

# **The Samurai's Garden Study Guide**

## **The Samurai's Garden by Gail Tsukiyama**

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## Plot Summary

When Stephen is allowed to leave his father's apartment to go to the family's vacation home in Tarumi, Japan, on his own, he counts it a victory. To celebrate, he buys a journal and begins making entries in the journal to document his journey and his time in Tarumi. It's those journal accounts that become the book, *Samurai's Garden*.

The book begins with Stephen's account of his diagnosis of tuberculosis, his family's reaction, and the events that brought him to be on a train bound for Tarumi. As Stephen tells it, his parents were searching for a place for Stephen to recuperate but were also looking for a way to get him away from his younger sister, Penelope, before he infected her. When Stephen arrives in Tarumi, he's met by Matsu, caretaker of the family property. Stephen first believes that his time in Tarumi will be too quiet and expects boredom. He plans to paint and expects to be homesick at once. But he soon discovers that he is entranced by the quiet and forms a friendship with Matsu. That friendship is enhanced when Stephen meets Sachi—the woman Matsu helped through her discovery of her own infection with leprosy. Matsu quickly becomes a complicated character and Stephen is inextricably caught up in Matsu's life, which is interwoven with Sachi's own.

Matsu's younger sister was among those in the village infected when the village experienced an outbreak of leprosy. All who were infected felt they had dishonored their families, and Matsu's sister took her own life in an effort to bring honor to her family. Sachi says she tried to do the same, but didn't have the courage. It was Matsu who helped Sachi find her way to Yamaguchi—the Village of the Lepers. Matsu's best friend is Kenzo. Kenzo was betrothed to Sachi until her discovery of the leprosy. When Sachi ran away, Kenzo sent messages to Sachi by way of Matsu, but never again saw her until he happened upon her one day at Matsu's house. Kenzo soon committed suicide himself.

Throughout the story, there are two gardens that are important to Matsu, Sachi, and Stephen. Matsu's garden is filled with water and color. He has a fish pond and a bridge, and the three work hard at the garden after a storm causes major damage. The second garden is Sachi's and is, in many ways, the opposite of Matsu's. Sachi's garden is dry and there's a single flower that blooms in the center of her garden. Rocks are arranged to resemble water and Sachi rearranges the rocks to resemble ripples from a single point or from a wave. She explains that she finds solace in the arrangements and in the act of arranging. As Stephen befriends Matsu and Sachi, he discovers that both are complicated humans with loves, dreams, and desires. He also learns about himself through the process.

Stephen hears the news of the escalating war between China and Japan. He worries about his family's safety, as the Japanese advance toward Hong Kong. The war means that some Japanese in Tarumi are hostile toward Stephen because he is Chinese. He meets a young woman, Keiko, and is instantly attracted to her. She returns the affection, but her father hates Stephen because of his race. When Keiko's brother is killed serving with the army against China, Keiko says she can no longer see Stephen.



Stephen is also forced into an adult role as he learns that his parent's marriage is in jeopardy. Stephen's mother tells him of his father's affair and asks him to intervene. Stephen avoids the situation as much as possible, but admits that his image of his father changed once he realized that there really was an affair and that his father didn't intend to end it. Stephen reluctantly prepares to go home . He knows that he must return to his mother in Hong Kong, but he has become caught up in his friendships in Tarumi. Though he toys with the idea of remaining at the beach house, he does return home after more than a year away. The book ends as Stephen boards the train—the first leg on his journey back to his family and his life before he was diagnosed with tuberculosis.



# Autumn: September 1937

## Autumn: September 1937 Summary

When Stephen is allowed to leave his father's apartment to go to the family's vacation home in Tarumi, Japan, on his own, he counts it a victory. To celebrate, he buys a journal and begins making entries in the journal to document his journey and his time in Tarumi. It's those journal accounts that become the book, *Samurai's Garden*. Stephen then begins to recount the months of illness that prompted the trip to Tarumi. He became ill while away at school in Canton. His friend King accompanied him home, and Stephen then describes the worry in his mother's eyes and the way the family servant Ching doted on him.

Stephen describes the symptoms of tuberculosis—the constant coughing and fever. While staying in Hong Kong with his mother, Stephen becomes something of a recluse. His sister Penelope—whom Stephen calls "Pie"—isn't allowed in his room. Penelope often hovers at the doorway, and sneaks in on the night before Stephen leaves Hong Kong. Stephen describes his other siblings only briefly. Henry and Anne are both away at school.

Stephen's father is in the import-export business and gave the children "Western" names because he believes it to be an advantage in business. Stephen's father stays in Japan more than China. While Stephen is ill and facing the heat of summer in China, he learns that the Japanese Army has advanced on Peking. It's then that he is sent to his father in Japan, where he is to make the journey to the family's beach house in Tarumi, Japan. Stephen says he was sent away without being allowed to see his family and friends and that it made him lonelier than ever. He expects the time in Tarumi to be "a quiet resembling death", but finds solace in the cooler climate near the sea. Ching and Stephen board the ship, the "President Wilson" for Kobe, where they spend several days with Stephen's father. While his father plans to take him to Tarumi, the war has become an issue for his business. Stephen persuades his father to allow him to make the trip alone. Stephen packs lightly and includes his paints. His father promises to send canvasses, but warns Stephen not to tire himself with the painting. Stephen believes painting is the only solace he'll find in Tarumi.

During the trip, Stephen recalls summers in Tarumi and is surprised to discover that Matsu—a gardener during Stephen's childhood—would be at the train station to meet him. Stephen's first impression of Matsu is that he seems the kind of person who would enjoy solitude. Matsu had been with the family for more than thirty years, opting to stay on at the beach house after his own parents died. Stephen immediately discovers that living with Matsu is going to be different than living with his mother and the family servants and their constant fussing. Matsu sets a brisk pace for home and doesn't stop to let Stephen rest along the way. When they reach the house, Matsu ushers Stephen into his garden. Stephen describes the silk tree, pines, rock paths, beach sand, and fish pond along with the "intoxicating" scents. Stephen puts his things away, then returns to



the garden for a bath. He is embarrassed by his body, which he says looks like a skeleton due to the weight loss from the tuberculosis.

The next entry is dated September 16, 1937, the day after Stephen's arrival. Stephen says he fell asleep immediately after the hot bath and slept through the night. Stephen wakes early, thirsty but already feeling "almost healthy". Stephen describes the small, uncluttered house, including memories from his childhood. He and Matsu have pickled vegetables for breakfast with little conversation. Stephen gladly escapes to the beach to draw.

While there, Stephen strips and goes for a swim. It's while he's in the water that he first sees Keiko and her little sister. Though he desperately wants to meet the young people, he is naked and remains quiet. The September 20 entry tells of Stephen's frustration that he has no canvas for painting, and that the week he's spent in Tarumi seems much longer. On September 20, he says that the quiet has "covered him like a blanket" and that he feels well again. When Stephen receives letters from home, it renews his homesickness. While he's in the garden reading letters, there's a shower of petals from one of the trees and he hears the girls from the beach laughing, but they run away before he can talk to them.

## Autumn: September 1937 Analysis

The very first words from Stephen's pen are, "I wanted to find my own way". He goes on to say that he convinced his father to allow him to travel from Kobe to Tarumi alone, but it's at least conceivable that Stephen was talking about "finding his way" in other ways. The repeated theme of the book is Stephen's own coming of age, and Stephen's actions from the very beginning of the book are likely aimed in that direction. Stephen doesn't dwell deeply on his relationships with his family member; he writes only of his affection for his younger sister, Pie.

When he meets Matsu, he immediately guesses that the Japanese man was comfortable alone and would not appreciate Stephen's presence. Though there's no indication from Matsu that Stephen is correct, it's easy to assume that he wasn't looking forward to Stephen's time in Tarumi any more than Stephen himself. It's probably loneliness that drives Stephen to ask Matsu if he ever gets lonely. Matsu simply replies, "there's always plenty of work to do". He then reveals that his sister sends him magazines to read. Stephen seems amazed and Matsu says that he had two sisters, but that one died. Stephen thinks it's a small bit of information, but that "it was a start". Stephen doesn't elaborate, but it's fairly obvious that he's already looking toward making friends with Matsu. Stephen seems to want to continue being bored and sad with his enforced exile, but can't quite seem to pull it off. Like most young people, it's likely that he's beginning to mature from the time away from his parents and by being forced to rely on himself.



# Autumn: October 1937

## Autumn: October 1937 Summary

The first October entry is dated "October 5, 1937." Stephen says his father arrived unexpectedly from Kobe the day before. Stephen is elated to spend time with his father. He talks of the fact that he's missed his father, and that it seems his parents have been caught up in the needs of Penelope since her birth. Stephen says he and his father are different in Tarumi, without the typical distractions. On October 6, Stephen and his father spend time at the beach, and Stephen learns that his father doesn't know how to swim. He notes that he's sad that their time together is nearing the end.

