

LESLEY DOWNER

*A Geisha for
the American
Consul*

About the Book

Two cultures. One man and one woman. One moment in time.

Cultures collide when Okichi, a beautiful geisha, is sent to work for the American envoy in Japan. Age and pride meet youth and grace. How will she survive in a home where no one speaks her language, where she understands nothing and she must submit to a strange barbarian's will?

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An extract from *Across a Bridge of Dreams*

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About the Author

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A Geisha for the American Consul

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Chapter 1

Shimoda, Japan. Spring 1857, Year of the Snake, a Yin Fire year.

'TODAY'S THE MOST important day of your life,' said Mother, measuring out the ingredients for tooth-blackening lacquer and mixing them together. 'Today you have to look your very best.'

Okichi gazed at the murky reflection in the tarnished bronze mirror as the old woman fussed around her. She could do her own make-up perfectly well but today Mother had insisted on doing it for her.

'But, Mother ...'

Okichi wrinkled her nose at the familiar smell of vinegar and metal. Black teeth signified that she was an adult, a fully qualified geisha, not a foolish virgin, and today they had to be polished to a perfectly smooth finish. She bared her teeth and sat very still as the old woman brushed on the vile-tasting mixture.

'But, Mother,' she began again when the mixture had dried. 'I'm just going to be a servant. I don't need all this make-up.'

'By all the gods, child, have you learnt nothing after all these years? How can you be so naive? Men are men the world over! Why on earth do you think he asked for you? You'll earn far more for me if he takes you as his geisha - or his concubine or his wife - than you ever would as a mere servant.'

The thought made Okichi shudder. She had always known hardship. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd been

taught to do as she was told without grumbling. She knew it was best not to think too much or ask questions. But this was different. No one had ever asked such a sacrifice of anyone before.

She couldn't help noticing the afternoon sunlight creeping across the straw mats that covered the floor, bringing the dread moment ever closer. Outside on the street the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. It was the balmiest of spring days.

'Isn't that what you want? Isn't that what we all want?' Mother demanded with an air of finality. She took a pair of ancient tweezers from her make-up box and tweezed out Okichi's eyebrows until they'd disappeared completely.

Okichi called her 'Mother' but she was not her real mother. That was probably why she was so tough on her. She was certainly old, older than Okichi by a long way, and her high-cheekboned face was sallow and withered. But she was slender and elegant still, and held herself very straight. She ruled the teahouse with a rod of iron, keeping the customers in line as much as she did Okichi.

Okichi thought of her real mother and sighed. She saw her regularly and took money to her; she made a far better living as a geisha than her faded mother ever could by taking in washing, and it was her bounden duty to support her family.

And now was her chance to really help them, to make a lot of money.

Mother picked out a wide, flat brush and slathered thick, white make-up over Okichi's face. The make-up was made from lead and it ruined women's skin. Mother had been a famous geisha in her time until the make-up destroyed her once-celebrated beauty, and Okichi knew it wouldn't be long before she too had turned into an old woman. But that was the way it was for those who lived by their looks. All too soon they lost their beauty and their life was over.

Okichi watched as her own face disappeared and became a mask, glowing enticingly in the candlelight. The more beautiful the image in the mirror, the more her heart sank. Mother outlined her eyes, first in black, then in red, and used her thumb to put in two charcoal smudges - 'moth-wing eyebrows' she called them - high on Okichi's forehead, above where her eyebrows had been.

'Don't fidget, child,' snapped Mother. 'Stop chewing your lips.'

Okichi had been trying so hard not to think about the reason for all this fuss, but now the image pushed itself into her thoughts - the event that had turned her life upside down.

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It had been an evening around the time of the last full moon. She remembered sliding open the door of the public bath house and stepping into the cool spring air, as she had every day of her life, flushed from the hot water, scrubbed and clean, wearing a cotton kimono loosely tied with a sash. As she stepped out she bumped into someone, started back and her wooden washing bowl fell to the ground with a clatter. The damp towels came spilling out.

It wasn't a Japanese man she'd bumped into, it was one of those barbarians she sometimes saw around the port. They were hairy, like monkeys - it was hard to imagine how any human being could have so much hair. She'd never been so close to one before. He had grainy greyish-pink skin and a big nose like all foreigners, and she could tell by the grey hair and beard and the whiskers sprouting from his cheeks that he was old. She caught a whiff of his smell. *Bata kusai*, the foreigners were called, 'stinking of butter', because of the nauseating grease they ate, made of the undrinkable white liquid that came from the udders of cows.

He'd stopped and stared. Normally she'd have kept her eyes modestly lowered but no one could help looking at the barbarians; they didn't really count as people at all.

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'Concentrate, child. Turn around,' snapped Mother. Okichi felt the cool touch of the brush on her back as Mother slathered it with the white paste, leaving a titillating fork of unpainted skin at the nape of her neck, to draw men's eyes to that most tender, desirable part of a woman's body.

Then she helped her into a perfumed kimono, tying it in place with ribbons and a broad obi sash, smoothed her hair and put combs and ornaments into it.

When Okichi looked in the mirror, she was no longer a country girl from the port of Shimoda, a carpenter's daughter whose widowed mother took in washing for a living. She was an enchantress, the stuff of men's fantasies.

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Waiting on her knees beside the door for the palanquin to arrive, Okichi twisted her fingers, running over the events of her short life again and again in her mind. What mistake had she made? When was the moment when she might have nipped this terrible fate in the bud?

She had always known her life was not her own. In this world no one chose what became of them. You were born into a particular class of family - samurai, tradesman, carpenter, fisherman - and that decided your fate. And for years Okichi's life had unrolled just as anyone might have expected.

Okichi had been one of twelve children. She was pretty and she had a lovely voice, so her parents had done what any parents would and sold her to a geisha house when she was four to be trained to sing and dance. She was lucky,