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## Fallout

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# Fallout

Bill Heintzelman

Yuichi Tanaka stepped into the afternoon shadows that stretched across his garden. He wore a brown kimono closed with a black *obi*, and he carried a prayer cushion. It was his hour to meditate.

If the ghost will permit it, he thought.

He looked from the pale, cloud-streaked sky to the garden's ceremonial corner with its miniature Torii gate standing near the trunk of a stunted willow. The tree's shadow bathed the red gate in darkness, and webs swayed from its drooping boughs.

In his pocket Yuichi carried a copy of *The Platform Sutra*. He read from this book each day. But his eyes defied even the powerful lenses of his bifocals and the *kanji* characters soon became indistinct. Reading had become a slow and tedious chore.

Halfway between the carp pond he tended and the Torii gate, Yuichi lowered himself to the cushion. He crossed his legs in front of him, forsaking the Lotus discipline for a position more suitable to an old man with arthritic joints.

One of the carp swirled the top of the pond. It was a lucky sign. Yuichi did not smile or turn his head or even think beyond that it was a lucky sign. He slowed his breathing, feeling tightness ease from his legs, back, neck, face, and scalp. He relaxed until the familiar chill rose from the base of his spine. It spread across his shoulders and he shuddered. He was not alone. Another presence was in the garden with him, a presence he was learning to know well. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The image of his wife in death floated above him. Yoko's gray hair was pulled severely around the sides of her head and pinned in back. Deep wrinkles lined her thin, old face. Her eyes were squeezed tight, and her tongue was forever stilled by a mouth that was clamped firmly shut. He studied the apparition floating above him.

"Dead," he said, "but not at rest. No rest for either of us."

In this house she had helped build there were few reminders of Yoko. Yuichi gave away or burned nearly all of her possessions after she died. But he kept two pictures of her. One sat on a table in his reading room, and the other was near their *futon* where he could see it at night. Her pillow, arranged as always with her hair brushes resting on it, stayed in place beside his.

He had been without her for three years. A generous pension from the Mitsubishi Corporation kept him in comfort, but his determined self-sufficiency kept him in solitude. Dishes were washed immediately after use and put away, newspapers taken out and disposed of after he read them, and laundry done without fail each week. He also swept his *tatami* mats daily. It was a task one performed to make the home pleasant and clean for guests. His floor sweeping was

pointless. Nobody ever called.

To those who did not know him, Yuichi Tanaka seemed a most unpleasant old man. The reputation gave him the distance he wanted from well-meaning people. After Yoko died, so many had offered expressions of sympathy that the words quickly lost their comforting power. He heard them as hollow and unfelt. He began staying in, and staying alone. But he still remembered a time when being alone was neither possible nor was it desirable.

After his release from the Imperial Army in November of 1945, Yuichi had come home to Japan, but found no home waiting for him. One bomb, a blinding flash of light, and Nagasaki had ceased to be. He found the skeletons of buildings, mounds of soft black ash, and he was sickened by the putrid smell of decay that lingered in the air even months after the bomb had fallen.

For weeks he followed leads from refugee center to refugee center until he found Yoko. She had been two miles from the explosion, and was spared the burns and the disfigurements that afflicted so many others. He noticed, though, that she tired easily. She told him of rashes that appeared on her face and hands, remained visible a few days, and then disappeared as mysteriously as they came.

Yuichi did not care. Yoko was alive and everything else could be fixed. What an enormous job it was!

While government workers rebuilt the city center, others followed Yuichi and Yoko out of the mist and smoke to reclaim their *cho*. Within five years, their lives had been rebuilt over the ashes. There was a sense of permanence and of accomplishment. Yuichi was elected *Cho Honcho*, and he led the community humbly and well.

Through these years Yoko struggled with headaches that sent her screaming to their *futon*. Yuichi knelt beside her and held her hand. It was the only help he and the doctors could offer. He did not flinch or cry out even when her fingers dug blood from his palms. The headaches lasted for days.

Eventually they went away for good, and so did the rashes it seemed. Yoko grew stronger. But the black rain of the bomb had left her barren. The family line ended here. They never talked of this.

Then came the night the bomb sickness returned for the final time. He was awakened by Yoko's thrashing beside him, and by her strangled retching. She lay with her back arched and her heels digging into the *futon*. Vomit drenched the front of her kimono and green bile rose from her mouth, streaking her face. Her eyes were glazed. As the spasm peaked and her back twisted to its highest arc, Yuichi grabbed her hand. And he prayed. He prayed as hard as he knew how. He promised the Buddha everything if only Yoko would live. He even petitioned the Christian God. But the spasm held her rigid, and when it finally released her he knew she was leaving him.

He felt the warmth drain from her fingers and he felt the coldness of death settle over her. Everything that had been her was gone. She became a thing. A dead thing. In the same instant, a numbness crept through him that he

could not shiver away.

Time had changed the *cho*. Streets and alleyways were filled with shops and stalls that sold cameras, computer games, watches, and televisions. Yuichi cursed the din of a Pachinko parlor across from his home. And every day he was forced to walk several miles just to buy the tea, rice, and fish cakes that were his staples.

