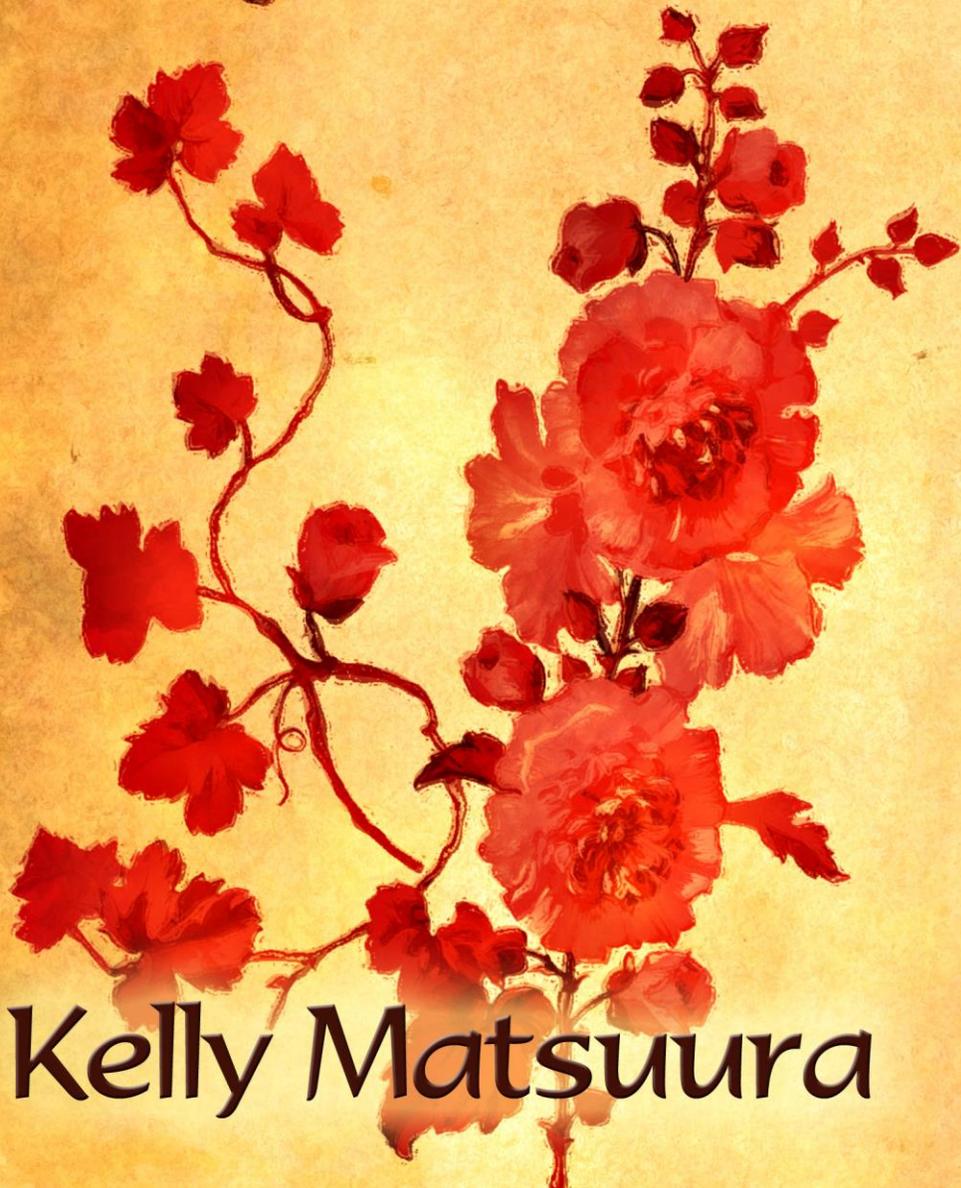




*Stirring
Winds*



Kelly Matsuura

Stirring Winds

A Short Story Compilation

By Kelly Matsuura

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This book was created in Japan.
First electronic release: September 2012.
This sample published by Kelly Matsuura
Available on blackwingsandwhitepaper.com

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Three Ballerinas

The subway was crowded in the late afternoon, even during Spring Break. Elise didn't mind, she enjoyed looking around at the passengers, they brought back so many memories of the years she had lived here in Japan. Old memories now. She hadn't been back for almost a decade, and she had mixed feelings about being here again this week.

She sat on the train, pretending to be an English teacher going to evening work, but she was really following three girls: the twins, Akari and Akemi, and their younger sister, Yurina. So beautiful and vibrant: she admired their smooth complexions, delicate bone structure and glossy black hair. Their chorus of laughter was like a string of tinkling bells. She squeezed her eyes closed. Why did it hurt so much?

The girls were on their way home from ballet school, wearing long tunic sweaters over pink tights and black flats on their feet. She imagined them in class practicing their *plies* and *port de bras*, moving gracefully to the music. Elise had taken ballet as a child too; she'd never felt more beautiful than when she was in costume. She couldn't remember now why she'd given up lessons, but it was one of her many regrets.

The train stopped at Jingu-Nishi, and the girls got off. They exited the station, and Elise trailed them at a safe distance. They stopped for a minute to chat with a girl walking two little Scottie dogs. Elise paused too, and looked around the familiar neighborhood. She'd lived in an apartment building near here for three years. She could just see it in the distance. She remembered this street too; it led to her friend Kyoko's flower shop just down the hill.

It had rained yesterday, but today was sunny and the streets were littered with pink and white petals from the overhanging cherry trees. Nostalgia hit her as she recalled Kyoko's wedding; it had been *hanami* season then as well, and the blossoms had mingled with the kaleidoscope of confetti on the ground. The scent rose up from the damp petals and Elise took a deep breath to capture the moment.

The sisters waved goodbye to the girl and rounded the corner. Elise waited until they'd turned before catching up and heading down the same street. She walked on the opposite side of the road, and when they turned up their driveway, she hid behind a large plum tree to observe.

The front door opened and Elise froze. She hadn't expected Hiro to be home this early, but there he was in a soft, gray knit sweater and jeans. His hair was a bit longer, but otherwise he looked the same.

He came out to meet his daughters, hugging them and swinging them around. They giggled and asked for more in Japanese. Yukina repeated '*otou-chan*' several times, and it made Elise's gut clench with unexpected longing. She watched him playing with his daughters, listening to them chatter about their day. He looked complete, happy in a way that only one's children can make a person. He was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Hiro was a father now, and a husband. He could have been *her* loving husband, if she'd had the courage to stay and make a life with him in Japan. Elise felt lost. Alone. She belonged somewhere, but not here.

She peeked out from behind the tree, observing the life she could have had. If a fortune-teller had shown her this picture nine years ago, she might have stayed to be part of it. Hiro had always had this dream of a family; beautiful children and a comfortable

home for them all. He'd held on to it, even when she'd left him. He'd just found someone else to build it with.

Hiro and the girls went inside, and Elise said a silent goodbye. She leaned back against the tree trunk and let herself cry. Tilting her head up to catch the sunlight streaming through the branches, she wiped her tears away with her fingers. She'd come all this way, just for a glimpse of what she'd given up, and now she hoped she could move on.

She'd remained frozen for too long, it was time for winter to end and for the spring breeze to bring joy to her heart once again. She walked back to the station, squaring her shoulders and chin, determined not to look back. The wind rustled the trees above and blossoms rained down around her like flurries of snow. But they were not cold, the petals held the warm promise of happiness to come.

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