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The Barbarian and the Geisha

By Charles Grayson

It began on the night of the Oban festival...
here in the small fishing village
of Shimoda.
Once each year, we invite the spirits...
of our dead ancestors
to join us in a celebration.
It was an old and happy custom.
There was much joy and much sake.
My name is Okichi. This is my story, too.
Black ship meant danger.
Foreigners were threatening our shores.
A messenger was sent
to warn the Governor.
Baron Tamura was the Governor
of Shimoda...
and my benefactor.
It was he who had paid for my training
as a geisha.
The ship lay at anchor all night.
At sunrise, the strangers approached.
He says it is forbidden for you to land.
You are commanded to return
to your ship...
weigh anchor, and leave this harbor
and all the Japan seas.
Commanded by whom?
The Governor of Shimoda, sir.
Tell him that I am the Consul General
to Japan from the United States.
Say that I am here in accordance
with a treaty entered into...
by their Shogun and Commodore Perry
two years ago.
He denies any treaty is in force
whereby you have the right to land.
Tell him I am landing.
Tell them it's a salute.
It speaks with a loud voice.
Townsend Harris.
I am Saemon-No-Kami Tamura,
Governor of the prefecture of Shimoda.
Are you aware, Your Excellency,
of an agreement between our countries...
which states,

"A Consul shall reside in Shimoda...
"when either country shall so require"?
Not either. Both.
"When both countries shall so require. "
If that is how your Japanese text reads...
a mistake has been made in translation
or a willful change.
I will acquaint my superiors at Edo
with that opinion.
- Meanwhile...
- Meanwhile, I'll require quarters...
for Mr. Heusken, my interpreter,
three Chinese servants, and myself.
It must be understood
that I am receiving you...
only as a private person.
Due note is taken of your refusal...
to recognize my status
as an American Consul.
Follow me.
This is a pleasant place to be buried.
Well, at least we'll have quiet neighbors.
This is the best we have to offer.
Two years ago, Commodore Perry was
allowed within the sacred walls of Edo.
Since then, our land has been torn
by earthquakes and typhoons.
We have lost homes, crops, loved ones.
Some ignorant people believe...
those disasters were warnings
from the gods...
not to change our ancient ways
but to remain as before.
No one stays as he was, nor any country.
This will do.
Home, sweet home.
There she flies, gentlemen.
The first time in this empire.
I think, Mr. Harris, you'd better
raise the doorways or cut off your legs.
The Governor says
you must take the flag down.
Very well.
He says it is not to be flown again.

Tell him it will fly again.
On holidays, ours and theirs...
and on certain other occasions...
such as the arrival and departure
of our ships.
A void the Americans, sell them nothing.
Baron Tamura had ordered.;
"Harris-san must be made to go. "
There was no place in Japan
for foreigners. They were all barbarians.
- Mr. Harris.
- Your Excellency.
I wish to protest against the way
I and my household are being treated.
We cannot even buy food
in the open market.
You are free to buy
from anyone who will sell to you.
And whoever does will answer
to your samurai?
You are in no position to lodge a protest,
Mr. Harris.
You have no standing here.
Your Excellency, let's stop this nonsense
about my official existence.
If your version of the treaty
between our countries were correct...
it would be an agreement to agree
if and when we chose to agree.
Would responsible men ever sign
such rigmarole?
Whatever its terms...
the treaty was made under the threat
of Commodore Perry's guns.
Such a treaty has no virtue.
Have you forgotten
why Commodore Perry came?
Because shipwrecked sailors
were being beheaded...
and because no ship could put in
to a Japanese port, even for water.
We only wish to be left alone.
Your Excellency, your country stands
at the crossroads of the world.

