

DELICATE TOUCH

story by Stephanie Waxman

KAZU TAKAMURA SAT UPRIGHT on the cream-colored leather couch, which took some effort as the couch was wide and deep, designed to relax people. But Kazu Takamura was not relaxed. He glanced nervously at the secretary again. She sat at a computer, her eyes glued to the screen. She had told him it would only be a few minutes, but that had been fifteen minutes ago.

At least he thought she had indicated a few minutes. Maybe he had misunderstood. Maybe he had not been kept waiting. Maybe his appointment was at four o'clock, not three-thirty. At any rate, several people had passed through the room, and no one had offered him tea.

His thin, tapered fingers reached down once again to touch the large black portfolio resting against his thigh. He glanced at his watch. He brushed an errant thread from his trousers. Once more he looked at the pictures on the wall, black-and-white photos, narrow black wooden frames, off-white 2³/₄-inch mat. The one of the reclining

nude irritated him. The angle of the light on her backside was too obvious. The one of the mountain had a calming effect, and his eyes lingered on it a moment. The way the light danced on the edge of the ridge reminded him of Mount Fuji at dawn. He felt a pang at being so far from home. Just then, the door to the inner office opened, and a woman paused at its threshold. She was of medium height with a sprinkling of brown spots on her face. She wore a plain gray suit, a red silk scarf at her throat. Her hair was the color of udon noodles. He couldn't guess her age; *gaijin* all seemed the same to him.

She walked over and extended her hand. "Mr. Takamura."

He couldn't get used to the offer of a hand. He took it limply in his own. Her hand was soft and cool. He let it go quickly. "Much pleasure to meet," he said as he stood.

"I'm Toni Donaldson," she said, her eyes bright and friendly. "I hope your trip was pleasant. I've been so anxious to meet you."

She spoke too fast. He didn't know what she wanted, but when she turned to go back into the office, he followed.

Her office was a quiet room, lit by northern light. Her desk was large and neat. Several paintings leaned against one wall. A bookcase stood against another. There was a black leather couch facing two chairs separated by a low, square glass table. An architect's table stood in front of the window, the whole city spread out below.

"Can I get you a soda? Coffee? Perrier? Here, why don't you take a seat," she said.

He sat down and said with as much politeness as the

situation demanded, “Whatever you drink, I will drink.”

She gave a quick laugh, saying, “If I have any more caffeine I’ll jump out that window!” Then she called through the open door, “Alex, two Perriers.”

What was Perrier? In any case, he was pleased to note that in America there were ceremonious exchanges before business.

“So,” she said, sliding into the chair facing him, “you are here at last! Somehow I expected you’d be older. Though what can one really tell from e-mails?”

He nodded, searching for a word to say about her age. Finally, he abandoned the effort in favor of a safer topic. “It is very warm today.”

“That’s for sure. California in March is a real treat if you’re used to cold weather. It makes hanging a show so much easier. No tracking muddy slush into the gallery. We’ll go over after lunch so you can check out the space. But first, I’m so eager to see everything!”

A young man entered and placed two glasses on the table. “Thanks, Alex,” the woman said. The young man left, closing the door behind him. The woman took her glass and stood up. Kazu took his own and was momentarily confused. Were they not going to drink together first, before looking at his work?

He stood, holding his glass.

She took a few gulps then set her drink down. “We can lay everything out over there,” she said, indicating the drafting table.

He made a slight bow and set his glass aside. He certainly wouldn’t put it anywhere near his work.

He went to the drafting table, unzipped his portfolio and sat on the high stool facing the table. She stood behind him, peering over his shoulder, so close he could smell her perfume. He wished she would move back, but even if he knew the English words, he would never ask such a thing.

He removed the first painting and carefully laid it down, pleased to note that the table was free of dust. He lifted up the thin film of parchment to reveal *School Children*. Three boys, their schoolbooks scattered to the side of a country road, surrounded a school friend. She was bent forward over a fallen log, her uniform pushed up, her panties down around her knees. Two boys held her arms while a third flogged her bare bottom with the strap that had held his books.

“Such a delicate touch,” the woman said. “The line is so subtle; the pigment is barely there.” She leaned over his shoulder to better inspect the image. “It’s terribly exciting to see the originals at last. What’s next?”

Keeping the parchment behind *School Children*, he carefully laid it to one side, then brought out the picture entitled *Old Grandfather*. As in the classic late 19th century woodcuts of Japanese erotica, it showed a man peeking through a shoji screen to view the scene beyond: an old man, skinny and shriveled except for his engorged penis, which was pushed into a woman, her face frozen in terror, her kimono torn.

“Ah-h,” said the woman. “In the tradition of *shunga*, with the peeping-Tom motif. Ingenious.”

She knew about *shunga*! Kazu felt himself color at

the compliment. So few foreigners understood the historical context of his work.

The next piece was his favorite: *Girl On A Swing*. The ground color was indigo, the girl bright pink, the swing crimson. She swung high, her pigtailed flying. A man, laughing wildly, faced her. His kimono had fallen open, revealing a large erection. The girl had a frantic look on her face as she pumped furiously, the blue tie of her school uniform whipping behind her.

The American woman said nothing. Kazu waited for her to make a comment about the realistic depiction of the landscape. Or to notice the pale color of the girl's skin compared to the darker color of the man. Or perhaps to appreciate the perspective, slightly exaggerated to highlight the central figure. But her silence continued. He did not want to look at her, to indicate in any way that he was waiting. He sat still, hardly breathing.

What if she had had a sudden change of heart? Or worse, what if she had just been humoring him about the other pieces? Perhaps she was now considering how to politely reject everything.

But then she touched his back. He felt violated by so intimate a gesture. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that it was not her hand that was touching him, it was her body. She was leaning into him.

He jumped to his feet.

"Mr. Takamura," she said excitedly. "I'm sorry. It's just that your work has moved me very much." She took a step backward and reached up to her scarf, loosening the knot.

His heart was racing. Was she going to remove her

scarf? Why had she touched him? His paltry English left him entirely.

She gave a nervous laugh. "I was looking at the girl swinging toward him and then back and then toward him." She spoke rapidly. The foreign words glanced off him like darts. She let her scarf fall to the ground.

"It is a painting," he said weakly.

Her eyes were ablaze. "His eagerness...her terror..." The color had risen in her cheeks. Suddenly she grabbed his hand and pushed it under her skirt, pressing it to her wet crotch. He let out a small cry as he drew his hand away, then reached back to brace himself against the table. With horror, he realized that his sticky palm had left a large smudge on *Girl On A Swing*.

"Mr. Takamura, please."

"*Gomen kudasai, gomen kudasai,*" he mumbled. He piled *Girl On A Swing* on top of *Old Grandfather* on top of *School Children* and stuffed the pictures into the portfolio. Not bothering to zip it, he grabbed it and headed for the door, eyes straight ahead.

"Mr. Takamura?" she called out in a bewildered whisper.

The receptionist looked up as he bolted from the room.