As he walked these new streets he kept his eyes lowered. Sometimes, he was almost glad Yoko was not here to see the changes. Music floated from stand bars and neon signs were hanging everywhere. To him they looked dingy during the day when they were turned off and gaudy at night when they blinked.

Dirty water trickled in rivulets down the littered cobblestone streets and spilled into pungent *binjo* ditches below. His face wrinkled at the smells of dirty bodies and spiced batter being deep fried.

“To these people, squalor has become normal,” he muttered, “It is not healthy.”

These new people prospered, but the cost of that prosperity was high. The blue jeans, sport shirts, and leather shoes they wore were trade-offs. They had turned from the old ways, and they copied Europeans and Americans. Sunglasses hid their eyes.

Yuichi was content not to see the eyes of the younger ones. He had seen them looking at him, seen how they mocked old people and traditions. They no longer seemed Japanese.

Yet, Yuichi, too, had turned from traditional ways and religion. He read Chinese prayer books and Chinese philosophy. The Shinto faith had failed him. In frustration he had thrown away the farewell *haikus* he wrote for Yoko. He was a poor poet. All that remained for him was confusion over the writings of the Buddha, and a vague hope that time would bring him understanding and healing.

He found a measure of relaxation in meditation, but it did not stop Yoko's ghost. She came silently to him each day, pinched and tense in her restless death. He knew she was bringing him a message, but he didn't know what it was. He wanted to hear her voice, to ask her about the message, but his questions hung in the air unanswered.

One September morning he found the female carp dead. He looked at the male swimming below where she floated and shook his head.

“Now there are two of us alone with sorrows,” he said to the fish, “but at least I can help you with yours.”

He went to a fish breeder and found a female of similar size and color. But the male rejected her. He kept the length of the pond between them, and refused to swim with her. Instead, he swam the same pattern he had for years with the first female.

“Yet that fish is not swimming alone,” said Yuichi. “He swims with the memory of his mate as if she were still here. He has rejected the new fish

because he is still swimming with the old one.”

Leaves were falling in the breeze and scattering across the graveled path of Yuichi's garden. He stood inside the door watching the season change and looking at the tattered *Sutra*. If he was correct, the help he sought was not in this or any other book. The help was waiting outside in his garden halfway between the fish pond and the Torii gate. Yuichi dropped the book. The breeze, blowing into the now open door, rippled the book's pages, and small leaves rose and fell as he walked into his garden.

He groaned as he sat on his prayer cushion. With his eyes closed, he concentrated on the breaths he took, and relaxed.

He felt the spirit join him in his meditation. He was no longer unnerved by its presence. He knew what to expect. His eyes fluttered open and the image of dead Yoko hovered above him. He looked at it.

“No,” he said. “This is incorrect. Here, in this heart, Yoko lives.”

He waited, eyes closed again, relaxed and expectant. His heart hammered inside his chest, and his racing pulse made the blood rush through his body. He felt the beginnings of a smile.

“In this heart, there is only life,” he said.

Yuichi repeated the new belief five times. He talked slowly at first, and soon his tongue was working in harmony with his faster heartbeat. The affirmation became a chant.

He heard laughter. It was distant and seemed to echo in his mind. As it moved closer it became familiar to him. But he kept his eyes closed, denying them vision until the sound was firmly in his ears. It was Yoko's laughter. He listened, feeling a warmth wash across his forehead and spread to his shoulders.

Yuichi opened his eyes. A new image of Yoko as she had been hovered out of focus above him. It was a blurry vision and he squinted to see it better. He slipped his hand automatically into the kimono pocket for his glasses. His mind stayed concentrated on the image over his head as he hooked the glasses over his ears and settled them on the bridge of his nose. Yoko's features became sharp.

Yes. This was the correct image! Her face was no longer thin, ashen, and wrinkled. Her skin was new and fresh. Her eyes twinkled as they had before the sickness had come to fill them with weariness and pain. And her laughter reached deep inside him. He felt a lightness he had not felt for a long time.

Yuichi heard words from her, even though she did not speak. They traveled from mind to mind. And they were her words said in her voice. They drained the color from his face and the strength from his arms and legs. He sat on the cushion limp and slumped over with his heart pounding and a thin smile lighting his face. His voice, when it came, was low and choked.

“I love you too, old woman,” he said. “I loved you for your whole life, and I love you still.”

He stayed with the image a while longer. It pleased him. And when

Yoko faded, he did not mind. She could be recalled anytime. He knew the secret now.

Yuichi Tanaka sat in his garden smelling the leaves and communing with a ghost. His knees hurt and his muscles ached with age, but he felt younger. He looked at his garden and his house. They seemed too neat and too orderly, the mental shelves of an old man's museum.

He listened in the growing dusk as night noises rose in the street. The cooking smells he disliked and the bell noises from the Pachinko parlor invaded his garden, and he became angry with himself. He had encouraged the changes by not fighting them. Now new thoughts stirred in his mind. There was still time. He might lose, but he could fight for the dignity and pride of the old ways. And he would not be fighting alone anymore.

There was much to do, but first he had to think carefully and plan well. He did not want events to overwhelm him again.