The talk turns briefly to the war, with Stephen's father offering little information but promising to have some newspapers sent to Stephen. Stephen then asks about Matsu as a child, and his father tells him that Matsu's younger sister was very pretty. He says that he was much too shy to talk to her and that his parents already had plans for him that didn't include the servant's daughter. Stephen's father says he heard rumors that Matsu had been in love with a girl from Tarumi who married someone else, but that his love had held him to the village when many others were moving away. He also says that Matsu's younger sister died suddenly, but had no details. He advised Stephen to simply accept Matsu's silence. On October 8, Stephen writes that his father had returned to Kobe. He walks his father to the train station and returns to the beach house sadder than ever.

Matsu meets him in the garden and announces that he plans to visit a friend in a nearby village, and invites Stephen along. They hike about two miles up the mountain to Yamaguchi—a small community known as "Village of the Lepers". Matsu explains that he began visiting Yamaguchi as a young man because of a friend from his own childhood. He says a doctor told him leprosy wasn't contagious through simple contact and that he'd never worried about catching the disease. Stephen has trouble catching his breath during the walk up the mountain, but insists that they go on when Matsu points it out. Stephen describes the village as containing houses that were pieced together from scraps. He says the people appeared normal from a distance, but the deep sores and scars could be seen when they were closer. Stephen says he was more curious than afraid. Matsu says the Japanese government would provide a better home for the lepers, but that the people who live in Yamaguchi feel the village is their home. Matsu leads Stephen to a house that is somewhat better than most, and introduces him to Sachi. Stephen gets his first look at her scarred face, but realizes that she was once very beautiful. Stephen recognizes a kindred spirit—a lonely person. Sachi says she seldom has visitors other than Matsu. Sachi invites Stephen back. Matsu says leprosy ran "like wildfire" through Tarumi and that Sachi was among the victims. He says that some killed themselves in an effort to end the dishonor to their families. When Stephen asks if Matsu's family was impacted, Matsu says that it "took" his younger sister.



On October 21, Stephen writes that the visit to Sachi advanced his friendship with Matsu. He is elated when Matsu promises another visit to Sachi at the end of the week. Stephen then decides that he wants to paint Matsu's garden. Later, Matsu brings Stephen a set of expensive paint brushes that had belonged to his grandfather.

On October 29, Stephen notes that he's almost finished the painting of the garden. He says he has slowed his progress, wanting to savor the final few strokes. He goes down to the beach where he briefly talks with the two young girls, Keiko and Miko. When Stephen returns home, Matsu tells him that Sachi has invited them for lunch the following day. On October 30, Matsu begins the day by cooking bacon and eggs for Stephen, and says that Stephen's grandfather loved eggs. When they reach Yamaguchi, they find that Sachi isn't home and Stephen gets his first look at her garden. It's a dry garden, called kare sansui. There are rocks arranged to represent streams and ripples in a body of water. Stephen presents Sachi with a drawing of the beach. After lunch, Sachi and Stephen return to the garden. Stephen calls the garden a mixture of beauty and sadness, referring to the illusion of movement without the water. As they return home, Matsu says that Sachi moved to the mountain home in an effort to bring no more dishonor to her family. He refuses to say more on the subject, but Stephen will eventually learn the facts of Sachi's decision from Sachi herself.

## **Autumn: October 1937 Analysis**

When Stephen's father asks Matsu why he isn't feeding Stephen, Matsu answers that Stephen "eats like a bird". It's a display of humor that's rather unexpected from both, and perhaps offers a look at Matsu's true personality. While Stephen's father advises Stephen to accept Matsu's silence, Stephen feels that Matsu has a story "that no one had bothered to discover". He seems to feel both a kinship and curiosity about Matsu. Though the reader never has a direct thought from Matsu, it seems that Matsu feels something for Stephen and probably invites him along to visit a friend—Sachi—in an effort to alleviate Stephen's loneliness. Considering how important this friend is to Matsu, it becomes an even more significant step in their friendship.

It's a bit ironic that Stephen seems to be concerned about going into Yamaguchi, considering that he was sent to Tarumi so that he wouldn't infect his family with tuberculosis. Matsu assures him that he wouldn't have brought Stephen to the village if there was a danger of infection, and Stephen says he's concerned about spreading the disease to the villagers. Matsu exhibits the full degree of his own selflessness with his dedication to Sachi and the village of Yamaguchi. Matsu tells Stephen that the people who came to Yamaguchi as young people gave up their homes, families, and friends, but it will be some time before Stephen can fully understand the concept. As Stephen notes that the friendship between himself and Matsu takes a giant step after their visit with Sachi, it's important to note that he says nothing has really changed other than his own attitude. This could be another indication of Stephen's rapidly advancing sense of self.





# Autumn: November through December 2, 1937

## Autumn: November through December 2, 1937 Summary

On November 19, 1937, Stephen completes the painting of the garden. He says that he's lost the moment it's finished. Then he heads into town with Matsu. He comments on the lack of young men in Tarumi, and Matsu says it's because they've all gone to join the Japanese Imperial Army. Matsu takes Stephen to a teahouse owned and operated by his friend, Kenzo. Matsu says Kenzo is the person who gets bacon and other hard-to-find items. Matsu says that Kenzo sought him out as a young man, despite their differences—Kenzo was neat and popular, while Matsu was shy and constantly in the garden. Matsu also tells Stephen that Sachi was best friends with his sister, Tomoko. Kenzo stayed in Tarumi to care for his parents. Kenzo gives Stephen a too-sweet drink made of roses. Matsu explains that Sachi refused to see Kenzo after her diagnosis. Matsu says that he believes Sachi allowed his visits because she didn't care for him.

On November 20, Stephen writes about a letter he received from his mother. She says that his father is having an affair, and asks Stephen to "find out what this is all about". His mother says Stephen is old enough to handle the situation, but Stephen says he isn't, and that he wants to cry. Stephen says the one thing he's certain of is that he doesn't want to leave Tarumi. Later, he writes to his mother, but doesn't comment on the affair. A storm approaches, and as Stephen is helping Matsu catch the fish from the fish pond, a huge wave crashes into the garden and smashes Stephen into the wall of the house. Stephen loses consciousness and Sachi is there when he awakes. She says she came to help repair the garden, and says she came only for Stephen and Matsu. Stephen, Matsu, and Sachi spend the next days working to repair the damage.

As the three are sharing a meal, they hear news of the advancing Japanese Army. The news dampens their spirits, but Stephen says his own was lifted later when he saw Keiko. She presented him a black lacquer box with homemade "yoken" as a get-well present and then agrees to meet Stephen the next day on the beach. On December 1, Stephen describes Sachi and Matsu as they work in the garden. Stephen prepares to head to the beach to meet Keiko, but he's concerned that he's abandoning Sachi. When Keiko arrives, she tells Stephen that she made a bet with her little sister, resulting in Miko having to do laundry and leaving Keiko free to meet Stephen. The two walk and talk for awhile, and Keiko tells Stephen that she has an older brother in the Japanese Army.

When Stephen arrives at home, he hears Kenzo's voice yelling at Sachi and Matsu. Kenzo accuses the two of lying to him, which they deny. He jerks the scarf from Sachi's face, then says, "You really are a monster." Matsu throws Kenzo down the steps and Kenzo says he's wasted years on that monster. He tells Matsu, "She's all yours, Matsu,



no one else would want her!" Stephen hides and never admits to Sachi that he overheard the conversation. On December 2, Sachi returns home. Matsu says Kenzo walked in and Sachi thought it was Stephen so she didn't hide. Matsu says Sachi was once engaged to Kenzo. Matsu feels badly, saying that Sachi has had to live through another disgrace and that it's his fault. Stephen offers to talk to Sachi, but Matsu says simply that he won't have her hurt again.

## **Autumn: November through December 2, 1937**

### **Analysis**

More than two weeks pass between Stephen's last entry in October and the earliest in November. He explains that he completed the painting of the garden on the morning of the first entry and it's likely that he's spent a lot of time working on that painting. It's important to remember that his father considers painting a hobby, and not an extremely admirable one. When Stephen meets Kenzo, he sees yet another side of Matsu. Matsu and Kenzo joke together, but at the end of their visit, Kenzo looks to Matsu and says to let him know "if she needs anything". Though Sachi isn't mentioned by name, it's evident that Kenzo knows that Matsu is in contact with her. When Sachi is helping with Matsu's garden, she tells Stephen that Matsu was impressed by Stephen's painting of the garden. Matsu had said nothing when Stephen showed it to him, and it's another insight into Matsu's true personality. Stephen has quickly forgotten that Matsu and Sachi had a life together before he arrived. He talks about the need to be near when Sachi is visiting, but says he realizes that they might enjoy time away from him.

When Stephen and Keiko meet on the beach, they share conversations about their lives. When Keiko starts toward home, Stephen wants to walk with her but she declines, saying her father is old-fashioned. It's not until later that Stephen discovers that her father won't approve of him because he's Chinese.



