame. “I am sorry you cut yourself, *itamae-san,*” she says quietly. “I hope it was not because of me.” Again the words seem oddly fluid, as if they have been studied and memorised. “Please allow me to buy you a drink, some *sake* perhaps.”

He shakes his head, uncomfortable at this attempt at intimacy. She should talk about the fish: where it has come from, how fresh it is. Or, if she wants to make conversation, about the baseball. Anything else is an impertinence.

He does not feel angry. Anger has no place in the kitchen. But he makes a decision.

He takes two more prawns from the tank. This time he does not kill them before he peels them, cracking open their puny armour with two pushes of his thumbs. The antennae and eyes are still rolling in alarm as he places the plate in front of her. Normally he would ask a customer before serving them *ikezukuri*, live seafood. Today he does not.

She picks up one of the shrimp, pulls the head off, and puts the rest in her mouth.

“*Oishii.*” She looks him in the eye as she says it.

He grunts as he takes the plate back and passes it to one of his assistants to fry the heads. Reaching into the refrigerated cabinet below the counter, he takes out a *mirugai*, a long-neck clam. The ones he has are about nine inches long and around ten years old. The musty taste is said to confer potency, but it demands a strong stomach, not just because of the appearance of the wrinkled, yellowing trunk, which resembles nothing so much as the phallus of some raddled old sea-donkey, but also because of the texture, the gristly flesh squirting brine into your mouth as you chew it.

He thwacks it on the counter to show that it is still alive. The tube contracts a little in response. He cuts two slices diagonally across the tip, then serves them to her.

She hesitates, and raises her eyes to his.

“Where is it from?”

“From Edo bay.”

Nodding, she lifts the first piece with her chopsticks and lowers it delicately into her mouth.

“*Oishii,*” she says again.

By now he is aware that his assistants, the two *wakiita* who stand on either side of the chopping area preparing the fish, are watching. The waitresses too, although they have not openly glanced in his direction, seem to have edged a little closer to the sushi counter as they set out chopstick-holders and flowers on the wooden tables. He knows some of them think he is too traditional, too authoritarian,

that they will titter later behind their hands over this half-caste mattress-girl who has made a laughing-stock of him.

This meal is not finished yet. She has ordered *omakashe*: she is bound to eat whatever he gives her. He utters a terse command.

The nearer of his assistants turns to the freezer and brings out a block of red flesh, its sides silvery with rime.

Taking a heavy, willow-leaf blade, he shaves off a slice as thin and even as a handkerchief. He arranges it on a plate in a thin roll. Next to it he places a saucer of sauce – soy and rice wine, mixed with ginger and radish.

“What is it?”

“*Basashi*.” Raw horsemeat.

She stares at the slice of cherry-red meat for a moment. Then she picks it up with her chopstick, dips one end in the sauce, and bites into it, experimentally.

She chews, then nods and smiles. “It’s good.”

He barks another command. One of the kitchen staff runs out with a dish containing a number of wrinkled, pod-like tubers. He puts four into a serving bowl and places it before her. “*Shirako*,” he says, without waiting to be asked. Fish-sperm sacs. A delicacy, but one that even many Japanese prefer not to eat uncooked.

She lifts one to her mouth. Clearly, from her expression, these are unfamiliar to her – there is a look of intense concentration on her face as she eats. Watching her lips move, a sudden image comes to him, unbidden but quite clear: those sharp neat teeth puncturing the outer casing, bursting it, the sweet milt coating her tongue... Unexpectedly, he experiences a brief stab of sexual confusion. He pushes the image away.

“Thank you, Okawa-san,” she says humbly, when the bowl is empty. “I have never had a chance to try *shirako* before.”

Is there a hint of amusement, of mischief even, hidden behind the politeness of her smile?

He notes that she has used his name. Without speaking, he turns and goes into the kitchen. In the refrigerator where he keeps the most expensive items, those reserved for special customers, is a platter containing a single fish – bulbous, misshapen, yet also innocuous. It is neither ugly nor beautiful, neither large nor small. But when he places it on the chopping board he sees her eyes widen.

So she knows what it is. Good.

Taking a special knife – a *fugu-hiku* – he eviscerates the fish in a succession of careless movements. Then, placing his fingers on the flesh to keep it steady, he shaves off a dozen slices, thin as wafers. Moments later they are arranged on the plate in the shape of a flower, each slice of fish corresponding to a petal.

The chrysanthemum, flower of death.

She stares at the plate, fascinated, as he sets it before her. Then she shakes her head.

“Okawa-san, I cannot eat this,” she says quietly.

He feels a stab of triumph, mingled with contempt. “You don’t eat *fugu*?”

