

Twisted Ropes

Louie knew nothing of the Bird's death. When the bodies were found on Mt. Mitumine, he was in Hollywood, falling to pieces. He was drinking heavily, slipping into flashbacks, screaming through nightmares, lashing out. Murdering the Bird was his fevered obsession, and he gave his life to it. He spent hours slamming his hatred into a punching bag, preparing for the confrontation he believed would save him. He walked around with murder in his head.

Throughout 1947 and 1948, he jumped into scheme after scheme to raise money to return to Japan. A man talked him into investing \$7,000 in an earthmoving equipment business, then stole the money. Plans to found a boat company and a movie production company failed. He even considered working as a mercenary bombardier in a coup in a Caribbean country, but the coup was called off. He and a partner cut a deal with Mexican officials to issue fishing licenses to Americans. The partner was in a car wreck, and the deal died with him. Each time Louie got money together, it was lost, and his return to Japan had to be put off.

Drinking made him unrecognizable. As he sat at a bar one night, stinking drunk, he groped a woman. Next he knew, he was outside, his jaw thumping

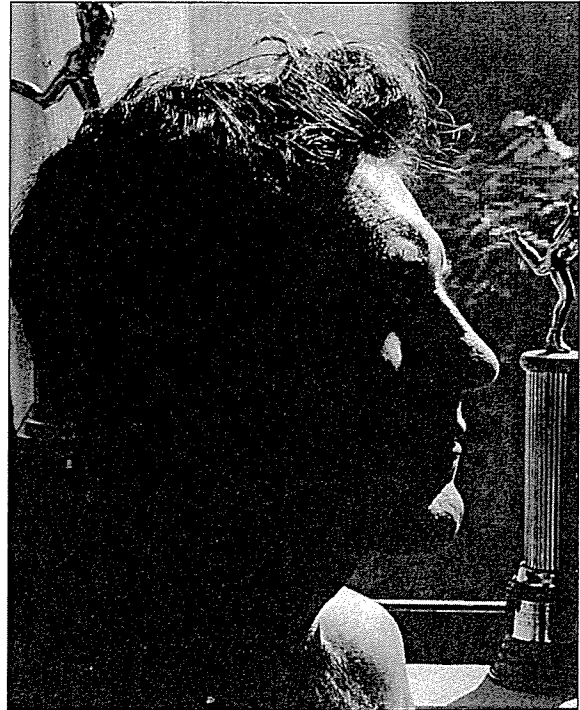
with pain, and a friend was chewing him out. The woman's boyfriend had knocked him unconscious.

On another night, after drinking what he'd remember as only one beer, he felt oddly light and stepped outside. Then he was in his car, driving, with no idea where he was. He weaved through the streets, disoriented, stopped the car, and rolled out. There was a tree before him, and he relieved himself against it.

When he turned back for his car, he couldn't find it. He stumbled along all night, scared and lost.

At sunrise, he realized he was in front of his apartment building. There was Cynthia, frantic with worry. He toppled into bed. When he woke and dressed, he had no memory of the night before and couldn't understand why

Louie, after the war. COURTESY OF FRANK TINKER



the heels of his new shoes were worn down. He couldn't find his car, so he reported it stolen. Two days later, the police found the car. He went to it, and memories of his night came back to him, carrying the ethereal quality of a nightmare.

Cynthia pleaded with Louie to stop drinking. It did no good.

The further Louie fell, the less he could hide it. Friends spoke to him about his drinking, but they made no impact. Pete, too, was worried but knew only of Louie's financial woes. He had no idea that Louie had slid into alcoholism and that he planned to kill a man.

Cynthia was distraught over what her husband had become. In public, his behavior was frightening and embarrassing. In private, he was often prickly and harsh. Cynthia couldn't bring Louie back. Her pain became anger, and she and Louie had bitter fights. She slapped him and threw dishes at him; he grabbed her so forcefully he left her bruised. While she cooked dinner on a friend's docked yacht, Louie was so snide to her, in front of their friends, that she walked off the boat. He chased her down and grabbed her by the neck. She slapped him, and he let her go. She fled to his parents' house.

Cynthia eventually came back, and the two struggled on together. His money gone, Louie tapped a friend for a thousand-dollar loan, staking his car as collateral. The money ran out, the loan came due, and Louie had to turn over his keys.

When Louie was a small child, he'd tripped and fallen on a flight of stairs. When he'd gotten up, he'd fallen again, then again. He'd risen convinced that God was toying with him. Now he had the same thought. When he heard preaching on the radio, he angrily turned it off. He forbade Cynthia to go to church.

In the spring of 1948, Cynthia became pregnant. Louie was excited, but the prospect of more responsibility filled him with guilt and despair. He drank ever harder. His only hope of pulling himself together, he believed, was to kill the man who'd taken everything from him.

One night in late 1948, Louie dreamed beside Cynthia. The Bird rose over him, the belt unfurled, and Louie felt the buckle cracking into his head, pain like lightning. Around and around the belt whirled, lashing Louie's skull.

Louie raised his hands to the Bird's throat, his fingers clenching around it. Now he was on top of the Bird, and the two thrashed.

There was a scream. Louie fought on, trying to crush the life from the Bird. On his knees with the Bird under him, he looked down. The Bird's shape shifted.

Louie was straddling Cynthia's chest, hands locked on her neck. Through her closing throat, she was screaming. Louie was strangling his pregnant wife.

He let go and leapt off of Cynthia. She recoiled, gasping, crying out. He sat beside her, horrified, his nightclothes heavy with sweat. The sheets were twisted into ropes around him.

Cissy Zamperini was born two weeks after Christmas. Louie was enraptured, but Cissy couldn't cleave him from alcoholism or his murderous obsession. In the sleepless stress of caring for a newborn, Louie and Cynthia fought furiously. Louie drank without restraint.

One day, Cynthia found Louie gripping a crying Cissy in his hands, shaking her. With a shriek, she pulled the baby away. Appalled at himself, Louie went on bender after bender. Cynthia packed up, took the baby, and walked out. Louie was alone. All he had left was his alcohol and his rage.

On the other side of the world, Shizuka Watanabe sat in a Tokyo restaurant. Outside, the street was lively with shoppers. Shizuka watched people drifting past.

It was there that she saw him. Just outside the door, gazing in at her, was her dead son.