# Winter: December 5 through December 25, 1937

## Winter: December 5 through December 25, 1937 Summary

The December 5, 1937, entry begins with Stephen saying he's tried to paint but is having trouble getting started. Following the argument with Kenzo, Matsu is spending most of his time in the garden. Stephen feels the absence of Sachi. He decides to visit her, but he won't ask Matsu. He doesn't want Matsu to go along, but also doesn't want him to say "no" to the trip. Stephen tells Sachi that he was concerned that she might be ill and doesn't say that he knows about the argument with Kenzo. Sachi says that her presences in Tarumi has brought "great dishonor to all of you", then explains that Kenzo saw her. Sachi says that Kenzo believes they had all deceived him. Stephen touches Sachi's face and tells her that she doesn't have to hide "from us", referring to himself and Matsu. Stephen tells Sachi that Matsu needs her. She removes her scarf, showing her scars, and asks if Matsu needs that. Stephen says yes. Sachi doesn't reply, but takes Stephen to the garden. She explains that she rearranges the stones often in order to change the garden's appearance. She then begins to talk about her childhood.

Sachi says that she and Tomoko—Matsu's younger sister—were close friends and that they were pretty and popular. Then Tomoko came down with a rash that wouldn't go away. Sachi suggests that Tomoko was first to come down with leprosy because the two of them were so vain. Stephen tells Sachi she can stop, but she says she's been silent for too long. Tomoko took her life by slicing herself open with a fishing knife. She says that Matsu was the only person who would talk to her about Tomoko and that he gave Sachi Tomoko's lucky stone. She says that Matsu had dreams of leaving Tarumi. Without asking, Stephen knows that Sachi was the reason he didn't. Sachi then discovers that Matsu didn't know Stephen was visiting Yamaguchi and tells him he is welcome to come again, but only if Matsu knows. As Stephen leaves, he says that he feels more at ease knowing that Sachi is safe from Kenzo's cruel words.

When Stephen arrives home, Matsu asks after Sachi, seeming to know that's where Stephen was. The December 6 entry is largely dedicated to a visit from Stephen's father. Stephen is distressed, not knowing what to say about his father's affair. His father compliments Stephen on his painting of the garden, then admits to having a twelve-year affair with a woman named Yoshiko. Stephen's mother became aware of the affair because of a large cash transfer to the woman. Stephen's father says that he gave Yoshiko money to help her through the time of war. He insists that it's his devotion to Stephen, his mother, and siblings that prevented him from leaving them for his mistress. The December 7 entry begins with Stephen and his father talking about the war. Stephen accepts that the war is progressing and wonders if that means he'll have to return to his mother in Hong Kong. Stephen's father leaves early the next morning



before Stephen is awake. Matsu tells Stephen that he's going to Tama—a Shinto shrine—and invites Stephen along. Stephen says the prospect makes him feel better, but he writes a letter to his mother before they leave. Stephen assures his mother that the money his father had withdrawn was a business venture. He says he doesn't think his mother will believe it, but hopes it will give her an excuse to believe all is well. Matsu and Stephen make the trip to the shrine, where Stephen struggles to decide what he should pray for. He finally settles on a general prayer for all the problems in his life. Matsu then tells Stephen that he opted to visit the shrine that day because he felt Stephen might need it. Stephen snaps at Matsu, accusing him of knowing and keeping the family secrets. He apologizes almost immediately.

On December 21, Stephen writes about his letter from his mother. She tells about meeting his father and that she will accept his explanations and whatever situation suits his needs. She says that she can accept that the marriage changes as long as the family remains together in every other way. Stephen is saddened by the fact that their marriage seems to be nothing more than a business arrangement. On December 25, Matsu shows Stephen a Christmas tree in the garden, which Stephen proclaims the "nicest Christmas tree I've ever had".

## **Winter: December 5 through December 25, 1937**

### **Analysis**

As Stephen is headed to Sachi's house, he isn't certain what it is that he wants to say to her. It's likely, though Stephen doesn't voice the desire, that he simply wants to be saying that he was angry with Stephen's mother for sharing the personal information with him. He says that a "Japanese woman would never do such a thing". Stephen often comments on the fact that his father is more Japanese than Chinese. Though Stephen has Japanese friends in Matsu, Sachi and Keiko, and toys with the idea of staying in Japan himself, he seems put out by the fact that his father spends so much time in Japan. His resentment could be less that he's concerned about the time his father spends there and more that Stephen feels abandoned by his father's lack of attention and betrayed by the fact that his father has a mistress. Stephen's father talks about Stephen's mother's spending habits as though to offer some sort of justification. Stephen's father insists that nothing will change for things to be as they were before the argument with Kenzo. When Stephen begins talking with his father, he's uncertain how to begin. His father starts the conversation about family, but Stephen knows that it already has changed—he has lost his respect for his father.

When Stephen and Matsu visit the shrine, Matsu tells Stephen that a person can't pray to change others—only themselves. It seems that Matsu knows better than Stephen what the younger man needs to come to peace with his situation. It's notable that Stephen accepts the fact that his parents' marriage has become a business arrangement, but that he is sad about it. This seems to be a combination of the young Stephen and the maturing man, with the younger Stephen longing for the happiness of his childhood and the mature man able to see things for what they are rather than what he wants them to be.



# Winter: January and February 1938

## Winter: January and February 1938 Summary

Stephen says he was happy to discover he'd be celebrating the New Year with Sachi. Stephen takes Sachi a miniature pine tree in a clay planter. Matsu cooks for days before January 1 and prepares kado-matsu—a wreath symbolizing prosperity, purity, longevity, and loyalty. Stephen gives Matsu a daruma doll. The doll is for luck and the custom is to paint in one eye while making a wish. If that wish comes true, the other eye is to be painted. Matsu gives Stephen a book of Japanese poetry. Yamaguchi is alive with celebration, though Sachi's house is more somber with only a shime-nawa—a rope of twisted straw thought to keep evil spirits away.

The January 15 entry talks of the many gifts Stephen receives from his family—a sweater, a watch, shirts, and books. He also receives a letter from King—his friend from the university. King tells of a massacre in Nanking. Japanese killed and raped thousands, according to King's account. On February 4, Stephen and Matsu plan to go to the Tama Shrine to celebrate Setsbun—the first rites of spring. The people throw beans—symbolically throwing out the demons and cold and pestilence. Stephen says he'd hoped that Kenzo and Matsu would make up, but that it hadn't happened. As Stephen and Matsu make their way through Tarumi, there is a crowd gathered at Kenzo's teahouse. Several people appear anxious to share some news, but grow quiet as they realize Matsu is standing near. When they enter the teahouse, they discover Kenzo's body hanging from the rafters. Matsu cuts him down, whispers something in his ear, closed the dead man's eyes, and walked away. On February 5, Stephen writes that he spent most of the day in bed, exhausted from the walk to the shrine and back. Stephen is awakened by the news on the radio, insisting that the Chinese should "simply surrender to the kindness of the Japanese Army and all will be well".

On February 6, Stephen writes that Kenzo is to be buried the following day. Matsu says that he's been to see Sachi and that she'd recalled a celebration many years earlier. At that time, Kenzo was serving as a mikoshi bearer and the crowd was pressing forward so quickly that Sachi fell and was about to be trampled until someone picked her up. She said the story quickly spread that it was Kenzo, but that she'd known it was Matsu. Matsu explains that the fact that the two were sweethearts made the story romantic—something people wanted to believe. Matsu says that he has always known Kenzo wouldn't have left Tarumi without Sachi. He says that both he and Kenzo were faithful to Sachi all those years. Stephen writes again to his mother, avoiding any issues that might trouble her, and goes to Tarumi to mail the letter. He sees a photograph of Kenzo, draped in black, on the teahouse. While in town, he meets up with Keiko. Stephen offers to carry her basket of persimmons, but Keiko says no. Stephen first presses the issue, asking if she's afraid her father won't like him. When Keiko's anxiety grows, he allows her to leave without another word.



When Stephen attends Kenzo's burial as recounted in the journal entry dated February 7, he notes that there are few young men in the village. He says he first thought they'd simply gone to the bigger cities, but suddenly realizes that they're fighting against China. When Stephen sees Keiko and her family, he decides he'll approach them. Keiko's father turns to him with eyes filled with hate. Stephen says he simply bowed his head and walked away. Stephen says it wasn't until then that he realized why Keiko was always so nervous of being seen with him. Stephen says he still doesn't understand why Keiko's father hates him, though he'll eventually learn that it's simply a matter of race. While Stephen is outside the temple after Kenzo's funeral, he sees Sachi, almost hidden in the trees. They bow to each other, but she quickly leaves and Stephen doesn't mention it to Matsu.