From both East and West, men are finding
an ever-increasing need for those roads.
If, in your desire for isolation...
you refuse to make them safe
for peaceful traffic...
the world will treat Japan
as it would treat a band of brigands...
infesting a highway.
A true Japanese would rather see
his country perish in flames...
and perish with it
than see it corrupted by foreigners...
and slowly rot.
Your Excellency,
there are fanatics in every country.
But if the majority of your government
were not reasonable men...
I should not be here.
And in hope that it will meet their eyes...
I hereby hand you an official letter...
for transmission
to His Highness the Shogun...
respectfully requesting that my position
as Consul shall be confirmed.
Tamura was troubled.
He had communicated with Edo.
In the capital there was much indecision...
between those who wanted Japan opened
to other countries...
and those who were against it.
Finally, a message arrived.
Until a decision was reached...
Tamura was instructed to continue
keeping Harris-san in Shimoda.
Happy, if possible.
- Salt pork again?
- It's all Sam has left, sir.
Our friend Tamura has seen to that.
Pardon me for asking, Mr. Harris, but...
do you have an enemy in your
State Department keeping you here?
Quite to the contrary.
Getting this post was a great honor.
And sitting before you, Henry,

eating this sowbelly and hardtack...
is an envoy extraordinaire
from President Pierce.
Well, we haven't entirely
wasted our time, sir.
We fixed up this house...
learned something about their agriculture,
the winds, the weather.
But I didn't come here to be a carpenter...
nor to gain information
for the Agriculture Department.
My instructions
from President Pierce were, quote:
- "To treat with the Emperor of"...
- Pardon me, Mr. Harris.
- The Shogun, not the Emperor.
- All right.
"To treat with the Shogun of Japan...
"on the subject of their entry
into the free community of nations. "
Well, treat with him?
I haven't been able to get
anyplace near him.
And Tamura is stalling.
He hasn't sent my credentials to Edo...
- and he has no intention of doing so.
- But this is a difficult post, sir.
- One has to be patient.
- Patience won't bring Commodore Perry...
nor a battleship to back us up.
We've been patient for five months.
We're so far off the beaten path, we can't
get a message to or from Washington.
I'm beginning to wonder if they care.
Sam, get me my coat.
Mr. Harris, I wouldn't do anything hasty.
I have eaten all the salt pork
that I intend to.
Our first callers.
What is it, Henry?
From the Governor. An invitation to dine.
Mr. Envoy, tomorrow night, no salt pork.
They want to show you a geisha game.
All right.

I am grateful to Your Excellency
for a most delightful party.
Given, I take it,
to celebrate your recognition...
of the first American Consul.
There has been no word from Edo
about your status, Mr. Harris.
Then why am I so honored?
I have sympathy for a man alone
in a strange country.
Alone, yes. But I have with me
the spirit of many million Americans.
Your Excellency,
if word does not come soon...
I might be tempted to go to Edo to get it.
You'd never get past the barrier.
Outside the gate of the Forbidden City
are the skulls of many uninvited guests.
I've crossed some thousands of miles
of sea and storms to get this far.
Do you think a few skulls will deter me
from going 100 miles more?
Ask her what she's doing here at this hour.
- Well?
- Our friend Tamura sent her.
She is here to make our existence
less troublesome.
Thank her, and send her home.
Wait. She can be useful.
The Governor wants to know about us,
and we want to know about Japan.
The room in the back, she can use that.
Tell her she can stay.
And then tell her to lift her head.
I waited for his footsteps...
the door to open upon the huge man.
My heart was beating with terror,
but all was silent.
It was a house of many mysteries.
I hurried to Baron Tamura.
I told him about the seeds, the shells.
The machine that made the winds blow
could cause typhoons.
I begged him to let me go back

to the geisha house.
But the Baron grew angry.
He said I was a stupid girl.
There was no machine
that could cause typhoons.
It was Harris-san who was dangerous.
The barbarians were planning
to invade us.
It was my duty to go back. I was a geisha.
I knew men.
I was to please Harris-san in every way...
and watch his every move.
Was she born in Shimoda?
No, she's from a village
on the road to Edo.
Another country girl sold
into a geisha house.
Sold?
She was 14, a poor family.
Later she would be able to help them...
when some man paid her "pillow money,"
as they call it.
Any sisters?
Her sisters were all returned to the gods.
She was lucky to be born in a year
when the rice crop was good.
You know, Henry, I've seen some pretty
attractive dancing girls from Siam...
singsong girls from China...
but I think I prefer the geisha of Japan.
I agree with you, sir.
I'll get drunk.
She wants to know
if she can do some small feats of magic...
for the Honorable Consul.
Please let her go ahead.
Very good.
Now let me show you one.
This is a dollar.
No, dollar.
They can't say "L's," sir.
Sure they can. An American dollar.
I'm afraid we're gonna have to do
some work on her English, Henry.

