RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

My Name is Sei Shōnagon

Jan Blensdorf

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About the Author

Born in Australia, Jan Blensdorf has lived and worked abroad for many years and is now based in England. *My Name is Sei Shōnagon* grew out of two years she spent in Tokyo. This is her first novel.

My Name is Sei Shōnagon

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TODAY, RAIN IS the first thing I know. I smell it and hear it at the same time. And my heart beating deep rapid beats into the pillow with the quickness of the waking.

Before they come to turn and reposition me, there is a closer scent of heavy hospital linen, and an image forming in my mind: the *kanji* for rain, which it is said began as a drawing of drops falling from a cloud, the picture to which we have given the sound '*ame*'. The English word for rain is a woman alone, looking out of a window into the rain as into herself, watching it join the sea until they blend without horizon. And then I drift beyond rain, to the French '*âme*', which has no picture but is simply a beautiful colour without boundaries – the word for soul.

I don't even know if you are still alive. I'm going to talk to you anyway. I'm going to tell you everything I can remember.

There is an incense shop in a small street leading off Omotosando. It is called *The Bridge of Dreams*. And upstairs, where the scent from below lingers as softly as the memory of a lover's hand or tongue, there is a room. While the stairs leading to it are narrow, the space that opens out before you is large, empty apart from a painted screen, the floor covered in fine-woven *tatami.* Behind the doors of the cupboards at one end lie all kinds of things, hidden things. But the room itself is completely open to view, an untroubled surface, like calm water.

The shop below is as restful as a temple compared to the street outside. On the counter, on any given day, a small burner sits in readiness to release the perfumed essence of aloeswood or *jinkoh.* In the sixth century a great log of this wood drifted ashore, on to the island of Awaji, near Kobe.

The scent that filled the air when the timber began to burn was so incredible that the islanders decided to present it to the Empress. They had made an extraordinary find – a source of one of the rarest fragrances then known, which had come to Japan with Buddhism less than fifty years before. As always, a sliver of the same species will be lying with others on the counter in the little shop off Omotosando, its tendrils of smoke still coiled in wait like a promise, ready to thread their way out into the polluted air of Tokyo – the pulse of another age.

Soon the hollow metal bird above the door will move with its child's toy sound between a ring and a rattle, and someone will enter. The client will take time to look, to muse, will consider the merits of one choice over another, and will then wait for the chip to be placed on the burner, for the warmth to coax it to life.

To breathe it in, eyes half-closed, is to be entered by another world – of revelations, infinitely subtle. This is what the Chinese were the first to call *Wenxiang* – listening to incense.

When the air is heavy with rain I can hear the occasional high-pitched scream of metal on metal. We must be somewhere near a station. Near the contradictions of stations everywhere: the rushing to and the rushing away from, the heaviness of machinery permitting the lightness of flight, the smiles of children next to the closed faces of adults.

In some cities the occasion of a person jumping into the path of an oncoming train would draw the media, but in Tokyo hundreds of rail suicides happen every year. And so, while travellers returning home will often comment, 'Another suicide on the tracks today', the event itself will not necessarily make the news. If it does, it is more often

than not an opportunity for troubled railway officials to discuss the inconvenience it causes. To mention the fact that it takes about fifty minutes to resume schedules no matter how fast they work, and that every time someone chooses this method of death the railway is flooded with angry calls from delayed commuters. In one incident it took three hours to restore services because they were still searching for the head.

Various methods have been tried to deter would-be victims, including forcing next-of-kin to pay for property damage (the shame involved in incurring such a debt for the family being seen as possibly a greater deterrent than the costs themselves).

Now the railway is trying mirrors, since some psychologists have suggested that, should potential suicides catch sight of their own reflections, they might be brought back to a true realisation of what they are about to do. Picture it: the search for your one face in a mirror on the opposite side of the tracks, among all the other faces crowding the platform, all the charcoal suits, all the lives looking – from where you stand – uniformly controlled and grey; the consideration that perhaps there are not many faces but only one, and that you are merely a brief expression passing across it.

A memory: Mr S., pausing at the slight rustle of my gown, sighing quietly.

‘And you? Tell me how it is with you. Are you happy?’

‘Yes, I am perfectly happy. Let us continue to speak of other things . . .’

‘You have not yet told me where you come from.’

‘Aren’t you forgetting the purpose of our meetings? Have we not agreed that I am recently come from the ancient capital, Heian-Kyo, to this room, for you, so that we can

travel back together, so that you can know it again in any way you choose?’

‘It’s only that I’m used to being in charge – of everything. This is slightly . . . unsettling. The screen. Just your voice and that scent in the air. If you could only tell me your real name.’

‘My name is Sei Shōnagon.’

A short stop down the line from Omotosando is Shibuya, that great melting pot of Tokyo youth, the place that demands you allow yourself to be lost in a crowd without quite losing yourself – or at least without losing sight of what you came to buy.

Around Hatchiko Square everyone is looking for something, like the ghost of the dog after whom the square is named, who waited in vain for his dead master at the same place before the station exit, at the same time, for years.

The endless wave floods across the intersection and recedes. A collective loss of self. The invisibility of a great number. Forward, back. Forward. A rhythm that could kill if conditions were slightly altered. If the traffic lights malfunctioned in a certain way (which, granted our efficiency, they will doubtless never do), if the earth shuddered more than usual on a typical day, and the road buckled . . .

A short way up from the station, kids in padded silver jackets are selling tomorrow’s matchbox-sized phone-fax-computer-watch combos at unbeatable prices, and further up still, a man with an unglamorous red cross painted on a board stares uncertainly into the distance, waiting for offers of blood. The shoppers jostle past him, pallid, heavy-eyed, mouths half-open, looking as if they’ve given and forgotten in the same moment.