## Winter: January and February 1938 Analysis

Stephen talks of the fact that the New Year's celebration is intended to be a new start. He says he is happy that Matsu and Sachi are happy together and that he hopes the day can be a new start for them. This is another example of Stephen's maturing. He not only wants happiness for himself, but recognizes that it's important for others to also be happy. Stephen's thoughts turn briefly to Kenzo and he wonders if the man is thinking of Matsu and Sachi - his two oldest friends. When Stephen hears King's account of the battle of Nanking, he compares that with the Japanese accounts on the radio. King calls it a massacre, while the Japanese accounts say that the Japanese Imperial Army had "bravely captured" the city with "little resistance". Stephen has to face the fact that he's not getting the true story from the Japanese radio accounts, though he says nothing about that. Stephen's youth again shows through as he considers how the war will impact him—and that he might have to leave Sachi, Matsu, and Keiko.

The relationship between Kenzo, Sachi, and Matsu is complicated. Though it's never fully explained, it seems that Kenzo knows Matsu sees Sachi often. Matsu says that he betrayed Kenzo, though that's never fully explained either. It's not until later that Sachi reveals the rest of the story, suggesting that Kenzo believed Sachi to be dead and that it could be that he simply wanted to believe that. Stephen himself is faced with a decision when he meets Keiko in the village. A part of him wants to press her to meet him more often, but he surrenders to her mood, which he calls "anxiety," and lets the subject drop. Stephen says he thought he was removed from the war while being so far from his home in China, but admits that he feels conspicuous because there are no young men remaining in the village. He sometimes mentions that he feels that he should be somewhere else, or doing something else. He doesn't say whether he would have joined the war had he not been ill.





# Winter and Spring: March, 1938

## Winter and Spring: March, 1938 Summary

There are no journal entries for a month following Kenzo's funeral. On March 7, Stephen writes that time has slowed to a crawl. He attributes it at least partly to the fact that both Keiko and Sachi have all but vanished from his life. He spends some time wondering about the hatred of Keiko's father, and considers that it could be some ancient grievance between the two families. Stephen says it's as though the new life he'd recently discovered had ended and he'd returned to the time of sickness, sleeping late and doing little. On March 14, he takes a sketch pad to the garden and has just seated himself when Keiko arrives. She apologizes for her father and Stephen says that he understands, considering "your brother and the war". Keiko says her father still brought shame to her family by being rude. She allows Stephen to walk her part of the way home. On the way, Stephen kisses her and she allows it. She leaves him with the promise that she'll return.

The March 28 entry begins with Stephen saying he can see signs of spring, but adding that he is happier since he saw Keiko. He receives a letter from his little sister, Penelope. She tells him that she's working with the Red Cross, rolling bandages and sorting clothes that have been donated for the many refugees that flooded into Hong Kong to escape the Japanese Army. She describes the "shantytowns" filled with cardboard houses and people who are sick. She says it's not enough to donate money. Stephen says her words went to his heart and he commended her bravery. She says her mother has been "in a bad mood lately", though she doesn't know why. She ends the letter by saying her mother has mentioned that it might not be safe for Stephen to remain in Japan. Stephen says the thought of leaving fills him with dread.

## Winter and Spring: March, 1938 Analysis

While Stephen expresses exasperation at the situation, he doesn't take action. He wants things to return to normal—at least as far as normal extends in his life in Tarumi. In essence, he wants to be near Sachi and he wants Matsu and Sachi together. While he wants those things for himself, he also wants those he cares about to be happy and decides that he won't press the issue. He's mature enough to allow the people in his life to work things out. Stephen's take on his own situation is little different. He wants to press Keiko and seems to want to believe that Keiko's father doesn't like him for some reason other than the fact that he's Chinese. Stephen doesn't really seem to realize the fact that he's a Chinaman in Japan. He talks of the war largely in terms of others. It hasn't dawned on him that he could be in danger from Japanese seeking revenge for loved ones who died in the war at the hands of Chinese fighters. He often says that he dreads leaving Tarumi.



# Spring: April 1938

## Spring: April 1938 Summary

The first entry in April is dated April 15 and is the story Sachi tells Stephen about her childhood. It's here that Stephen will learn the details that have been missing. Stephen says he's made up his mind to see Sachi, but it's Matsu who broaches the subject. Stephen says the walk to Yamaguchi was dampened only by his fear that he might soon have to leave for Hong Kong. As they near Yamaguchi, Matsu smells smoke. He yells for Stephen to go back, but the both enter the village and begin fighting the fire that will destroy two or three of the small houses. It's during that battle that Stephen meets Hiro—a leper who has lost his hands to the disease. Stephen and Hiro work together, dousing the flames until the fire is put out. As Stephen and Matsu are talking after the fire is put out, Sachi approaches them and kneels in thanks so low that her forehead touches the dirt. They return to Sachi's house where they talk about the fire. Sachi says Tanka—the woman who lost one of the houses—shouldn't have saved magazines because they are a fire hazard. She says the people of Yamaguchi "shouldn't have to rebuild their lives twice". Stephen says the people of the village were brave, but Sachi says they were trying to save their own possessions, and that Stephen and Matsu—the people with nothing to lose to the fire—were the brave ones. Stephen and Matsu spend the night with Hiro, who tells of an earthquake in 1923 that destroyed all the houses and left many dead. It's Hiro who tells Stephen that Matsu was responsible for carrying much of the building materials up the mountain.

The next morning, Stephen wakes early and goes to Sachi's garden. Sachi takes Stephen to the back of the garden where a blue-purple flower is blooming—the only bloom in Sachi's garden. Sachi calls them "one of the small miracles of life", and says they're called balloon flowers. Stephen wonders silently if Matsu planted them. Sachi says that when she began the garden, she wouldn't include flowers. She says she has come to appreciate beauty and says she's glad she had the chance to become friends with Stephen. Sachi then begins to talk about her diagnosis. She says Matsu was the only one she could turn to. She says she loved Kenzo, but knew something was lacking and that he would never accept her once she was diseased. Sachi briefly stops the story, but Stephen says he would be honored to take a piece of her past with him. She says they shouldn't talk on an empty stomach. They eat before she begins again. Sachi says that she wasn't brave like other lepers. She says her father hoped that she would end her life and restore honor to the family. She then tells the story of meeting Matsu when she and Tomoko were teenagers, and that he seemed overly serious. She said Tomoko was the opposite, sparkling with life and always on the go. Sachi says she was Tomoko's willing accomplice.

When Sachi was fourteen, Kenzo began to pay attention to her, but Tomoko planned to leave Tarumi. When Sachi was fifteen, she and Kenzo were engaged. When Tomoko came down with leprosy, she hid herself away then ended her own life. A year later, Sachi came down with the rash. She went to Matsu first, who called a doctor to confirm





her suspicions. When she told Kenzo, he walked away and never returned. Her father took her to shrines and sought to purify her, but the rash persisted. Then a group of five people with leprosy went to the edge of the sea on a particular morning to end their lives. One man walked into the water and drowned. A woman slit her wrists then handed her knife to Sachi, but Sachi says she couldn't bring herself to end her life. Instead, she ran away and hid in the woods where Matsu found her. He told her it took more courage to live than to die. He took her to Yamaguchi and told her he had hoped to take Tomoko there to live.

When she arrived, she was appalled by the people living in the village. The woman who cared for Sachi was Michiko, and Sachi says that she's still ashamed of her first reaction to the woman's noseless face and distorted features. She says she screamed and wished she had died in the woods. But rather than being angry, Michiko apologized for frightening Sachi. She cared for Sachi, making her feel at home. Sachi says she was hysterical for months and that it took time for her to trust Matsu and Michiko. She says that Matsu came almost daily, then skipped several days. She was worried and ran out into the village, where an old leper approached her. She started to cry and it was Michiko who comforted her then. She discovered that Matsu had been sick and became aware that he'd been dividing his time between his work and family in Tarumi and his work and friends in Yamaguchi.

Then Michiko told the story of a girl named Sumiko who was a pearl diver. She was in love with Akio and the two married. When she discovered she was pregnant, she agreed to stop diving until the baby was big and strong. But she became ill and Akio finally took her into the sea where she swam away. She returned months later and presented him with a daughter, Kuniko. Sachi says that when Michiko finished her story, she realized that it was a story about Michiko and the family she'd left behind. It was then that Sachi discovered she was at peace with her new life. She nursed Michiko as she grew weaker from the leprosy and the older woman was calling for Kuniko when she died. Sachi tells Stephen that she then began a new stage of life, working on her house and garden until she was too tired to worry about the turn her life had taken. Sachi says it's about that time that Kenzo began to suspect something because of the many supplies Matsu was buying for the people in Yamaguchi. He began to send food and messages to Sachi but never went to see her. Sachi says she finally realized what Matsu had known all along—peace could come only from within. Matsu himself interrupts the conversation as he enters Sachi's home.

## Spring: April 1938 Analysis

As Stephen and Sachi talk briefly about the war, Stephen seems to suddenly realize that the two should be enemies. Their countries were at war. He feels the need to tell her that they'll always be friends, and she says she would never have thought otherwise. Stephen listens intently to Sachi's story and begins to understand things that likely hadn't made sense up to that point. The entire story still hasn't been revealed, though Matsu will fill in the remaining blanks soon. It's important to note that Stephen has taken time to learn about these people who haven't really shared their lives with



others in a long time. It's likely that Sachi and Matsu have never told the entire story to anyone. It's also important to remember that Stephen's father—who has known Matsu for many years—says Matsu doesn't reveal anything of himself to others. It's a statement of Stephen's own perception of humans that he took the time to learn how to get Matsu to trust him enough to talk about his past.