Now watch closely,
nothing up my sleeves.
You like that? It's yours.
What?
She's asking if the eagle on the dollar
is one of our gods.
Well, not exactly, but very powerful.
Negotiable, too.
She'd like you to do it again, sir.
Well, my first success in Japan.
Now watch closely.
No, here.
Malice against the foreigners
was growing.
They were plagued constantly.
Henry, will you take Okichi into the house?
My hat.
Let him have it, Henry.
It didn't fit you anyway.
- It was a happy accident.
- How's that?
If your foot hadn't slipped,
you might have harmed the little fellow.
Please.
Thank you.
- Good?
- Yes, indeed.
Well, you're in good hands now.
- Also "yes, indeed"?
- Yes, indeed.
The women of the village
had turned against me.
To them,
I had become the concubine of Harris-san.
I was not fit to bathe with them.
"In simple language, Mr. Secretary,
I am up against a stone wall.
"So far, we have been unable
to make contact with the Shogun.
"It seems that they are undecided
and are playing fast and loose.
"I am not giving up by any means.
"But I feel that it might be some time...
"before I can report real progress.

I will keep you informed. "
Just sign it "respectfully yours".
It's wonderful,
the things she can do with flowers.
Mr. Harris.
Mr. Harris.
Bring the flag, Henry.
An honor, Your Excellency.
Mr. Harris, you must take down that flag.
The flag is a signal to that ship that
there's a consul here ready to serve it.
Must I repeat? There is no consul here.
Shimoda is closed and guarded.
The ship shall not land.
If you wish to serve it,
take down that flag.
The cannons are loaded, Mr. Harris.
Ahoy, messenger! Welcome!
Harris! Harris, American Consul!
Stand away, sir. Stand away.
We have cholera aboard.
Why aren't you flying the yellow flag?
It went overboard with a mutineer.
- Have you a doctor here?
- No. No doctor.
God help us.
We're three dead and five sick...
and it's nine days to Hong Kong.
Set sail, weigh anchor.
Have you a gun, sir? Shoot them!
They must not reach shore!
Keep back! Keep back, men.
Damn you, keep back!
Ashore there, don't touch those men!
Don't touch them!
They carry sickness!
Stay away from those sailors.
Don't go near them.
They have a bad disease.
Don't go near those men.
Can't you understand?
Cholera.
It swept the village like wildfire.
Almost everyone was stricken.

The sick were everywhere.
Harris-san did everything he could...
but he fought the sickness in his way.
My people fought with their old ways.
Prayers, chants, and paper images
of the red demon of sickness.
The dead were sealed in barrels,
taken to the sacred grounds to be burned.
Harris-san worked day and night...
but the new way was as weak as the old.
The demon of death went
from door to door.
Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris.
Very sorry, Harris-san.
What do you think, sir?
We don't know much
about cholera, Henry.
We do know
that only fire and frost will kill it.
And only God can bring a frost.
Make him understand, Henry,
fire is the only thing that'll save them.
Get him out of here!
Have you not brought enough sorrow
on my people?
Must you burn their houses?
We've given them money
to build new houses.
You must be mad.
It's the only way to stop cholera.
By fire. Sanitation.
He says we are their prisoners.
If we resist them, they will kill us.
We are to be sent home on the first boat.
I think we can go to bed now, Sam.
She's sleeping. It's not cholera, thank God.
Put it away, Henry.
I thought that perhaps some
of those hotheads out there...
We're 5,000 miles away from home.
If they wanna cut our throats...
there's nothing we can do about it.
- Shall we have a drink, Henry?
- Yes.

