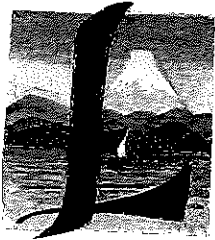


TOKOYO



ong, long ago there lived a powerful emperor who had fallen sick with a mysterious illness. His bones ached, it was difficult for him to breathe, and he was always in great pain. His illness made him short-tempered and irritable, so that he easily became offended by any slight to his dignity, real or imagined. One day, for no particular reason, he grew furious with the noble samurai Oribe Shima and ordered the good man banished. Oribe Shima was sent to the Oki Islands, a wild and desolate place far from the court of the emperor, to live out the rest of his days in poverty and isolation.

Oribe Shima had only one child, a brave and spirited young woman named Tokoyo. From the time she was a tiny girl, Tokoyo had been in love with the sea, and she spent all her time with the women who dive for oysters deep down at the bottom of the ocean. By the time Tokoyo became a grown woman, she was the best of all the oyster divers, fearless and strong. Nobody could dive deeper or swim farther than she, and everyone admired her courage and endurance.

When Tokoyo learned of her father's banishment, she was heartbroken, and furious with the unjust emperor. She decided to find her father and to share his lonely exile with him. She sold all their property and walked to the small fishing village of Akasaki. There she tried to persuade the fishermen to take her to the Oki Islands, but not one wanted to help her. It was too long and dangerous a voyage. Besides, it was forbidden to visit those who had been banished, and the fishermen feared they would be punished if they helped her.

Finally Tokoyo spent the rest of her money on a small sailing boat. On a clear, moon-

less night, she slipped down to the harbor and set sail for the Oki Islands all by herself. It was a reckless thing to do, but good fortune smiled on her and sent her a strong breeze. The sea remained calm, and the following evening she arrived at a rocky cliff off one of the islands, exhausted and chilled to the bone. Since she could find nowhere to dock her boat, she tied a bundle of food and clothes to her head, tucked her oyster dagger into her belt, and swam to shore.

After resting all night in a small sheltered place between two rocks, she climbed the cliff to the road above. There she met a fisherman and immediately asked him if he had word of her father, Oribe Shima. No, the fisherman had never heard of this man. Tokoyo told the fisherman her story, and he warned her never to mention her father's name again, for if the emperor knew she was looking for him, he might easily have her father killed.

Tokoyo wandered from island to island, hoping to hear word of her father but afraid to ask about him. She managed to stay alive by begging food from some of the kind people she met along the way. Months passed, but she heard no mention of her father's name, and she began to fear he was no longer alive.

One night she came to a small shrine that had been built on a rocky ledge. She decided to pass the night there and curled up in the shadow of the shrine, her bundle tucked beneath her head. In a little while she was awakened by the sound of a girl sobbing and a curious clapping of hands. She opened her eyes, and in the bright moonlight she saw a young girl kneeling before a priest, who clapped his hands over her and chanted strange prayers.

Tokoyo was horrified to see the priest seize the frightened girl and drag her to the edge of the cliff. The girl screamed in terror. Just as he was about to push her into the angry sea below, Tokoyo raced from the shadows of the shrine and pulled the girl to safety.

"What are you doing?" she cried, pushing the priest away.

The priest looked at her sadly. "I can see you are a stranger to this place," he said quietly, "and not familiar with our customs. This island has been cursed by an evil god, Yofune-Nushi. He lives at the bottom of the sea and each year demands that we sacrifice a young girl to his kingdom. If we don't send what he demands, he becomes angry and causes great storms at sea, so that the boats of our fishing people are broken and many of the fishermen drown."

Tokoyo listened seriously to everything the priest said. Then she spoke.

"Holy monk, my name is Tokoyo, and I am the daughter of Oribe Shima, a noble samurai who was banished to these islands by the emperor. Months ago I came here looking for my father, but though I have searched and searched for him, I cannot find him, and now I believe I will never see him again. My life is no longer precious to me. Death would be a sweet release. But life is precious to this young girl. Allow her to go free, and I will take her place."

While the old priest looked on, Tokoyo untied the girl's hands and motioned for her to leave. Then she wrapped a white cloth around her head and knelt at the shrine to pray for courage. In her heart, she was determined to kill the evil god Yofune-Nushi. She took her oyster dagger from her bundle of clothes, placed it between her teeth, and dove into the water.

Down, down, down she plunged, into the icy water. A path of moonlight led her to the bottom of the sea, and Tokoyo allowed the current to pull her deeper and deeper. Finally she found herself at the mouth of an enormous cave with walls of mother-of-pearl, encrusted with jewels and seashells and glowing with an unearthly light. But the cave was empty except for a wooden statue. Swiftly she swam to the statue and saw it was a wooden likeness of the emperor himself, beautifully made, but tied tightly with ropes of black seaweed, which seemed to be strangling it.

At the sight of the emperor who had caused her so much grief, Tokoyo's heart filled with bitterness. She raised her dagger to strike angrily at the statue, but then she thought, What good would it do? Better to do good than evil. Quickly she undid her sash and tied the statue to her back. Then she began swimming upward.

As she left the cave, a horrible face rose up in front of her. It was covered with scales and had hundreds of tiny legs growing from its long, snakelike body. She knew it was Yofune-Nushi. A poisonous cloud of red issued from its black mouth and swirled about her, blinding her. But Tokoyo raised her dagger and struck deeply into the monster's rolling, lidless eyes, and then again at its heart. Squirming and wriggling with pain, the sea-god slumped to the ocean's floor and died. With her last ounce of strength, Tokoyo cut off the sea-god's head and began swimming upward with one hand. The water pressed in around her, and she began to see flashing lights behind her eyes. I am dying, she thought, but still she kept swimming. The path of moonlight guided her up and up, until somehow, gasping, she reached the surface, still clutching the horrible head of the dead sea-god.

The priest, lingering on the shore, was amazed to see Tokoyo emerge from the waves. He climbed down the cliff to the beach and carried her out of the water, then called for the islanders to come and help. When they saw the head of Yofune-Nushi, they knew they were at last free of the terrible curse. They buried the head deep in the sand and tenderly carried Tokoyo into the village, along with the statue of the emperor.

Word of the courageous diver who had killed the sea-god and rescued the emperor's statue soon reached the court of the emperor himself. Miraculously the emperor quickly recovered from the illness that had tormented him for so many years. He realized that he, too, had been cursed by the evil god. When he discovered that the person who had freed him from the sea creature's curse was the daughter of Oribe Shima, he immediately decreed the end of the samurai's banishment.

Tokoyo's father had been living in a lonely cottage far from any of the villages. Since he



Tokoyo

was forbidden to speak to the islanders, none had known of his presence. The emperor's messengers came to tell him that his daughter was now a heroine and that he was free to return to his home.

At first he could not believe that his months of exile were truly over. But Tokoyo herself finally found her way to the cottage, and father and daughter were joyfully reunited. They returned to the court of the emperor, where they were received with great honor, and they lived the rest of their days in peace and prosperity.