“I cannot afford it.”

Fugu is expensive, of course. But she is not going to get away that easily. “I’ll take it off the bill.” He gestures at the plate. “I’ve cut it now. Who else is going to eat it?”

Still with her eyes lowered, she takes a petal of the death-flower in her chopsticks and puts it in her mouth.

It would take only a pinhead of toxin from the liver or ovaries of the *fugu* to kill her – or rather, to paralyse her, for one of the curious things about *fugu* poisoning is that the victim remains conscious as first the mouth, then the limbs, and finally the lungs become incapable of movement. By the time he finds that he can no longer breathe, death is inevitable; but by then of course he is unable even to scream. His face becomes impassive, only the eyes betraying his agony as he dies in a stiff, immobile silence. The very finest sushi chefs, amongst the small number licensed to serve *fugu*, are celebrated for their ability to leave the faintest tingle of numbness on the diner’s lips, a teasing whisper of mortality.

To him, this is merely commonplace, a skill he mastered many years ago, and he watches the curious trepidation of diners as they take their first wary mouthful with an amusement he is always careful to conceal. Foreigners, in particular, found it so difficult to place their trust in the skills of another – yet this was simple foolishness: how had they got here, if not by trusting someone to fly the plane? How did they cross the road, if they did not trust the drivers to stop?

He knows, too, that the reverse is also true – that there are some Japanese who become addicted to *fugu* precisely because of its reputation for deadliness, and their eagerness to consume it is matched almost by a sense of disappointment that, on this occasion at least, they are still alive.

He watches as the woman eats the rest of the plateful, delicately putting each slice into her mouth and chewing it, as neatly as a cat. She seems rather unimpressed. When she has finished she says, "Thank you," but she does not compliment him on the taste.

Well, it does not matter: he knows her weakness now.

"Chef Okawa-san."

She has laid down her chopsticks and adopted an attitude of supplication, her head lowered and her hands clasped together.

"This is one of the most remarkable meals that I have eaten in my life. In the past weeks I have been to all the most famous sushi restaurants in Tokyo, looking for the one who is the very best, the most skilled sushi-chef. I knew as soon as I saw you at work that I had found him."

He waits, unsure where this is going.

"I have come to ask you for a job," she says simply.

He frowns. "As a waitress?"

"As a sushi chef. That is," she corrected herself quickly, "As an apprentice. I want to watch you, and to learn, and in return –"

Startled, his assistants stare at him. They have almost never heard him laugh before.

When he has finished he says, "Of course a woman cannot be a sushi chef."

"Why not?"

"Her hands are too warm. This is well known."

Without raising her head she holds out her hands to him. He understands that she wants him to feel them. As his fingers reluctantly close around hers he is amazed at how small and frail her wrists are, like two branches he could snap in two; and, more strangely, how the inside of her forearms are criss-crossed with old scars and burn-marks, all the way up to the elbow, like the pattern of a griddle.

Her hands are cold, the nails pared and plain. He drops them.

"Women cannot be sushi chefs," he repeats. "Even if they could, I would never have a woman in my kitchen. Now leave, you hear me? Go."

She nods mutely, biting her lip.

"The bill is 150,000 yen," he adds.

She gasps. "You said you would take off the *fugu* –"

“And I did.” Of course he does not expect her to pay the whole outrageous sum: his satisfaction lies in knowing that she is unable to, that she will be too ashamed ever to show her face in his restaurant again.

Slowly, she takes out a purse, removes a roll of bills and counts out 150,000 yen. It appears to be all she has. As she reaches the last few bills she smiles a little ruefully, as if at some private joke or consequence.

She stands up, placing the money on one side for the waitress. She knows he would never handle cash, not in the restaurant and possibly not even outside it. Hands that touch fish should remain pure at all times.

He nods. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” She hesitates, then adds in American, “I will remember this meal as long as I live, Chef Okawa.”

He says nothing more. The staff watch her go. Afterwards the restaurant seems strangely silent. He picks up a knife and finishes filleting the *fugu*.

3: A Woman's Skin Shining

Moonflowers in bloom.

A woman's skin

Shines through the dusk.

- Chiyojo

The next morning he rises at four-thirty, pulls on a fleece and a pair of rubber boots and goes to Tsukiji. The fish market is in the centre of Tokyo, near the fashionable district of Ginza. Although the shops and boutiques are closed, there are still a few smartly-dressed people on the streets, wealthy young Japanese in expensive clothes stumbling to one more nightclub before going home, incongruous among the market workers in their white coats and rubber boots.