If they had given us another week,
we might have licked this thing.
Now they'll go on chopping up effigies
and dying like flies.
Well, Henry...
we were sent out here to establish
diplomatic relations with Japan.
So far, we have let in a cholera ship,
started an epidemic...
burned down half the town,
and been taken into custody.
A wonderful record. Let's drink to it.
The fires had burned away the cholera.
The time of dying had passed.
The village returned to its quiet ways.
Once again,
the fishing boats put out to sea.
I, too, was recovering.
Okichi, let me have that.
You'd better take it easy for a while,
until you get your strength back.
Thank you, Henry.
I didn't realize
we had brought so much junk.
Harris-san take books?
I'm leaving, Okichi.
- Going Edo?
- Going home.
The first sensible thing
since I've hit Japan.
Go soon?
Very soon, according to Tamura.
He's putting us on the first ship.
Of course, you can never tell
when that first ship will...
I'm not leaving because I want to, Okichi.
America, so far away.
Not so far away that I'll forget you.
Every time I see a woman
with ornaments in her hair...
I'll think of Okichi and her yellow combs.
Every time I hear the rustle of silk,
I'll think of a little...
Harris-san! Harris-san!

People here. They come honor you.

They are thanking you
for saving their lives.

Okichi.

- Mr. Harris?

- Yes?

The Governor is here.

- The Governor?

- Yes, sir.

Show His Excellency in.

Mr. Harris.

I am in your debt.

- My debt?

- The sickness is gone.

You did good.

I acted wrongly toward you.

Well, that's in the past. It's best forgotten.

I cannot forget.

Forty generations of my ancestors cry
that my debt must be paid.

You wished to go to Edo.

The visit has been arranged.

My men will escort your procession.

I'm afraid the Shogun
will be a little disappointed...
when the two of us ride into Edo.

Now let me read you the account
of a real procession:

"Our cavalcade was of many hundreds...

"winding along the road
like a huge silken dragon. "

And we will be two men and a horse,
if we can get a horse.

"A list of the gifts
the same lord took to Edo.

"Lacquer boxes for ivory and enamelware,
inlaid swords and shields. "

I wonder if His Highness could use
a good jack-knife.

"Delicacies of food
that might have been spun from air. "

I suppose we can spare a keg of sowbelly
and a tin of hardtack, Henry. Go on.

"Paintings by the great artists

Kano and Sesshu. "
That's not a bad likeness
to President Pierce at a dollar and a half.
"Porcelain jars of the finest of sake. "
There we can match them.
Good old sour-mash tanglefoot.
I guess that's everything.
It had better be.
Well, let's start
"winding like a silken dragon. "
Where is Okichi?
People of Shimoda do this for you...
so you enter Edo proudly.
The people of Shimoda forgot nothing
for the journey.
When Harris-san started...
he rode as a great man and a great leader.
Your escort, Mr. Harris, as I promised.
We shall meet in Edo.
Near Edo, we made our final camp.
Your Excellency.
I greet you on behalf of our Shogun.
Welcome to Edo.
Are these the protectors of your city?
Yes. Against evil spirits.
I trust they will let me pass.
They will let your body pass
but not your soul, if it is evil.
Tomorrow, at the Hour of the Dragon...
I will escort you
into the Shogun's presence.
And now, to your quarters.
Bless my soul!
Steady, Henry. Maybe it's all a mirage.
The calendar of your visit, Mr. Harris.
First day, assembly of nobles and guests
in the Great Hall.
Presentation to the Shogun...
and expression of gratitude
by visitor from far-away land.
On the second day at the Hour
of the Rooster, a banquet in your honor.
Return to house for repose.
The Shogun wishes all a pleasant dream.

