

Flower *from Deep Well* by Emil Paul John. Friendship Press

“Garden of Eden” was what the men from the nearby airbase called the Bonnell’s backyard. The housing development, in which Lieutenant Irving Bonnell lived, was run-of-the-mill; the wonderland his wife had created, right outside their kitchen door, was close to paradise.

Irving had met and married Hanako during his service in Tokyo. Everyone who strolled through her garden agreed that the English translation of Hanako: Flower – suited the Japanese bride admirably. Flower accepted her new name happily – it sounded more American – and from the day of her marriage she had done all she could to adjust to the new ways of her husband and his countrymen. She had sacrificed religion, country, culture, and most difficult of all – family.

Fortunately, Flower didn’t have to give up her green thumb. Her magic touch gave the plants in her garden a certain character of their own. Even the rocks, bushes and dwarf trees were artfully arranged. It was no coincidence that so many people happened to drop by the Bonnells. At first they came out of curiosity – to see the Japanese bride – later they came to admire the artistry of her hands. One of Irving’s friends once told him, “When I’m all wound up after a fight with my wife or a rough day at the base, a walk through your garden relaxes me better than a shot of whiskey.”

The garden was Flower’s special place of refuge. In fact, this only reminder of her past helped her to bear a burden that was becoming intolerable. Flower might not have survived her lonely struggle had not the gods intervened and sent her help in the form of her sister, Miyuko.

“It was Father’s last wish before he died that I come to America and stay with you a short while,” Miyuko said. He asked that I carry his blessings to you.” Tears welled up in the eyes of both sisters and Flower began to pour out her pain. Two years ago Irving had asked Flower if his mother could come live with them. She had agreed immediately: the woman’s husband was dead, she was alone. Flower would love her as her own mother. However, her mother-in-law had no use for Flower and used every opportunity to discount her, chastise her, or treat her with disdain. No amount of effort by Flower could alter the dark, cold look in her mother-in-law’s eyes. Irving had noticed the tension, but kept hoping that as his mother got to know Flower better, she might warm up to her. Now Flower was contemplating asking Irving for a divorce.

“But enough of me,” Flower concluded. Tell me of Father’s last days.”

Miyuko replied, “Our father’s face was peaceful as the sunbeams fell upon it for the last time. Our mountain lakes were never so calm. He spoke of you. I think he knew from your letters that you were suffering, though you never wrote directly about it. He made me promise to come to you to bring his final blessing and to encourage you to remain loyal to the gods.

“Yes, he knew you became a Christian after your marriage. He asked me to read to him from the Christian Bible. At one point he interrupted me and said, ‘It is all true, my child. If I were younger, I could easily become a Christian, but for me that is not necessary. The gods have revealed to me the mystery of love and given me the strength to forgive and to ask for

forgiveness. When you see your sister, tell her that her father has walked the path that lies before her as a Christian and he will be waiting for her at the end.” Miyuko took a flower from her handbag and gave it to her sister. “This is the last flower you put into Father’s vase. He gave it to me right before he died and asked me to return it to you as a sign of his blessing.”

When Miyuko met Mrs. Bonnell shortly before dinner that evening, she noticed in her eyes the same darkness that had been in her own father’s eyes. There was one difference – the muscles in Mrs. Bonnell’s face were tense; deep lines were etched in it. The darkness was imprisoned in her eyes. The unlined face of Miyuko’s father showed that he had made peace with his darkness. “She suffers very much,” Miyuko told Flower.

Conversation during the evening meal was tense, despite Irving’s best efforts to be light and casual. After the meal Miyuko offered to perform the tea ceremony. Flower went out to the kitchen to help her. When the sisters returned, the lines were furrowed more deeply than ever in Mrs. Bonnell’s face. Her words pricked them sharply, “It’s really not necessary to hide in the kitchen to talk behind our backs. You can speak in Japanese right before us, and we won’t know what you really think of us.” The sound of airplane engines interrupted the stunned silence in the room. The wind was from the east and planes had to fly over the Bonnell house to land on the airbase. “Planes,” Mrs. Bonnell announced, her mind now trailing into revelry, “Jap planes, coming in low. They’re heading for the harbor – Jim! Come home! Don’t stay there! They’ll get you!”

Irving was kneeling beside his mother while she sobbed uncontrollably. He would now have to tell his wife the story he had determined she would never hear. “Jim was my father. He was on board a destroyer when the planes hit Pearl Harbor. He never knew what happened. I was only one at the time. Mother was very bitter. I guess I was wrong, but I made Mother promise never to tell you...I could understand how she felt, but I thought once she met you... Well, it didn’t work.”

Flower gazed at her mother-in-law, and then, wordlessly, she rose, picked up the dried flower her sister had given her and placed it in Mrs. Bonnell’s lap. “Why?” the older woman asked, the tension now returning to her face. Flower spoke softly, “I have often wanted to retaliate, even to run away. I knew you disliked me, but I didn’t know why. Now I understand and a cloud has lifted. I do not wish to strike back at you. That would give me no happiness and it would dishonor the grave of my father. He recently died, and just this morning Miyuko gave me the details of his death.

“At least your father lived long enough to enjoy his children. My son can’t even remember what his father looked like.”

Miyuko could be still no longer. “Ever since I met you this evening I have wondered about the expression in your eyes; it reminded me of my father. I know now what this likeness is. You, like our father, suffered very much in life. Before my sister and I were old enough to talk, Father was severely burned. He was taken to a hospital in Tokyo, and there he remained until his death. You are right when you say that we were more fortunate than your son in having our father for many years. We were permitted to visit him, and we never missed a single day. From

his burned lips we learned about the gods and about life and death. He gave us courage to face life. Because of his love for us we wished to bring happiness to his heart. Flower did it through her garden. Every plant she grew was destined to take its place in the vase beside our father's bed. I performed the tea ceremony every day in my father's hospital room."

"After our country's defeat in the war, we were able to find life worth living – thanks to him. When my sister asked him about marrying an American, he gave her his blessing and said, 'It is good that former enemies be united by love.'

"One month ago he died in that same hospital. The doctors said he lived all those years in great pain, but he never showed it to us. At his funeral they held a special ceremony attended by many Japanese; your American ambassador to our country came. Father was the latest person to die as a result of the atomic bomb explosion on Hiroshima."

Miyuko became silent. Mrs. Bonnell stared at the sisters. The lines around her face relaxed. She picked up the dry blossom lying in her lap and lifted it slowly until it touched her lips.