# Spring: April 22 through May 30, 1938

## Spring: April 22 through May 30, 1938 Summary

Stephen begins the entry by admitting that he hasn't written in his journal in weeks, and has been busy helping rebuild in Yamaguchi. Stephen says that he was first annoyed that Matsu interrupted Sachi's story, but realized the conversation had come to an end. Stephen says he feels cheated by the fact that he hadn't had time to "properly" thank her for sharing the story. Matsu and Stephen are headed back to Tarumi when Matsu asks Stephen if he's tired. He is, but hadn't mentioned it to Matsu. Stephen says it seems that he and Matsu have come to the comfortable point many people find after they live together. Matsu asks about Stephen's conversation with Sachi. He says that Sachi could have slept until noon when she and Tomoko were children. Matsu then picks up the story, filling in some gaps Sachi left.

Matsu says that he and Tomoko became closer after she became ill. He says that she came to him one night and asked him to bring her his father's fishing knife. Matsu says he asked what for and Tomoko said she didn't want "to live like this", referring to the leprosy. Matsu says he reminded her that she wasn't to touch their father's fishing knife. She left his room and went into hiding in her room. Matsu says he tried to tell her about Yamaguchi, but she wouldn't listen. Three days after that nighttime conversation, Matsu found that Tomoko had retrieved the knife and killed herself. Stephen notes the changes in the garden upon their return and that Matsu became quiet after talking about his sister.

By the time Stephen writes the May 15, 1938, journal entry, he and Matsu have made several trips to Yamaguchi. Stephen says he's heard reports of the Japanese Army's invasion of China. Stephen writes to his mother, suggesting that he should come home, though he says he hates the thought of leaving Tarumi. Just as Stephen is preparing to mail the letter, Matsu gives him a letter from his mother. His mother tells him that it would probably be best if he remains in Tarumi for awhile. She also says it's best if she and Pie don't visit Stephen in Tarumi, but that they might visit Henry and Anne at school. Stephen steps outside to find Matsu sharpening his father's fishing knife—apparently the same knife his sister used to end her life. There is no other mention of the tool. Stephen's next entry is March 30 and he says the houses have been rebuilt. He says the celebration of the completed houses was the best of his life. He says he drank too much sake, fell asleep, and dreamed that Yamaguchi was in the middle of Hong Kong, and that Pie is handing out bandages to the lepers.

## Spring: April 22 through May 30, 1938 Analysis

Stephen's maturity allows him to wait for Sachi to reveal her story and he seems to recognize the moment when she would be ready to take that step. There's little doubt that Stephen is curious and wants to know about Sachi's life, but he also tells her that a



person sometimes needs to share that story in order to be ready to move on. Sachi isn't overly reluctant, seeming to indicate that she is ready to share the story. She tells Stephen that she hasn't talked about it in so long that it truly might be good for her. It's interesting that Stephen finds Matsu sharpening his father's fishing knife in the garden, but that the two don't discuss that point at all. It could be that Matsu's own time talking about the past has somehow cleansed him so that he's ready to move on. It's likely that the fact that he sharpens the tool means that he's ready to use it for cleaning fish again—it's true purpose. That could be an important step toward healing for Matsu—a step that he might never have taken on his own.

Matsu talks of his wish that his sister would have opted to move to Yamaguchi to live out her life, leading the reader to wonder if Matsu was so concerned about Sachi because he had failed his sister in her time of need. Matsu is the type of person who cares for others, so he would probably have taken the time to care for Sachi no matter what. While Stephen seems to already be at peace with his role in Tarumi and Yamaguchi, he seems to have made an even greater step toward that inner peace after talking with Matsu. He doesn't discuss what the dream about the lepers in Hong Kong might mean, but it could be his subconscious desire to be with Pie—the sibling he seems to miss the most.



# Summer: June through July, 1938

## Summer: June through July, 1938 Summary

Stephen joins Matsu for a trip into town. He says it seems more than the two months since Kenzo's funeral. He notes that Matsu stares straight ahead without looking toward the teahouse. Stephen mails letters to his mother and sister, but says he no longer mentions the possibility of returning to Hong Kong. Stephen encounters Keiko, and she asks if he'll meet her at the shrine the following day. She makes sure no one is looking, touches him on the hand, and leaves. As Stephen and Matsu head for home, Matsu says that Hiro—the leper who fought the fire with Stephen—has died. Stephen doesn't accompany Matsu to Yamaguchi and the following day he heads to the Tama shrine to meet Keiko. She has a picnic lunch and Stephen lays down and closes his eyes. When he opens them, Keiko is watching, her face near his. They kiss and Stephen says he unties her sash and they touch each other. Afterward, Stephen falls asleep. They return to the village and Matsu has returned to the beach house. He says they buried Hiro and that he'd always wondered how the man came to Yamaguchi. He says Hiro had said he'd tell the story some day, but never had. Matsu seems exhausted and the two share only a limited conversation before he retires.

On June 15, Stephen writes that his father has visited again. Stephen says they talked of the weather, seeking noncontroversial topics. When the talk turns to war, Stephen suggests he return to Hong Kong. His father says he and his mother agree that he should remain in Tarumi through the summer. Though Stephen is relieved that he won't be leaving, he admits to wishing that his father had decided to return to Hong Kong and his family. His father suggests Stephen spend the upcoming holiday—the O-bon festival—in Kobe, but Stephen lies and says that Matsu has made plans. By the end of June, the "Plum Rains" begin—six weeks of rain that vary from downpours to misty drizzles. Stephen sees the garden in the mist of one of those rains and wants to capture it on paper, but says the true beauty evades his efforts.

In early July, Stephen spends time on the beach, despite the rain. He sees Keiko occasionally, though he doesn't talk to her. He says something has changed between them—an intimacy he attributes to the fact that she has watched him sleep. Stephen says he's begun to feel suffocated by the rains, but they stop in mid-July, just as the tourists take over the beaches. Stephen gets a letter from Pie, saying that some of Stephen's friends have been asking for him, that she's still working with the Red Cross, and that she threw a tantrum when her mother told her they wouldn't visit Tarumi for summer vacation. On July 25, Stephen says he again saw Keiko, and that they walked through the woods holding hands. In early August, he says he hasn't seen her again. Matsu takes Stephen to catch shrimp at night, using torches that cause the shrimp to jump from the water toward the light. In mid-August, Matsu's sister, Fumiko, arrives for the O-bon celebration. Stephen gets a look at his friend interacting with his sister and is amazed that Matsu seems to have never told her about Sachi. Fumiko says she wonders if she might have prevented Tomoko's suicide. The three take food to the



graves of their family—Matsu's mother, father, and sister. Then Matsu takes an offering to Kenzo's grave.

## Summer: June through July, 1938 Analysis

The attitude about suicide is difficult to understand. Though there seems to be an attitude that there's honor in the act, Stephen points out that the "bad spirits" of Kenzo's own suicide seem to linger at the tea house. It could be that the suicides in some cases are more acceptable than others. For example, those who commit the act as a way to restore honor may have been accepted while other suicides were not. It's also interesting to note that Sachi says her own father wanted her to commit suicide in order to restore the family's honor. Matsu says it takes more courage to live than to die. Both Matsu and his sister seem to wish they had been able to prevent Tomoko's suicide, but neither mentions whether it was their parents' wish.

Stephen talks briefly about the deaths in Tarumi, then says he's faced with the war, the breakup of his parents' marriage, and the knowledge that he'll never step back into the comfortable life he left. Stephen's coming of age is becoming more evident as he accepts the changes, but his youth shows through as he says he is being pulled in different directions. Stephen's encounter with Keiko is summed up in a single paragraph, and it's notable that the tense of his writing changes from past to present. Stephen doesn't say they make love, but suggests it.



# Autumn: September, 1938

## Autumn: September, 1938 Summary

Autumn shows itself in Matsu's garden, and it's in early September that Matsu discovers a "Kerria" plant, thought to be a sign of good luck when blooming so late in the year. Stephen asks if Matsu believes there will be good luck and Matsu replies, "As long as we don't have any bad luck", Stephen has learned that Keiko's family has gone to visit her mother's family. While Stephen is walking along the beach, he sees Keiko. She tells him she'd hoped to meet up with him and then says she won't be able to see him anymore. When he presses for a reason, she tells him that her brother was killed fighting the Chinese. While Stephen feels for Keiko's family, he wonders if her parents are grieving for the families of Chinese soldiers killed in the war. Stephen admits to watching for her in the coming weeks, but not seeing her again.