Third day, Hour of the Tiger...
to an exhibition of archery
with Lord Hotta.
Okichi, what is this?
Your furo. Hot bath.
They will help you from your clothes.
Here. Wait a minute. You mean,
they're going to take my clothes off?
Is ancient custom.
The next day,
Harris-san was shown to the Great Hall.
For centuries, only Japanese eyes
had seen the Shogun's house.
Your Excellency.
I owe you my thanks.
You owe me nothing, Mr. Harris.
My obligation is at an end.
Now we stand equal.
May it please Your Highness...
I'm directed to express the wish...
of the President
of the United States of America...
for your health and your happiness.
Your Highness, Counselors...
it is in the very nature of creation
that man shall have a neighbor...
though he builds his home in the desert
or in the mountains...
or in the midst of the sea.
Yet somewhere, however distant...
dwells that next man who is his neighbor
and might be his friend.
As it is with men, so with nations.
Across 5,000 miles of ocean...
the United States of America,
your neighbor...
stretches out its hand to Japan.
It is not a hand clenched in a fist of anger.
It holds no knife to threaten.
It wears no glove of dissimulation.
It is the open hand of my countrymen,
demanding nothing...
asking no special favors...
seeking only the common good.

But in pursuit of that common good...
we ask that you pull down the barriers
which for centuries...
have separated Japan
from the rest of the world.
We ask that you take your rightful position
among the community of nations...
with all its glory
and with all its responsibilities.
To be good neighbors
to not only ourselves...
but to every nation of goodwill.
To take what the world has to offer,
and to offer that which you have.
To learn from others and to teach them.
If this seems good to you,
to do these things...
then I am empowered
by my government...
through the instrument
of this new treaty...
to pledge to you our friendship in peace...
our help in trouble,
and our strength in danger.
How long do you think it will take them
to make up their minds, Okichi?
Three days, maybe four.
Treaty big fence.
Some horses no likie jump.
"Likie"? Like.
You've been listening
to Sam's Pidgin English again.
Like. Thank you.
Lord Hotta tells me that...
I'm to be questioned
before the Council takes its final vote.
What will they ask me, Okichi?
Maybe strange questions.
But say truth.
Just tell them the truth, eh?
Is always best.
Same thing in America.
In America, geisha girl pretty?
There are no geisha girls

in America, Okichi.

- No geisha?

- No geisha. Just girls.

When wife in street...

she walk behind husband?

- Yes?

- Rarely.

- Where walk?

- By his side.

By his side?

Or a little in front.

Husband permit this?

Sometimes he can't help himself.

In Japan, different husbands.

No, in America, different wives.

The banquet was held

on the second evening.

Behind the faces of the nobles
were strong and dangerous feelings.

Some agreed with Harris-san,
some did not.

And some hated him...

as they had always hated those
who intruded upon the soil of Japan.

They have seen your warships.

Are your fishing boats as large?

No.

Is war more important to you than fishing?

No.

Mr. Harris...

we have had no wars

for the last 200 years in my country.

How many have you had in the West?

Too many.

Yet some were fought for liberty.

You speak of liberty. Yet do not ships
of your country go to Africa...

get black men,

and bring them back as slaves?

Yes, I am sorry to say that is true.

But there are men in my country
who would die to end that evil.

It cannot long endure.

No nation understands another.

It is best for Japan to remain apart.
Only by understanding
can the world hope to progress.
He asks, "What is progress?"
Tell them it can mean many things.
Among them...
not having to kill girl babies
in time of famine.
The calendar of his visit
continued to unroll.
Today archers rode
as they had for 1,000 years.
Do you have archers in America?
Yes, of sorts. In the Far West.
Our countries must have many things
in common.
Yes. I have decided to support you,
Mr. Harris.
I am delighted to hear that
from the great Lord Hotta.
A reed must bow with the wind.
I hope others of the Shogunate
are of the same mind.
Unfortunately, we are divided.
But if Lord Shijo,
who has much influence...
joins with me, the vote will be favorable.
Have you reason to believe that he might?
Oh, yes. He is a man of great wisdom.
Lord Shijo has been assassinated.
Poor man.
He was the one who asked,
"What is progress?"
I could have said, "Not being murdered
because you disagreed with people. "
Mr. Harris.
Your Excellency.
Mr. Harris,
as the person who brought you here...
I have come to beg you
to leave Edo at once...
and return to Shimoda.
Why?
For our sake and your own.

