

The Body on the Mountain

In the first winter after the war, a police officer trudged through a remote village in Japan's Nagano prefecture, knocking on doors. The hunt for Mutsuhiro Watanabe now involved every police force in Japan. In one prefecture alone, 9,100 officers participated.

The officer reached the largest house in the village. Inside, he found an old farmer, his wife, and their laborer. As the laborer prepared pickles, a traditional gift to visitors, the officer showed a photograph of Watanabe. Did they recognize him? None of them did.

The officer left. He had no idea that the fugitive he was seeking had just been standing in front of him, holding a plate of pickles.

The Bird had come to Nagano the previous September. He grew a mustache and chose an alias, Saburo Ohta, a name unlikely to attract notice. He told people he was a refugee from Tokyo whose relatives were dead, a common story. He met the old farmer and offered himself as a laborer in exchange for room and board. The farmer agreed.

At night, lying on the farmer's floor, Watanabe couldn't sleep. Thousands of other soldiers were being arrested and tried for war crimes. Many were

given death sentences. On the pages on which he poured out his emotions, Watanabe wrote of feeling guilty when he thought of those soldiers. He pondered his behavior toward the POWs. "Am I guilty?" he wrote. He didn't answer his question but expressed no remorse.

Listening to radio reports on fugitive war crimes suspects, Watanabe watched his hosts, worried that they'd suspect him. The newspapers called the fugitives "enemies of human beings," wounding Watanabe's feelings. It seemed to him outrageous that the Allies who "would not forgive" would oversee trials of Japanese. "I wanted to cry out," he wrote, "'That's not fair!'"

The tension wore on him. He had to work himself to exhaustion to bring sleep on. He wondered if he should surrender.

One night, as the fire died in the hearth, Watanabe told the farmer who he was. The farmer listened, his eyes on the fire, his tongue clicking on his teeth.

"People say to control your mouth, or it brings evil," the farmer said. "You should be careful of your speech."

He said nothing else and turned away.

Watanabe waited out a bitter winter. The policeman's visit shook him. The farmer's wife eyed him with what seemed to be suspicion. When night fell, Watanabe lay awake, mulling capture and execution.

When summer came, Watanabe was asked to accompany the farmer's son as he toured the country, selling leather. The tour would take them through major cities where he was surely being sought, but he was living on the farmer's good graces and had to accept. Watanabe donned glasses to obscure his features and headed off, filled with anxiety.

In the cities, no one gave Watanabe a second look. As his fear of being caught eased, he became bolder. He longed to see his family. They would now be in Tokyo, on their regular visit to his elder sister Michiko's home. Watanabe took out fortune-telling cards his little sister had given him just before he'd fled. The cards told him if he went to his family, he'd be safe.

On a sweltering day in the summer of 1946, Mutsuhiro boarded a train for Tokyo. His timing couldn't have been worse. Doubling their efforts to find him, the police were scouring the city for him. Watanabe was walking into the manhunt.

The Watanabe family was sitting in Michiko's house when the front door opened and in walked Mutsuhiro. The room fell silent as the startled family members looked at Mutsuhiro and then at each other. Mutsuhiro, overwhelmed and dizzy from the heat, wavered, afraid he'd faint. The family broke into celebration.

For two hours, Mutsuhiro listened to his family tell of being arrested, questioned, followed, and searched. He said nothing of where he'd been, believing they'd fare better if they didn't know.

There was shuffling outside. Someone looked and saw detectives. The Watanabes sprang up. Someone tossed Mutsuhiro's belongings into a closet. Someone else whisked their teacups into the sink. Mutsuhiro raced into a tearoom. Behind him, he heard the detectives enter and begin questioning his family.

His heart racing, Mutsuhiro tried to decide whether to run or conceal himself here. The room was tiny, but there was a closet. Slowly, slowly, he opened the closet door and squeezed in. He decided not to close the door, as it risked making noise. He stood there, a hand over his mouth to smother the sound of his breath.

The tearoom door opened. A detective looked in, and there was a pause as he looked about. If he only turned his eyes to the closet, he'd see Mutsuhiro. "It is tidy," he said. The door closed. The detectives left.

Mutsuhiro had planned to stay overnight, but the scare changed his mind. He told his mother he'd try to see her again in two years. Then he left, walking back, he wrote, "into the lonesome world."

Watanabe returned to the village and waited tables in the farmer's son's coffee shop. The farmer approached him with a proposition. Arranged marriage was still common in Japan, and the farmer had found a young woman for him.

Watanabe was tempted; he was lonely and unhappy, and liked the idea of marrying. But marriage now seemed impossible. He said no.

The woman eventually came to him. When the farmer's son fell ill, she visited, and Watanabe went in to meet her. He liked her. Part of him seemed to want to fall for her, and he believed that love "could save my daily life."

The woman was taken with the handsome waiter and lingered in the coffee shop to be near him. He kept his identity secret from her. She told her parents about him in hopes of winning their blessing for a wedding. After much thought, Watanabe decided he had to leave her. All he told her was that he had a burden that would make her unhappy.

He quit his job, hiked into the countryside, and took a job as a cowherd. He was despondent. At sunset, he lifted his eyes to the Asama volcano, watching a ribbon of smoke unspooling from its summit, the cattle grazing below.

In Japan's Okuchichibu Mountain range stands the holy peak of Mitsumine. In the fall of 1946, the bodies of a man and a woman were found there, a suicide pistol lying with them. No one knew who they were.

The police drove Shizuka Watanabe to Mitsumine and led her to the bodies. Shizuka looked down at the lifeless form of the young man.

Japanese newspapers ran the sensational story: Mutsuhiro Watanabe, one of Japan's most wanted men, was dead. He and a woman, probably a lover, had killed themselves.