On Saturday evenings would-be escorts dressed in evening suits form a vaguely-threatening semicircle around the station exit, and wait, and wait. While people inevitably surge towards them, no one is ever seen deliberately approaching the group or actually leaving with one of them. Certainly not the Japanese Shibuya girls with their freshened orange tans and their cowboy hats pushed far back on bleached hair. Suddenly one girl pauses to fish in a Prada handbag for a cigarette. Before she can adjust her slightly twisted kimono, the crowd charging out from the underground has swirled around her, has picked her up as though she were a piece of driftwood, has carried her off in a totally new direction, one that she will later probably believe she has chosen herself.

This is Tokyo. Anything can happen here.

I do not know what it is that is broken. Only that I slip in and out of a mental wakefulness that can’t translate itself to speech, to movement. I know I should open my eyes to let them know I can hear. To let them know my mind is still alive. But something won’t allow this to happen. It’s like being in some advanced state of meditation, knowing your body is there, but also being disconnected from it.

I don’t even know if you are still alive.

It was my mother’s family, generations ago, who began to sell incense from a fragrant wooden shop-front behind which the whole family lived and worked. Even the youngest children helped with grinding some of the ingredients, while the male head of the household supervised every process, at last sealing himself into a closed and shuttered room while he perfected a final blend according to the family’s

secret recipes. Many variables would affect the end product: the exact origin of the perfumed wood, the amount of sun it had received while growing, the way harvesting and moisture and storage had already affected the spices . . .

The result took several different forms. Perhaps most significantly there was the chipped mixture called Shokoh which would be placed on hot ash and burned on Buddhist altars, but there were other specialities too. Sometimes honey or plum might be added to the powdered ingredients, the whole thoroughly kneaded and then rolled into tiny balls to form *nerikoh*. The honey or plum maintained a perfect moist environment for the full development of the fragrance, after which the blend was aged for at least three years, the longer the better where ultimate quality was concerned. 'No possibility of hurrying it up,' my mother would say with a smile. That mixture, sealed in ceramic jars and buried in the damp earth, took exactly the time it needed. To our ancestors it was like making a deposit in the bank. But more than that, it was a part of themselves that grew in complexity and richness. Incense was a way of life. Then, as now, all the processes were carried out by hand – grinding, blending, kneading, rolling. A family business.

Another favourite was joss sticks, based on the ancient form which originated in India. They not only provided fragrance but could also be used to measure time, since the rate of burning was so predictable. In contrast to the Indian variety, the Japanese stick originated as solid incense with no central bamboo core. Up to fifteen different ingredients were used at once, including small quantities of the prized elements *jinkoh*, cloves and ambergris. The most common binding agent was the almost scentless bark of the Judas tree, valued because it would not upset the delicate balance of the chosen fragrances. Once the paste had achieved the right consistency it was pushed through a mould to emerge like thin spaghetti. The skill, my mother said, was all in the

final grinding and blending, otherwise the sticks might warp or not burn well.

There were also *nioi-bakuro*, sachets of ground ingredients packed into little embroidered bags. Women would place them between folded linen or slip them into the sleeves of their kimono. Apart from their delicate scent, they were believed to repel bad luck.

‘And do they really work?’ I demanded of my mother one day after we had moved back to Japan, desperate to know if there was anything I could use to control fate.

Her eyes looked into mine as though searching for the future.

‘It could be worse, couldn’t it?’ she said at last, hugging me and then spinning me around the kitchen in an impromptu dance, her sleeves flying out like scented wings, stretching to test the air for me.

My father was an American, teaching at a Tokyo university when he met my mother, a beautiful and committed student who initially refused to take him seriously. Their courtship began in the library, among a forest of hushed and ordered shelves. He said he fell in love with the crown of her head and her eyelashes first of all because, as a well-bred Japanese girl, she instinctively lowered her eyes when a man focused his attention on her. It didn’t take my father long to realise that flirting was going to be a major obstacle in itself. He taught literature, wrote poetry, shocked the department where he was gaining a cautious acceptance by decorating his tie with poems and drawings in order to attract her attention since, if she looked his way at all, she would never manage to glance higher than his chest. He would watch her lips for the slightest hint of a smile at his efforts. When at last he saw it one day, he knew she was going to be his wife.

His own mother remained in something of a state of shock over the unexpected marriage, the honeymoon on a tiny island she couldn't even locate on a map and – eighteen months later – my birth. A couple of years later still, a job in New York drew my parents towards America, and for the first time my grandmother gazed anxiously into my face, seeking recognition of one of her own. I was judged quite a pretty little thing, with delicate ears. My mother, then, had not been a complete disaster.

If I could have foreseen how few years would be permitted me to share with my father, would I have wanted anything to be different? Apart from wishing for more hours in the day, I don't think so.

He died sprinting across a New York street one evening as a stolen car shot out of the darkness. What changed after that was my confidence in a universe whose laws I thought I had understood. I knew I had to reconsider every part of it then, but suddenly it was too full of emptiness for me to do anything but sit in my room and rock myself backwards and forwards, waiting for him to put his head around the door and grin at me and tell me it was just a trick and that I had every right to be angry with him. The last thing we did together was construct one of our handmade books, the new creamy-white pages for once in perfect alignment, waiting to be filled, scrap-book fashion, with the beautiful and imperfect fragments of a life.

Up until my father died, one of my certainties had been that it was enough for me to be me. And then the planets shifted and the balance of many things was destroyed. My mother and I had gone to stay at my grandparents' beach house in the Hamptons. One morning while my mother was still sleeping upstairs, my grandmother called me over to her large pink-patterned armchair. She lifted my chin and