Your treaty will never be signed.
Violence, and only violence can come of it.
Lord Shijo is dead.
He was a good old man.
It was a bad deed to kill him.
Family is being set against family...
and friend against friend.
Do you want to tear us to pieces?
I told you long ago
that there are men here...
who will fight for our old ways
to the death.
Do they still include Your Excellency?
Mr. Harris, you do not understand.
In Japan we do not belong to ourselves
but to our families.
We owe them unquestioning obedience.
Go, Mr. Harris. Go before
that obedience is turned against you.
Now the time had come.
They had to decide.
Those who wanted to vote
for the treaty opened their fans.
The vote moved around the table...
and Lord Hotta counted more open fans
than closed ones.
The death of Lord Shijo had decided
against the opposition...
not for it.
Harris-san had won.
You are welcome?
Right. You are doing fine, Okichi.
Sir, to you.
My most hearty congratulations.
Thank you, Henry. And to you...
without whom success
would have been impossible.
Mine was a very small part.
That made the difference
between being deaf and dumb...
and hearing and speaking.
And now to Okichi...
whose gentle glow has been the lantern
that I've followed.

Thank you, Harris-san.
May it always guide me.
To Okichi.
While we were celebrating...
the clan of Baron Tamura
was planning a tragic deed.
Though his heart was divided...
Tamura accepted the ceremonial sword...
and bowed to his fate.
Before he told me his wish...
Baron Tamura made me swear...
I would obey him in all things.
Then he told me his wish.
Death for Harris-san.
I was his to command.
I had no choice.
Beautiful, Okichi. Beautiful.
Very late, Harris-san.
Best you go sleep now.
Okichi.
After the treaty is signed, I must go back
to America, and you know that.
Yes, Harris-san.
But only for a short time.
I'm coming back to you, Okichi.
And that's the last time
we'll ever be separated.
Yes, Harris-san.
There's so much of Japan
that I haven't seen.
Cities and temples.
You must show them to me.
And they say the mountains
are magnificent in the winter.
Snow very deep.
And they say there are hot springs,
and you bathe in the snow.
Yes, Harris-san.
Then when I come back,
we must go to the mountains.
Yes, the mountains.
We'll find a lake
and build a house over the lake.
And no neighbors.

I'm tired of neighbors.
Tired of people and politics.
A house with a slanting roof, alone.
Would you be happy, Okichi,
in a house like that?
Would you?

It is written:

"Fortunate is the woman
who rises in morning...
"to cook her husband's rice. "
Fortunate is the man.
Best you go sleep now. I puts light out.
All right. You "puts light out. "
- Good night, Okichi.
- Good night, Harris-san.
Take back your life.
Take back my life. What does he mean?
What does he mean, Okichi?
He came to kill you.
What stopped him? You?
But once drawn,
that sword must taste of blood.
He has gone to kill himself.
Tamura had failed.
When he came face to face
with Harris-san...
he had not the will to kill him.
Dishonor to himself, to his ancestors.
To a samurai, this meant but one thing.;
Death.
Life with you...
would have been
all happiness, Harris-san...
but happiness bought by my broken vow...
and the death of my Lord Tamura.
I have failed my people. I have to go.
It is the way of my ancestors...
their beliefs.
And if I am to live at all...
I must live by those beliefs.
Okichi?
Okichi?
Where is Okichi?

Where is she?
She's gone, sir.
Gone? Where?
She left these for you.
A comb is the symbol of parting.
A mirror, her soul.
She has left it with you, sir.
- We've got to find her.
- No, Mr. Harris.
You will never find her.
She had her reasons.
But these symbols mean
that she has gone forever.
As he went to sign the treaty...
the streets were filled
with those who wished to honor him.
So he passed into our history...
and from my sight...
but never from my heart.
English