

bonsai

by Ernest Stableford

Fixed by a watermelon sun low over his west fields, Jeremy Haas starts at the soft rattle of the remote phone. He lays down stainless steel shears on a neat stack of bills and receipts; and, with the phone purring a second time, scoops it off the rough pine shelf at the back of his attached greenhouse. Bumping an uncorked liter of sake with his forearm, he snaps, "Yeah?"

Braced with copper wire, a miniature juniper ripples out over his free hand. It's roots dangling partly trimmed, the thin shrub is supported by a spring-bound, hinged, steel brace that girdles Jeremy's shrunken left hand, forming a serviceable grip.

"Jerry?" The high small voice adds weight to the handset. "Jerry, I'm sorry to bother you right now, but I wanted to see if there was anything . . ." The voice dwindles back into the ear piece. Sticky, pungent juniper sap sparks flashes of an immaculate eight acre farm in Hokkaido where he remembers an odd sense of being home the months he'd worked and studied there for room and board.

"No, we're doing okay, Mom." The weariness he's been waiting for seeps in. Anybody would have guessed he wouldn't want to chat now. He hopes the extension hasn't wakened his wife. "Tamieko is sleeping. The midwife cleaned up around here. I've taken care of everything else." His eye on the sake bottle, Jeremy gently shakes the juniper over a shallow pot, trying to free it from his braced left hand.

"Your voice sounds funny, Jerry. Are you alright?"

With the remote pressed between his ear and shoulder, Jeremy snaps open his hand brace by an adjustable slide on the wrist bracelet. "Just tired I guess." His Mom is used to his silences. She would wait. The tiny juniper collapses on the floor, deformed for lack of support.

Through the double glass greenhouse doors Jeremy hears Tamieko call softly from the downstairs bedroom. "Jeremy?"

So the phone has wakened her, his little sparrow. Her father had mailed the sake from Hokkaido, an old vintage for the first grandchild, an unprovident expense for a Japanese market farmer.

"Oh, you and your father, Jerry," his mother scolds gently. "I just knew. You haven't slept at all, have you?"

He slides his left hand around the neck of the sake bottle, then tightens the brace enough to feel the pressure in his shrunken fingers. His father had not wanted him to go to Japan, and had never said anything about his hand, ever.

Jeremy exhales. "After I called you this morning, we didn't get back from the hospital till two. Then there were all the other. . . arrangements."

Tepid, juniper sweet air pushes up the thin curtain of chill rolling off the angled glass above him. The late October light grows smoky, and the broad Iowa sky glows over the still standing west thirty acres he'd planted with Japanese seed. Joe Marshall needled him all summer about the stunted stalks. "Japs gonna end up with this place one way or the other, Jer." But he'd rumbled across the street in his combine last week to help harvest.

His mother exhales into the mouthpiece. "Where is the . . . where's Mathew . . . now?"

Slugging down a mouthful of sake, Jeremy chokes and coughs. Where the hell would he be? "I left him at Cardigan's."

"You didn't want to go with Knox's? They're members of our church, and took care of your father."

Jeremy buries the mouthpiece against his sleeve, forcing his breath through his nose three times in rapid succession. Tamioko had shown him the technique her father uses to control his temper. He hears her softly calling from the bedroom. ". . . my baby."

Jeremy snaps into the phone, "They're members of *your* church, Mom. Don't worry, okay? I took care of it." He takes another mouthful of sake, the sweet burn seeping into and soothing the pulse in his temples.

"I knew you would, Jerry. I mean, oh, I know that you do — like your father did. The house, the farm. You've always been so good with your hands." Her voice dips. "It's just that Joe called and said there were no lights on, so I thought I'd call . . . to . . . see . . ."

Jeremy wants to head off what's coming. "The doctor said having it in a hospital wouldn't have made any difference, Mom. He was too small. Something in the water maybe, runoff from the chemicals Dad used; maybe something genetic." He looks at his left hand. "He . . . Mathew . . . couldn't have survived more than a few days, even in intensive care." Jeremy tips up the bottle and swallows hard. "Without the scans, nobody could have known."

