

The Prologue

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I will be writing on several topics dealing with my role as an American woman in the Japanese traditional archery (Kyudo) and mounted archery (Yabusame) world. I hope you enjoy my future articles. However the prologue to my experience is one of many chapters, which I plan to fill a book with someday and is one that cannot go without mention. This chapter began in Japan when I decided to move from the south island of Kyushu to the main island of Honshu.

The train was crowded with rush hour *salary* men commuting away from the metropolitan areas of Tokyo to the countryside. Regardless of the two-hour ride packed like sardines, no one seemed to mind being pressed against unfamiliar bodies all weary from long days in stuffy office buildings. Except me.

Finally the announcement came. "*Mamonaku, Kamakura, Kamakura de gozaimasu.*" The doors opened and against my will, had it been so, I was carried out on a wave, bags and all, to a small platform at Kamakura station. This was where I would make my new home.

I had made arrangements to take up residence in a small apartment near the hills in the ancient capital city and made my way via scribbled directions to the bus that would hopefully transport me there. I was elated to be close to the swordsmanship school I had commuted three hours to when I lived on the west side of Tokyo a year before. So, I let no time pass. After finding my new place, I packed my gear and headed for the train station lest I should miss any second of practice that night.

I managed to navigate my way along narrow side streets, through the main shrine, Tsuruga Oka Hachimangu, down the main road, to the station. However, I was not as keen navigating home that evening at midnight after the celebration of my return.

The road I took began winding up a hillside and narrowed as it ascended. I realized it was not one of the roads I had taken earlier but preceded to make an evening stroll of it. As I neared the end of the road, I noticed a small white animal sitting in the road. I thought it to be a dog but as I approached, I realized it was a fox. How unusual, I thought. An albino fox must be rare. He assessed my position and took flight into the hills as I came near.

I backtracked down the hill still amazed by the interesting white fox. At the bottom I found a road I assumed to be the correct road home. However, this road led to yet another interesting discovery. I stood at the bottom of a weathered stone stairway leading up into the darkness of a thick hillside. On a sign written in very poor English, was the account of Japan's first Shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo who died in 1199 at age 52 after being thrown from his horse. This place marked his burial.

Intrigued, I fumbled up the long stairway into the darkness. My eyes gradually adjusted as I found my way to a clearing guarded by old ginkgo trees. In the center was a moss-covered pagoda surrounded by a stone fence. At the entrance lay the remnants of flowers withered from the day, along side open jars of sake and coin offerings. Odor from previously burned incense lingered in the cool February air. Out of respect for the man that made Kamakura the seat of the Japanese feudal government in 1192, I folded my hands and prayed for his repose. I passed along my admiration to this historical figurehead whom I had briefly studied about in Japanese class.

As I prayed I heard a strange noise that sounded like breathing next to me. My hair stood on end and when I realized that my fear had not paralyzed my legs, I used them to race down the stairs almost losing my footing on the way down. Trying not to hyperventilate, I gained control of my breathing and my sanity. Was I crazy? I don't believe in ghosts, certainly not VERY old shogun ghosts. Being stubborn by nature, I marched back up the stairs and put my hands together and although I could still hear what sounded like breathing, I stood and finished my prayer to Yoritomo and thanked him for the opportunity to be in *his* city. I turned, walked calmly down the stairs and somehow, straight back to my new apartment.

The following day I retold the story to my seniors in the dojo and to my sensei. However, I was surprised by their reaction. They were not at all shocked by my ghostly incident. They were more surprised that I had seen a white fox. I had seen many brown foxes in the US and they questioned whether it was just a cat or a dog. "It couldn't be a white fox!" But I quizzically ensured them I knew what I saw...?

My sensei took me aside and explained that the white fox was O-Inari-sama, the Fox God. He was the most revered Shinto God of Minamoto no Yoritomo. In deep patronage, Yoritomo erected many shrines throughout Kamakura in honor of O-Inari-sama.

Now I was really confused. If there was no such thing as a white fox, then why did I see one??? I went to the local library and researched and found information that indeed confirmed the reaction everyone gave me. Foxes were demons that could change into young maidens and lure men to their demise. However, the white fox was a God...