On September 23, Matsu and Stephen make the walk to Sachi's house. They arrive muddy and tired, and Sachi laughs at the state of their clothing. They bathe, then go in to spend time with Sachi. Stephen says that he senses a difference in Matsu's attitude, then realizes that he is actually "master of the house", and is more at home at Sachi's than anywhere else. He watches closely as Matsu approves of the food, and says he's seen the same ritual in his own home, only it was his father's approval and Ching—the servant—waiting for that nod. Stephen then notes that Sachi is ready to serve Matsu even before he asks for something and knows that the two have a relationship that will survive the test of time. Stephen says he knows they'll never "drift away from each other".

On September 28, Stephen writes that he woke feeling anxious. He helps Matsu in the garden and then tells him that he won't be seeing Keiko anymore. Matsu says that Stephen can only look back on his life, hoping that everything had happened for a reason. He says that the fact that they won't see each other doesn't mean she wasn't important in his life. Later in the month, Stephen takes a trip to Tarumi and says that the old men of the village were discussing various accounts of the war. He says they all seemed to agree that the war should end before there were more Japanese killed, but didn't mention the Chinese losses.

## Autumn: September, 1938 Analysis

Stephen admits that he barely knew Keiko and that their friendship was very young, but says that he still misses her very much. Stephen is again young enough to focus on the war's impact on him personally, but mature enough to look at the larger picture. He says that he knows the situation is spiraling and that few will escape its effects. He talks about his memories of Keiko and says he thinks most about her colors—persimmons she carried in a basket, the bright kimono and her dark hair against creamy skin. While it can be argued that Stephen has put more emphasis on his relationship with Keiko

because it's his first serious infatuation, it's also likely that this became important to him because of other aspects of his life—his removal from friends and family and his parents' rocky marriage, for example. While Stephen hasn't written extensively about his thoughts on his parents' situation, it's evident that it weighs heavily on his mind.

He looks at Sachi and Matsu and seems relieved that they appear to be happy together. He worries about them, and what would happen to one if the other were gone. This is an example of the recurring theme of loyalty. Stephen has been thrust into an adult role and the realization that bad things can happen seems to have made him concerned about those he cares for and those who seem most vulnerable. Stephen's take on the war is interesting and the reader should wonder if he would have had different opinions had he heard the coverage only of the Chinese. The fact that Stephen is on foreign soil has given him a different perspective. He continually asks whether the Japanese were concerned with Chinese losses, but one wonders if he would have given the Japanese losses a second thought had he spent all his time in China.





# Autumn: October, 1938

## Autumn: October, 1938 Summary

On October 5, Stephen says he wakes up ready for a swim. He says that it's as if Keiko's "shadow had been lifted". He swims until he's numb with cold, then goes back to the house for a hot bath. When Matsu returns from the village, he has a letter from King. King has news of the war and says it seems funny to be writing his friend in Japan since the Japanese are the "ones we curse every morning and every evening". Stephen also has newspapers filled with news of the war. He realizes it's been more than a year since he saw family and friends, but says he feels removed from that life. Stephen also receives a letter from his father, asking Stephen to join him on a trip to Tokyo. Stephen accepts.

On October 19, Stephen makes a final trip to Yamaguchi to visit Sachi before he leaves for Tokyo. Stephen doesn't focus on the visit, saying only that he realizes Sachi has been away from cities for so long she can only dream of them. Matsu accompanies Stephen to the train station and gives him the contact information for Fumiko, Matsu's sister, just in case Stephen might need her while in Tokyo. Stephen is slightly apprehensive, wondering what he and his father would find to talk about for three days. Stephen's father tells him that it's time for Stephen to return to Hong Kong. Stephen asks if it's safe there, expressing concern for his mother and sister. His father says that it is safe, "for now".

On October 22, they learn that Canton has fallen to the Japanese Army. Stephen says he suddenly felt unwelcome in Tokyo and he and his father quickly prepare to leave. They return to Kobe, and Stephen's father decides to remain in Kobe to complete some business and "see what the Japanese would do next." Stephen was to return to Tarumi, then go to Hong Kong. Stephen knows he has only a few days in Tarumi. On October 24, he writes that there is never enough time to accomplish everything. Stephen then goes to visit Sachi for the last time before his return to Hong Kong. He goes alone and brings her a vase, telling her he was to depart within a few days. Sachi suggests that the gods will smile on them and they'll meet again someday. Stephen begins to rake the rocks in Sachi's garden, then asks what will happen to her if Matsu were not able to care for her. Sachi tells him that either she or Matsu will someday be left without the other, and that Stephen should not worry. Then she offers a final piece of their story. She tells Stephen that he's filled in the one gap that had been missing from their lives—the child who died at birth. Stephen says he's angry that the person who could have made the lives of Matsu and Sachi easier should be taken from them. Sachi then takes Stephen inside, arranges branches in the vase he gave her, and presents him with the lucky stones she and Tomoko had found so many years earlier.

On October 26, Stephen spends the day on the beach. He wants to see Sachi again but doesn't go back to the village. He and Matsu share a picnic on the beach. On October 27, Sachi comes to the beach house as Stephen is packing. Stephen says he realizes



that he needed to see Sachi, but that Sachi actually came for Matsu. On October 28, Stephen and Matsu visit the Tama shrine at Stephen's request. Stephen says he didn't particularly want to pray, but wanted to leave a message on the board at the shrine in order to leave something of himself at Tarumi. After dinner, Matsu shows Stephen the Druma doll—complete with one eye painted on. Matsu says he painted the one eye with the wish that Stephen would someday return. In keeping with the custom, he says he'll paint the other when that day comes. The next day, Stephen and Matsu walk to the train station for a final good-bye. When Stephen boards the train, he discovers that Matsu has given him two new journals. He opens one, takes out his pen, and begins to write.

## **Autumn: October, 1938 Analysis**

Stephen's heightened awareness of the feelings of others is seen again when he tells Sachi that he is going to Tokyo with his father. He notes a "flicker of longing" in her eyes, and immediately realizes that it's because she's been hidden away in Yamaguchi for so long. Matsu's changing attitude is also noteworthy. When Stephen first arrived in Tarumi, Matsu walked briskly to the beach house without waiting to see if Stephen could manage the pace. Later, Matsu would look carefully at Stephen to determine whether he was alright. As Stephen departs to meet his father for the trip to Tokyo, Matsu insists that Stephen take Fumiko's number and address. Even though Stephen would be with his father, Matsu wanted to be certain Stephen would be alright.

Stephen spends a lot of time grieving his departure from Tarumi and from the friends he's made there. There's little doubt that he feels torn. He feels that both Matsu and Sachi need him, though it was only a year ago that their friendship began to form. It's a sign of Stephen's maturity that he recognizes that Sachi made the trip to Tarumi on Stephen's last full day there for Matsu. While Stephen doesn't talk about the fact that Sachi and Matsu have come to rely on his friendship as well, it's evident that they have. Stephen realizes that Matsu will be lonely once Stephen has gone. It's also important to note that Matsu has spent some thirty years in the employment of Stephen's family and as caretaker of the beach house, but is talking about a change as soon as Stephen is gone. Stephen's friendship becomes the catalyst for change for Matsu and Sachi. It's notable that Stephen's first journal begins and ends with his time in Tarumi. Matsu provides Stephen a new journal and he begins writing in that book as he leaves Tarumi—a new stage of his life.



# Characters

## Stephen Chan

The book is Stephen's journal. Stephen is a young Chinese man, attending college and working on a life of his own, when he is diagnosed with tuberculosis. World War II is already in the making when Stephen is sent to live at his family's summer home on the beach in Tarumi, Japan. It's there that Stephen learns about himself, finds new friends, and contemplates his future. Before the trip, Stephen is extremely ill. He describes the racking cough and weakness that puts him in bed most of the time. It's ultimately a fear that he'll infect others and the search for a place conducive to recuperation that prompts his family to send him to Tarumi. Stephen makes the trip without argument, though reluctantly. Stephen looks ahead to the months in Tarumi as an exile. He is met by Matsu, an elderly caretaker that Stephen remembers from the vacations of his youth. As Stephen learns about Matsu and begins to feel somewhat better, he quickly begins to call the beach house at Tarumi "home". Rather than the exile he was expecting, the house, village, beach, and nearby village of Yamaguchi are a serene get-away, and Stephen does begin to regain his strength. His time is not without conflict, and Stephen regrets being pushed into adulthood. His mother writes him a letter telling him of his father's affair and asks Stephen to intervene. Stephen doesn't want to be in that situation and works to avoid the conflict with his father while finding a way to reassure his mother. Stephen also learns that Matsu—who could be considered nothing more than a servant—is a person with a life, love, and dreams of his own. The budding friendship with Matsu, and later with Matsu's friend Sachi, gives Stephen a focus other than his own health and family problems. Stephen is a strong person, working at learning about himself. It's that drive that prompts him to begin the journal that turns into the book. Stephen's reactions to Tarumi, the people of the area, and the two gardens where he spends much of his time give him insight into himself.

