

# **Mrs Fujita's Living Room**

**By Ellie Karlin**

## **Introduction by the author**

*At the time I was planning my story, we were studying the Second World War in History. I started thinking about all the parts of the World War we had not gone into detail about and, reading further, became fascinated by how the conflict continued in Japan even after Germany had surrendered. This led me to think about the terrible decisions leaders must make during wartime, sacrificing lives for the supposed 'greater good'. I wanted to focus my story away from the much-debated ethics of this decision and go deeper into the lives of two ordinary women in Japan at this time.*

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The taste of fear lingers in the air like perfume, thick and cloying. The thrum of the observation planes that seem never to sleep has become background music to the visits Mrs Hayashi pays to Mrs Fujita, in those afternoons where neither can pretend to be busy anymore. Sometimes, Mrs Fujita tells her friend, she dreams of embracing her son, but when she opens her mouth to tell him she loves him she hears the planes as if out of nowhere. They are louder than in real life, she says, louder than the loudest voice in the world.

Mrs Hayashi says she doesn't dream of her husband or her sons anymore. She says there are no faces in her dreams, only strangers' voices. But when Mrs Fujita asks what the voices are saying, Mrs Hayashi only presses her sleeping baby to her breast and shakes her head, as if she doesn't remember.

That baby is the centre of both women's worlds now; she is the miracle child born from Mr Hayashi's last leave, that time Mrs Hayashi saw them all home and her boys' smiles were older and sadder than a hundred years. Mrs Hayashi wishes she could dream of those smiles, if only to be sure she would never forget them. It was only a few weeks after that last visit that the letters stopped coming.

The little one has her father's eyes, so dark brown they look black. She is not yet six months but she seems already to understand the world as it is. She came smoothly into being

without cry or struggle and even the creaking collection of the nurses who remained said how good and quiet she was. Mrs Hayashi can remember how tired and joyful she felt when her sons came screaming and squalling to life, how she would laugh and say they were her father and her father's brothers come again. It is different with her daughter. With her, there are only sweet half smiles and little hands grasping into heaven.

Mrs Fujita dotes on the girl as if she were her own. She had a daughter once, she told Mrs Hayashi one day. Mrs Hayashi opened her mouth in surprise, but when she caught sight of Mrs Fujita's sagging face she only pressed her lips together in sympathy and placed the girl in her friend's arms. She does this now without prompting.

'She has no father, she must have two mothers,' says Mrs Hayashi.

Even though Mrs Fujita at once protests that the girl's father is still alive, Mrs Hayashi does not want to talk about it. She is very pale and skinny, and she confesses that she does not always have enough money to buy food for the both of them, that she would rather the baby was fed than she was. Mrs Fujita insists that they must eat together from now on, that Mrs Hayashi and the baby must sleep in her son's room until he comes home. Mrs Fujita promises she will take care of them.

Every day Mrs Fujita leaves very early to work in the factory. Before the war, it would have been unthinkable for a married woman to do such hard work as this, yet Mrs Fujita carries the soot and dust with fierce pride. She praises the men for fighting, but she often says women are just as capable of bleeding for their country. She is not young anymore and her hands are red and sore with blisters when she comes home, yet she feels happy knowing she is helping put weapons in the soldiers' hands. She has long since forgotten why the war started or why it continues in Japan when everywhere else has surrendered. She only wishes to do her part so that it may soon be over.

Mrs Hayashi wishes she could work too, but Mrs Fujita forbids it. The baby is too important to be left with strangers, she says, and Mrs Hayashi is far too thin. So all day Mrs Hayashi sits and sings to her daughter, thinking about how much Mr Hayashi wanted a girl, how he talked of her as a part of their future the night before he left for a war that lasted longer than anyone expected. As Mrs Hayashi thinks and sings sweet songs, her knitting needles clack in her fingers. Every time she places the thick, carefully sealed parcel on the post office counter, she wonders who will open it, who will read the words filled with so much of herself.

In the afternoon, Mrs Fujita cleans her gritty hands and face in tepid water and Mrs Hayashi serves tea and rocks her miracle baby back and forth. In Mrs Fujita's living room,

the talk becomes the same, day after day. It is the talk that permeates the city in fear and anticipation.

Scarcely a week goes by without news of a bombing in one of the neighbouring cities, of the death of somebody's mother, somebody's father, somebody's brother or sister. Sometimes they can hear the noise of the impact, see the houses wreathed in flames, yet their city stands almost intact. A few minor bombs of course, yet so far only the roundabouts have been destroyed. They are the only ones standing.

Why us? Every voice cries. Why have the Americans, who have so little kindness, spared this place of all places?

The citizens play out scenario after scenario, each more fantastic than the last. But it is the questions that they never speak aloud that hang over them like death's own shadow.

What is planned for Hiroshima? What will come upon us to end this war?