That night I went walking with a friend hoping we might see it again. Well, we never did and I let it pass.

Two weeks later, I went for an evening stroll. This time up a different hillside road. As I reached the dead-end, I chuckled at my apprehension and sighed when I saw nothing. I returned down the road and just as I turned up another side road, there it was!!! A white fox! My reaction was hardly the same as my first encounter. I froze. The fox looked at me and leapt up on a stone wall along the roadside and sat looking at me while swishing its tail. A street lamp clearly lit up the animal's head and the body was partly in shadow. But it WAS a fox. A WHITE FOX!

While pinching my arm I started mumbling out loud to it. "Why can I see you? Are you really O-Inari-sama?" and other questions. The fox just sat looking at me still moving its tail. I must have babbled for 15 minutes before I started to calm down. My fear was now gone and I started to feel a warmth. I felt like it was a sign welcoming me to Kamakura and decided that it was a good thing, not something to be feared. I looked at the fox, which to my surprise was still there and said, "I understand now, you can go now." You can stop reading if you think I am crazy, but the fox turned and ran into the bushes.

I returned home and never talked to anyone about it for several years. But a funny discovery came a month later when I was walking one afternoon. The first road where I sighted the fox had a historical marker sighting the road as the East Gate to Yoritomo's old dwelling, the second, the marker for the West Gate. Out of respect for the sign I received, I went to Yoritomo's grave and prayed every day for one year. A Japanese custom "*sendo-mairi*" or "one thousand prayers."

Now to the archery part of my story to those who kept reading whether believing my tale or not:

One night while walking home through Tsuru ga Oka Hachimangu Shrine, I randomly turned into the shrine dojo, marched up the steps to the rooftop range and threw myself on the floor. I begged permission to study *kyudo* from anyone who would teach me the tradition of shooting with a 2.5 meter—long bow.

I was told to register with the shrine and a few months later, I started formal *kyudo* lessons. This also led to a strong desire to study *yabusame*, mounted archery, which they practiced every Saturday on wooden horses in the main hall of the dojo just below our range. I used to sneak downstairs to watch them practice and imagined myself riding in a gorgeous costume, racing my horse and shooting my long bamboo bow along the track through the center of the shrine grounds.

During my daily prayer at Yoritomo's grave, I always mentioned my desire to learn *yabusame*. However, only after becoming determined to get accepted and learning the history, did I realize that the Ogasawara family started their school of archery, horsemanship and etiquette as the official teachers to Minamoto no Yoritomo; my teacher being the 31st generation teacher to Yoritomo. This drove my desire to be accepted and also my desire to excel in *kyudo*. I practiced four hours everyday and was always the first in and the last to leave.

After being accepted, I was asked to be in a special ceremony where I was dressed in the traditional costume from the Kamakura period. Before departing, I proceeded to Yoritomo's grave. As I descended the stairs after praying, I was met by a dozen elementary school children who started shouting; "*Hojo Masako!*" Quite sincere, the children asked if I had come to pay respects to my husband. I smiled and not entirely sure why, I said, "yes" and the kids were in awe as I continued down the stairs. Hojo Masako? She was Yoritomo's wife.

When I eventually made the transition from *kyudo* and *yabusame* to western style archery, many criticized me for giving up the traditional way. Although, I hadn't stopped my study, my heart was certainly drawn to my new recurve bow and to shooting at 70 meters. However, I eventually felt guilty. So I put my recurve together and walked up the stairs and held it out as I bowed at Yoritomo's grave. I asked for acceptance in my decision to shoot the modern bow. My reasoning was simple. In Yoritomo's day, he used the best bow available to become the best possible archer. I want to become the best possible archer in "my time" and use the best bow available in "my time."

Recently, I said "sayonara" to Japan in my pursuit to be that best possible archer. I returned to the USA where I recently made the US World Field team. Although I can no longer visit the grave of Yoritomo, I feel that somewhere a white fox has spied another and drawn them into the mysterious history and tradition that Japanese archery offers. I am blessed to have received so many opportunities to embark on the ancient paths of the Japanese samurai and that I have been given a chance to share them with you. Enjoy! *Dozo yoroshiku!*