## Matsu

Matsu is the caretaker of the Tarumi property owned by Stephen's family. Matsu has worked for the family for most of his life, taking over full-time upon his father's death. The reader must remember that the only view of Matsu is what Stephen sees. Matsu seems a simple person at first, then becomes more complex as Stephen learns more about him. Matsu's younger sister showed the symptoms of leprosy and took her own life when she was only sixteen years old. Her suicide was an action she hoped would bring honor to her family because she felt she had dishonored her family by contracting the disease. When her friend Sachi came down with the disease, it was Matsu who helped her through those first days. Matsu knew of the mountain village called Yamaguchi and wanted his sister to go there. Though Sachi was ashamed that she didn't have the courage to commit suicide, it was Matsu who told her it takes more courage to live than to die. Matsu was a quiet youth and kept to himself. He became friends with Kenzo, an outgoing young man who wanted to marry Sachi before she



showed the signs of leprosy. Matsu and Kenzo continued to be friends and that friendship seemed important to Matsu. Matsu may have been upset by Stephen's visit, though it's impossible to be certain because there's only Stephen's own impression to go by. Matsu does seem sad to have Stephen leave and there's little doubt that the friendship Stephen felt for Matsu was equally returned.

## Sachi

Sachi was a young woman when she discovered that she had leprosy. Sachi tells Stephen that she was a spoiled, beautiful young girl, and that she felt nothing could possibly tarnish her future. She was best friends with Matsu's little sister and betrothed to Matsu's best friend, Kenzo, when the leprosy rash developed. It was then that Sachi went to Matsu, asking what she should do. Sachi tells Stephen that she had brought dishonor to her family by contracting the disease and that she planned to join several others in suicide on a particular morning to restore her family's honor. When the time came, she watched others kill themselves but couldn't bring herself to do the same. Instead, she ran away and was found by Matsu, who helped her settle into the village of Yamaguchi with others. Stephen says he can see the beauty, although it's some time before Sachi will reveal her disfigured face to Stephen. As the two become friends, Sachi confides more in Stephen, including the fact that she and Matsu had a child together, and that the boy died. It's Sachi who makes Stephen see that everyone in the village gave up lives, homes, families, and friends in order to live in seclusion. Sachi seems at peace with her situation. She tells of some of the reasons for that—her relationship with Matsu and the garden—but may not be telling everything, even after she becomes good friends of Stephen.

## Kenzo

Matsu's best friend as a young man and the man betrothed to Sachi when she discovered she had leprosy. Kenzo never married, though he would have been free to do so after Sachi's apparent suicide. Kenzo owns and operates a tea house in Tarumi and is called the "best rice cake maker" in the area. Kenzo's thoughts regarding Sachi are never revealed, but he is quite angry when he discovers Sachi at Matsu's house. It's only shortly after that time that Kenzo commits suicide, hanging himself in his tea house. During a celebration that included offering dishes of food to the dead, Matsu and his sister take bowls of various dishes to his parents and younger sister, then take a dish to Kenzo—a sign of his friendship, honor, and sense of loss. Though Kenzo's actual appearances in the book are few, his role is significant in the lives of Matsu and Sachi.

## Keiko Hayashi

Keiko is a young woman Stephen meets on the beach soon after arriving at the Tarumi beach house. Stephen is immediately enamored with the young girl and works at trying



to encounter her. Keiko is obviously attracted to Stephen as well, but is unwilling to allow him to accompany her anywhere in public for fear that her father would find out. Because Keiko is Japanese and Stephen is Chinese, the war between China and Japan is an issue. Any relationship that might have been budding between the two is quelled when Keiko's brother is killed by Chinese soldiers during a battle. Stephen is bereft at first, but it's Matsu who tells him that he is forever changed because of his time with Keiko, and Stephen begins to heal.

## **Penelope**

Stephen's youngest sister, also called Pie. She and Stephen are very close and Penelope sneaks into Stephen's room the day before he's to leave home for the family's beach house.

## **Anne**

Stephen's older sister, Anne was away at school when Stephen became ill.

## **Henry**

Stephen's younger brother. Henry is away at school when Stephen becomes ill. Henry and Penelope often fought and Stephen claims to have worried until he realizes Penelope always knew when to quit.

## **King**

Stephen's friend who accompanies him home from the university.

## **Ching**

An old servant in the household of Stephen's mother.

## **Michiko**

A servant in the household of Stephen's father.

## **Ba-ba**

What Stephen calls his father.



## **Mah-mee**

What Stephen calls his mother.

## **Pao-Lin Chan**

Stephen's grandfather.

## **Tomoko**

Matsu's younger sister who took her own life after being infected with leprosy.

## **Miko**

Keiko's little sister.

## **Yoshiko**

Mistress of Stephen's father.

## **Tanaka**

A woman in Yamaguchi who lost her home to fire.

## **Hiro**

A man in Yamaguchi. He had lost his hands to leprosy but helped put out the fire in the village and then gave Matsu and Stephen a place to stay for the night. Hiro later died peacefully in his sleep.

## **Michiko**

The leper who took Sachi in when she ran away to Yamaguchi.

## **Uncle Sing**

Stephen's mother says this is Stephen's uncle, though Stephen doesn't remember him.

## **Fumiko**

Matsu's older sister.



# Objects/Places

## Tarumi

The Japanese village where Stephen is sent to recover after being diagnosed with tuberculosis. It's a vacation community and Stephen expects his time there to be an exile. He soon falls in love with the quiet, avoids the crowds that arrive during the holiday season, and dreads returning to Hong Kong.

## Yamaguchi

Also known as the Village of the Lepers, Yamaguchi is a mountain village where lepers have gone to live out their lives. It's home to Sachi and soon becomes a place Stephen loves as much as his family's beach house in Tarumi.

## Kobe

The Japanese city where Stephen's father lives.

## Hong Kong

The Chinese city where Stephen's mother lives.

## Canton

The city where Stephen attended university.

## Lingnam University

The school Stephen attended in Canton.

## Genken

The entrance room of a house with wooden benches. This is where shoes are to be removed.

## Kare sansui

A dry garden made to resemble water through the use of rocks, pebbles, and sand arranged in specific ways. Sachi's garden was a kare sansui.





## **Tama Shrine**

A shrine near Tarumi where Matsu and others from the village go to pray.

## **Matsu's Garden**

The garden surrounding the beach house where Stephen is staying. That garden contains a fish pond, trees, a bridge, and flowering plants.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Stephen is actually a mature young man when he prepares to spend time at Tarumi recovering from tuberculosis. But he emerges more so, due partly at least to his own interaction with others and their impact on him. The story begins with Stephen dreading the trip and feeling as though he's being exiled. Despite those feelings, he's anxious to be kind to the old caretaker of his family's beach house and he and Matsu soon find a common ground. Their time together makes Stephen realize that he knew nothing about Matsu as a young man when Stephen's family visited the beach house on vacation. He has a similar encounter with Sachi—a friend of Matsu's who lives in Yamaguchi, also known as the Village of the Lepers. When Stephen first meets Sachi, he's repulsed by the scars left by the disease, but he quickly sees that she was once a beautiful woman. He also decides that Sachi is a wonderful person and he works at befriending her. Through his friendship with these two older people, Stephen figures out that the way to earn their friendship is to allow things to move at their own time. He must have had some maturity at the beginning of the journey or he wouldn't have known to handle the situation in that way, but the fact that he has the patience to work on his friendships are a statement of his evolving maturity. Stephen's budding relationship with Keiko is another matter. He's unable to wait for her and wants to press the friendship, though she tells him to take matters slower. It's not until Stephen sees Keiko's father and understands the hatred he feels simply because Stephen is Chinese that Stephen realizes he would make things difficult for Keiko. Stephen is then strong enough to deny his own desires in order to make things better for Keiko.

## Denial of Self

This theme is repeated throughout the book and is seen in many of the characters. Stephen is a prime example. He does not want to leave Hong Kong, his family, or his friends, but apparently goes without voicing his opinion to his parents. He's basically being sent away because he might infect his younger sister, and Stephen seems to be willing to give up what he wants—to be near his family and friends—in order to protect his sister. That same denial of self is evident as Stephen wants to learn about Matsu and Sachi. He wants to question them about their lives, but waits until each is ready to share information. Stephen isn't the only person to exhibit this type of selflessness. Sachi planned to kill herself in an effort to bring an end to the dishonor she brought upon her family. She felt that she dishonored her family by coming down with leprosy. Her death would have atoned. She planned to carry out her own suicide but backed out at the last moment. Despite the fact that she couldn't give up her life, she did leave her family, friends, and home and made her life in Yamaguchi. Stephen's mother is another example. She knows that her husband is having an affair, but clings to Stephen's explanation that his father was engaged in a business relationship with the woman. Stephen's father says he loves the woman with whom he's having an affair and that he



would not compromise his family in order to make the affair permanent. It's important to note that many of the people who say they are selfless and willing to deny their own wants and needs are really selfish in other ways. Stephen's mother isn't willing to give up the comfortable life provided by her husband and his father isn't willing to give up his affair. On the other hand, some are willing to deny their own desires in order to care for others. Matsu never married and remained in Tarumi though he had dreams of moving away. He stayed to be near Sachi and to be certain she was cared for.

