

# Ya Watashi

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Now where were we? Still trying to get back to the topic of Japanese traditional archery and my struggle as an American woman in Japan. Four months had passed and I finally graduated from the 16<sup>th</sup> *kyudo* class at the Shrine of Hachiman in Kamakura city where I lived. Despite a major head injury, I received the coveted certificate of graduation and my name was added to the roster of members on the dojo wall. Now I was free to practice with the senior archers. I was ready to grow!

Now that I was free to go to the Kenshin *dojo* I took advantage of the opportunity. I changed into my practice uniform and tucked the flowing legs of my black floor-length *hakama* into my waste band. After securing my quiver to my back with the long silk cords, I wrangled my 7 and a half meter long *yumi* into its bow sock and gathered my *kake* shooting glove and accessories into a bundle and tied that to my back as well. I grabbed my keys and headed out the door.

I was very careful as I pulled the cover off and rolled it into a heap. I didn't want to soil my nice white top or my white *tabi* socks covered only by the straps of my *seta* sandals. After I turned her around, I mounted my scooter and grabbed my *yumi* and lay it across the handlebars. It protruded like a jousting stick. I fired up my Honda and sped towards Hachiman shrine along the narrow roads that interlaced the ancient capitol. The guard at the old *tori* gate smiled, bowed and waved me onto the shrine grounds. I zipped into my parking spot under an old ginkgo tree and hustled in before the senior archers' arrival.

As custom dictates, I enter the Kenshin *dojo* and bow low towards the main hall *kamiza* before proceeding to the office window. A shrine *miko-san* hands me a sign-in log and requests my member card. She turns it to face outwards and places it by the log. No other shooters have arrived yet. I make my way to the rooftop *shajo* range and unload my gear and head to the *matoba* to set up the targets.

First thing first, I place a red flag in a special holder to signify the cessation of any shooting regardless of lack of presence. After spraying the mound to moisten the sand, I place each *mato* according to specific markings written above the *azuchi* sand mound framed by the full purple curtains that hang above the targets.

Each target has a stake attached to the top edge of the cylindrical *mato*, which is driven into the *azuchi* sand to hold it secure. After each *mato* is in place, I carefully rake the sand at the base to show no footsteps, remove the red flag and return to the *shajo*. After stringing my bow and preparing my arrows, I savor my early arrival by sitting quietly in front of the *kamiza*.

Usually I would get at least one hour of practice before other members arrive. Amongst the arrivals was usually one *sensei*. I learned rather quickly that the *sensei* were not running classes and if you wanted to learn something you had to ask. So that's what I did, almost constantly.

Four hours after my arrival, it was time to clean the dojo. This procedure entailed splitting up in groups. I usually ended up with the men cleaning the *matoba*. Each target is removed and taken to the back behind the concrete wall that supports the target mound. All the *mato* are turned upside down and the arrow holes are pushed back and smoothed over. Finally new target faces are glued on top of the layers of old faces and hung on posts to dry for the next day's use. Then several of us take wood spatulas to the *azuchi* and smooth over the stray arrow holes and those from the target stakes. The sand is once again raked and the *azuchi* is as it was when I arrived.

In the *shajo*, other members sweep the floor and take damp cloths and push them by hand along the length of the glossy boards. After cleaning, those present line up according to rank and bow formally with the *sensei* at the head of the group. After strapping my gear on my back, I reverse my earlier entrance by returning to claim my member card, bow to the dojo *kamiza* and clamor around the other bikes to my scooter. This daily ritual ends once I park and cover my Honda upon returning to my little one room apartment.

It never occurred to me that practicing everyday would lead to improvement; certainly not the improvement that would win me a *dojo kyudo* competition a few months after graduating. *Getsurei-kai* are held every month and most use the standard black and white concentric circles, where points are based on simple hit or miss. However the *gesturei-kai* I won was one of only two scored competitions throughout the year. The targets are colored and scored according to accuracy. I was very excited about my victory, as it was not gender or rank specific. That was, of course, until I was informed that the winner of the *gesturei-kai* was required to perform the *ya-watashi* ceremony at the opening of the following month's tourney. Now I was terrified.

Motomatsu-sensei was unsure what to do about my performing the ceremony. Generally the winner of a *gesturei-kai* is a senior archer who already knows the procedure for the *ya-watashi* and also has the required ceremonial kimono. I had no rank, no experience, and no kimono.

I managed to sew my own kimono and Motomatsu-sensei agreed to help me learn the intricate moves, which also include two other members chosen by me to be my assistants. I chose two senior women who were well versed and practice began. I was very honored to do the *ya-watashi* but preparing for the ceremony humbled me when realized I could not perform the part of tying the sleeves of my kimono back with a special cord. It was not for lack of trying but my handicap in my right shoulder. I simply could not reach my left side to grasp the cord and wrap it in accordance to specific moves. I tried but no matter how I contorted my body, my hand would not reach and I was expected to do this in front of the whole *dojo*.

And just when I thought my troubles had worsened, my shooting glove was stolen from my gear when I left it at the *dojo* to run an errand. A *kake* takes up to six months to break in and I felt like bailing out and giving up on this ceremony. I had no money for a ¥50,000 *kake* and opted to use a *dojo* glove, which didn't have a hardened thumb and was painful to use.

The day finally arrived and terror filled my heart as I began the careful sequence leading up to my shooting two arrows at a single target in front of every sensei and member of our school. I knelt in front while my two assistants knelt a few paces behind and we all bowed with orchestrated precision to the rhythm of our breathing. Then came the task of preparing my long flowing sleeves for shooting. I was quaking at the thought of failure in front of my whole school. Per direction, one assistant kneels behind me and holds my bow while I attempt to tie my sleeves and the other goes to the *matoba* to wait for me to shoot.

Then the dreaded reach for the end of the cord... There it was! I actually got it! I felt my assistant's hand withdraw. She had taken the cord and placed the end within reach delaying my painful attempt to dislocate my shoulder. I finished tying my sleeves and was ready for action.

As I set up for the first arrow, I was trying to remain calm but was struggling to remember all the moves that seemed to take flight from my memory at the slight hint of fear. I shot my first arrow and it skidded to a stop in front of the *mato*. My thumb stung as did my pride and I retreated to a kneeling position while my other assistant retrieved the arrow with poise and purpose.

When she returned to the safety of the *matoba's* enclosure, I made way for the finale and entered the sequence for my last arrow. My heart was beating wildly and I could see my bow pulsate at full draw as I took aim. I released the arrow and terror filled my heart when the string slapped my sleeve, which had started to come loose from its bind. I held my follow thru. A clear pop emanated back towards the *shajo*. My body filled with shock. I hit the target despite catching my sleeve?

Nearly shaken beyond recovery, I just held my follow thru until my head cleared. I once again knelt and watched as my assistant removed my arrow from the center of the *mato*. She returned to the *shajo* and passed the arrows to my first assistant who then, from behind me, returned my arrows into my hand. We then moved into position for a closing bow. It was over and I had survived. Members of my school surrounded me and honored me more than I deserved.

Being part of this ceremony changed me and changed my level of appreciation for the art of *kyudo*. It also changed how I felt about my involvement in the traditions of Japan. I wanted to do it correctly and felt horrible that I could not do the forms to the perfection dictated by hundreds of years of culture and discipline. A new battle began to stir inside of me: one that would change my heart and my direction. But, hey, that's another story...