The streets around the market are choked with traffic – moving away from it, mostly, making the first deliveries of what has already been sold. Carrier bicycles and tiny three-wheel trucks weave in and out of the throng. Even to cross the road is

potentially lethal; rainbow-hued spills of fish scales make the tarmac as slippery as a mirror. Automatically, he quickens his pace. However early he gets here, he cannot shake off the fear that someone may have already bought the best specimens. As he enters the focus of all this activity, the great interconnected warehouses and halls, the bikes are replaced by hand carts and trolleys. Inside, there is hardly any smell, only a kind of steely, briny brilliance to the air, along with a pervasive chill from the ice, stored here in such quantities that it never melts.

He walks past the wholesalers' displays, ignoring their cries, nodding occasionally to an important supplier he will come back to later, noting here and there where the specimens look especially good today. Great piles of sea urchin, as beautiful and detailed as Fabergé eggs. Octopus, their thick pink tentacles coiled up over their heads like dreadlocks. Swordfish, their long snout-mounted blades protruding lethally from the crates. Live crabs, snapping at each other's bald pates like barbers in search of business. All these can wait. It is to a long, low room, the concrete floor wreathed in ice-mist like a mountain lake, that he hurries: the hushed epicentre of all this activity, where men walk up and down silently inspecting rows of deep-blue torpedo-shaped fish, each one almost as long as a man. To the untrained eye they seem identical – the tail fins lopped off to save space, the gills pulled open for inspection, a deep nick near the tail to show that each has been properly bled. Every fish is numbered; there are perhaps fifty in all. Each will fetch over a hundred thousand dollars. But the auction, when it begins at precisely five thirty, is conducted without drama. A man with a pencil and a tiny, filthy notebook wanders amongst the tuna, calling out the numbers. The bids are muted, almost muttered. No one wants to advertise how much cash they are carrying.

He buys one bluefin tuna. It is not the biggest by any means, but a good one, the flesh firm and lean, the body powerful. He makes arrangements for it to be delivered and turns to go back to the outer halls.

“Good morning, Okawa-san.”

He stiffens. How can she be here? But she is, inappropriately dressed in trainers, jeans and a thin denim jacket. She bows her head over her clasped hands, nodding with cold. How long has she been here, waiting for him?

“I see you have bought a fine tuna. What a privilege it must be, to work on a fish such as that,” she says through chattering teeth.

He grunts, unwilling to be drawn into this conversation. But as he turns and heads back to the outer hall, she trots alongside him, talking away.

“That is the one I myself would have chosen. Number seventeen. I wondered which fish you would buy, and it was that one. You see, I had thought to myself, if he does buy number seventeen, it is a sign: I will approach him again – ”

He stops. “Why are you following me, woman?”

“To ask for a job. No, not a job,” she corrects herself, “because I will not require any money, at least not at first, and then only enough to pay for a room, because the meal you served me yesterday has unfortunately deprived me of the last of my funds.” Her Japanese is halting and barbaric; she stumbles over the words. A fish-seller sluices away a pile of fish-guts on the narrow walkway by hurling a bucket of water at it: she has to jump to avoid the torrent. He lets it wash harmlessly against his boots.

“I have already told you. There is no job. Now go away. I have work to do.”

“Respectfully, Okawa-san, may I point out that the market is open to everyone, so I have every right to be here, and if you will only let me explain –”

“There is nothing to explain. You are wasting your breath and my time.”

“I have studied sushi-making for many years. So you see, I would be useful –”

He makes a noise of disgust deep in his throat. “Where have you studied? How?”

She bows her head. “In America, Okawa-san.”

“America!” He stops, points at a crate of fish. “What is that?”

“*Saba.*” Mackerel.

“And that one?” he demands, indicating a glittering, iridescent display.

“*Kohada.*” Gizzard shad.

“And those?”

“*Aji.*” Horse mackerel.

Frustrated, he lowers his arm. “Just because you know fish, it doesn’t mean you know sushi.”

“I know, Okawa-san.”

“I worked for three years gutting fish and washing the storeroom floor before I was allowed into my master’s restaurant. Is that what you want? A job washing my floor?”

She hesitates, but only for a moment. “If that is all you will give me, yes.”

“I will not give it to you. I am trying to make you understand how foolish this is. This is an American thing. You think that because you want something badly enough, you can make it happen. In Japan it is not like that.”

She says, “When you washed that storeroom floor for three years, what made you stay?”

“I wanted to be a sushi chef. It was a test of my commitment.”

She nods. “As this is a test of mine.”

He sighs. Why will she not understand? She seems to think that she can argue him into changing his mind, as if it were a debate rather than a matter of principle. He makes a decision. “Come with me. I will show you why you cannot be an *itamae*.”