## Loyalty

Loyalty is second nature to some people in Stephen's life, though his own loyalty comes into question. Stephen loves his parents and younger sister, but has also come to love his life in Japan. As he learns of the advance of the Japanese Imperial Army into China, he feels that he should be at home, but he doesn't want to leave Tarumi. He does say on several occasions that he's willing to go home, but is always relieved when he doesn't yet have to. Stephen feels the need to tell his Japanese friend, Sachi, that he will never hate her, despite the fact that the Chinese and Japanese are at war and that some will hate simply because of ethnicity. Sachi says that she would never have expected less. In that case, both Stephen and Sachi are loyal to their friends despite their home countries. In the case of Teiko's father, his loyalty demands that he hate Stephen on sight without knowing anything other than his Chinese ancestry. Stephen's loyalty to his parents is also put on trial as he learns of his father's affair. Stephen says he lost his respect for his father upon his father's admission that the affair had been going on for twelve years. Another type of loyalty seen in the book was Kenzo's loyalty to Sachi. Though he could never bring himself to see her in person after she left the village, Kenzo never left Tarumi and often sent food and messages to Sachi. Though he couldn't honor his engagement to Sachi, he was—in his own way—loyal to her. There is also a loyalty of servants to their masters. Matsu remained loyal to Stephen's family for some thirty years, staying as servant after his own parents died.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is written in first person by Stephen Chan. The entire story is a journal of Stephen's life, thoughts, and dreams. The first person point of view works well in this instance because it allows Stephen to make discoveries and learn details on his own. That's important because he comes to know specific people better through those discoveries. The story would likely have been less effective had it been from an omniscient point of view or even third person. Stephen's journal begins on his trip to Tarumi and ends on his trip back to Hong Kong more than a year later. The fact that he tells only of that period of time is also effective to this particular point of view, especially since he takes the opportunity to share memories and knowledge of previous events. There is plenty of dialog to hold the reader's interest. The dialog is believable and offers an important look into the characters.

## Setting

The story is set in Tarumi, Japan. Stephen's journal begins during his travel to Tarumi, though he tells of the series of events that brought him to that point. Stephen tells of the trip to Tarumi, then of his time in Tarumi and his story ends as he boards the train leaving Tarumi for his home in Hong Kong. The story takes place in an array of settings within that village. Stephen's grandfather owned the beach house at Tarumi and it's there that Stephen is to spend some time recuperating from tuberculosis. The house, along with the garden created and maintained by the caretaker, Matsu, are where Stephen spends much of his time. He also makes frequent visits to the beach. Stephen then learns of a nearby village—Yamaguchi—which is home to a number of people with leprosy. It's there that Stephen meets an intriguing woman and becomes fast friends, forsaking the common thinking that the lepers are "monsters" and should be avoided.

The people of Tarumi make the setting come alive. Tarumi has always been home to Matsu. Stephen recalls visiting the beach house as a child and recalls Matsu almost as a part of the setting itself.

There are brief glances at Hong Kong, Kobe, and Tokyo, each through Stephen's eyes. While he talks about the quiet of Tarumi in a negative way as he's preparing for the trip and becoming settled into his life there, he soon comes to love the village for those very same reasons and says he isn't certain he can stand the noise and confusion of his home in Hong Kong.

The time is 1937 and 1938. Stephen is Chinese but he is staying in Japan as the Japanese Imperial Army begins to invade China. The timing—just before World War II—means that tensions are typically high between the two countries and that the races are typically antagonistic toward each other. There are points of that animosity between



Stephen and some of the Japanese people of the village Tarumi, but it's not a main theme of this book.

## Language and Meaning

The book is written in modern English, though there are several Japanese words scattered throughout the text. The majority of these are defined, though there are some that are considered common knowledge. The use of the Japanese is limited sufficiently so that the reader should have no difficulty keeping track of the meanings. The wording is typically casual, though the proper mannerisms and speech of the Japanese of the day is apparent in the dialog. There is also a certain formality in the way people react to each other, though it's more a described formality than a formality of speech.

The fact that the book is divided into dates helps track time when days go by without a journal entry. By checking dates, it's easy to determine that there have been actions and events during the intervening days. But Tsukiyama also helps the reader track those skips by Stephen's words in the journal entries so that he tells the reader that there have been days without journal entries.

## Structure

The book is divided into five sections: Autumn of 1937, then Winter, Spring, Summer, and finally Autumn of 1938. Each section is further divided into dated sections. The book is actually a journal, begun on the date Stephen heads to his retreat at Tarumi and ending on the date he leaves for the return trip to Hong Kong. The individual dated entries are also sometimes additionally divided into sub-sections that change with a change of topic. The length of the dated entries are fairly uniform, though there are some dates with especially long entries. For example, Stephen hears Sachi's story on one of his visits to Yamaguchi and he tells that entire story in a single dated entry—making that entry much longer than others.

The book moves through the thirteen months of Stephen's stay in Tarumi quickly. There are no lengthy descriptions or dialogs to slow down the story. There are also sufficient surprises along the way to make the story move along.



## Quotes

"Japan is like a young woman who thinks too much of herself. She's bound to get herself in trouble." Matsu, Autumn, p. 17

"When you're well again, this period of your life will simply be a quiet memory." Stephen's father, Autumn, p. 20

"When some of those who had the disease were no longer wanted by others in town, they took what few belongings they had and went up into the mountains." Matsu, Autumn, p. 23

"When I first arrived at Tarumi, I wondered how Matsu could spend so much time in the garden. But the more time I spend here, the easier it is to see there's something very seductive about what Matsu has created." Stephen, Autumn, p. 31

"You have brought me more than that. You have brought me the sea." Sachi, Autumn, p. 42

"All the while, I knew my mother could only have one thing on her mind: Who was this woman who had stolen my father's love?" Stephen, Autumn, p. 51

"Matsu once told me the bridge represented the samurai's difficult path from this world to the afterlife. When you reach the top of the bridge, you can see your way to paradise." Stephen, Autumn, p. 58

"The garden has once again become his refuge, the only place he seems to feel any comfort. It's there that Matsu become the artist; adding and mixing colors." Stephen, Winter, p. 73

"I thought of how lonely my mother must sometimes be, always losing herself in charities, her constant shopping sprees for the latest styles from Europe and the long lunches and mah-jongg games that often ended in losses." Stephen, Winter, p. 84

"I was old enough to understand everything he said, but as his mouth softly formed the words, I knew the sense of integrity I had long admired in him had died, and that I was already grieving for its loss." Stephen, Winter, p. 85

"You've heard this story many times, forgive me. I'm old now. Almost forty. I wouldn't know what to do out there in the world." Stephen's mother, Winter, p. 92

"Until Keiko had mentioned her older brother, I took it for granted that most of the young



men from Tarumi had gone to seek their fortunes in larger cities. Now, I couldn't help but realize that most of them had joined the Japanese Army." Stephen, Winter, p. 106

"Every day I can see spring arriving in the smallest ways, mostly in the form of the double cherry blossoms sprouting from Matsu's weeping Higan, and the clear, light scene I smell every time I step into the garden." Stephen, Spring, p. 117

"When I turned around, the bright light of the morning sun had just filled the garden. It left the rushing stream of rocks aglow. I had stood watching the way the light played off the rocks, knowing that in a few moments the sun would shift its position and again the garden would appear different." Stephen, Spring, p. 125

"The greatest honor I could have given my family was that of my death, and I ran from it." Sachi, Spring, p. 137

"'It's better this way. If you have too much good luck when you are young,' Mah-mee said, 'there won't be any luck left for when you are old.'" Stephen's mother, Spring, p. 153

"Three days later when I went to check on Tomoko, my sixteen-year-old sister had found my father's fishing knife and ended her life." Matsu, Spring, p. 156

"And as I watched him, I could suddenly see small cracks in his armor, grief in the curve of his back and shoulders. For so long, he had been the strength of both worlds, the unlikely hero." Stephen, Summer, p. 168

"I daydreamed of what it would be like to stay in Tarumi and take care of Matsu and Sachi, make a quiet life for myself away from the noise and war. It would be so simple." Stephen, Autumn, p. 206



## Topics for Discussion

What was it that took Stephen to Tarumi? List the reasons his parents thought the change was necessary.

Who were Stephen's siblings? What kind of relationship did he have with them?

How did Stephen's mother discover his father's affair? What changes did that discovery make in the lives of the various characters? Stephen? His mother? His father?

How did Sachi know Matsu? Describe Sachi's actions when she discovered she was infected with leprosy.

Did Stephen expect to enjoy his time in Tarumi? What changed for him?

Describe Matsu's garden. Compare that with Sachi's garden. What are the similarities? Differences? Why does each enjoy their particular gardens? What does Stephen find attractive in each?

How did Matsu know Kenzo? What was it that prompted Kenzo to commit suicide?

What was the attitude about suicide among those from Matsu's lifetime and society? What did Sachi think about her inability to commit suicide? What was Matsu's attitude about it?