"Of course not. It's alright. Nobody blames you, Jerry."

The wine light in the greenhouse deepens, the chill from the glass thickening. Jeremy nudges the fallen juniper with his toe. Properly wired and trimmed it could bring a hundred bucks in a year. A shame to waste it. Very un-Japanese. Joe Marshall called him a crazy Nippophile. "The old man wouldn't like what you're doing to his place, Jer." But then he'd seen the yields and asked where he could get seed.

"Jerry?" His Mom's voice softens. "I called Rebecca and Eric and Catherine. They'll be here tomorrow."

"Oh no, Mom." Weariness floods his eyes. "What for?" He tries to shake his hand free from the bottle. "I mean, they don't need to . . ."

"Your sisters and brother want to be here for you, Jerry. They want to help. You've kept to yourself so since going away, and your father and . . . I mean, most all last year over seas in that place, and now you're always busy with the farm."

“Oh, Mom.”

“Will there be a viewing?”

The bottle snared in his left hand feels like it's dragging him down. He wedges it between his knees, trying to pull his hand away, and hears Tamieko crying in the bedroom distinctly this time. “I want my baby.”

“Mom, he was already blue and getting splotchy when Cardigan's picked him up at the Emergency Ward. I didn't want him all made up like some . . . some . . .”

“That's alright, Jerry. It's alright. You always know what to do. Just like your father. It's alright.”

Tamieko had been crying all morning. She is so perfect to him, so unearthly dainty and pretty. He'd sat with her and been strong for her, the way her father and brother would have, pretending not to hear.

“Jerry, let us help you this time.”

Tamieko's cry is softer now. “I want my baby.”

“Mom, I've got to go.”

His mother's voice gathers speed. “I just want to help if I can, Jerry.” The sake bottle won't work loose. “You've kept to yourself so since coming back with that new thing on your hand and a wife who hardly ever says anything. We all just want to . . .”

Jeremy slams down the remote on the pine shelf and a sharp pain shoots up his forearm. The phone casing falls apart in his and, a jagged piece imbedded in his palm when he wrenches it away, toppling a freshly repotted miniature birch. Graveled soil bursts across the greenhouse floorboards, and the stack of bills and receipts drifts down slowly like giant snow flakes over the immaculate, windrowed acre fields at the beginning of winter in Hokkaido when the time to leave had drawn near.

Blood quickly wells around the plastic splinter. He reaches with his left hand to pull it out, but the bottle caught in his handbrace prevents him from closing his fingers. Furious at the weight, Jeremy swings his left arm out wildly, sweeping two potted maples and a baby oak off the concrete retaining wall behind him, and shattering the sake bottle against the rough hewn center post.

Trying to shake the broken plastic wedge free, he flicks streaks of blood across his pant legs, spattering the dirt covered papers now strewn over the floorboards under broken pots and limp, contorted, miniature trees.

Through the double glass doors Jeremy sees Tamieko in her white nightgown, gliding barefoot toward him across the buffed pine living room floor. Her tiny, wide set, dark eyes are puffy, but round with regard — that way she has of looking at him as if waiting, concerned always to know what he wants.

She'd needed two pints of blood, and the doctor had warned her, when they'd insisted she would not stay in the hospital, to remain lying down for a full day. Jeremy reaches for the polished brass latch, but the broken neck of the sake bottle is wedged in the brace on his left hand, and blood drops

between his fingers from the plastic splinter piercing his right.

Tamieko stands on the other side of the doors, waiting for him. She is so patient, so tiny and beautiful. He knew when they married that she'd been bred to wait for him, to hear from him when and how things would be done.

He reaches again for the latch, unable to open the doors. His father wouldn't approve. Joe Marshall calls him a Nippophile. His mother needs to help. And Tamieko is on the other side, looking into his eyes, waiting. He looks back, weary to his marrow with old rage.

He wants to tell her, but can only mouth the words: I don't know what to do.

And in this way, at last, his tears for his son come to him.