

## CHAPTER 1

**“Come to my village, build yourself a house, a studio and kiln, find your way.”**



These were the words spoken by Kabumoto Nobuo, my patron to be as he offered me the opportunity to come and live under his auspices in the fishing village of Hamasaka on the Japan Sea Coast. For me, it was as if I had fallen down the rabbit hole into an enchanted land, and I was offered a charmed life from some Japanese historical novel. But it did not stay this way for long. I would soon be in for a rude awakening.

Kabumoto san was a charismatic man with deep piercing eyes, a shock of jet-black hair, and an ageless face, full of vitality, that reminded me of the ever-youthful John F. Kennedy. His demeanor was stern and confident. He was a consummate businessman; the head of a successful building company that erected highways and ports along the Japan Sea Coast, with hundreds of employees. His face was distinctly chiseled like the stone outcroppings that rose from the coast line, and that defined the character of this wind swept stretch of land along the Japan Sea. Wherever he went, people acknowledged his importance and bowed in respect. And yet he was a very humble and giving man. He was wealthy but not concerned with wealth. He wielded power but did not abuse power. He had an overall responsibility to the welfare of the town as did his father before him. Just one of many examples of how he interacted and took on responsibility in the town was that he financially assisted the family that ran the local restaurant to make

sure that their children would be able to attend college. Although he could afford to have a chauffeur and a fancy car, he instead chose to drive himself around in a simple black sedan. He wore plain beige suits and nothing but beige suits. His residence was the family compound nestled in the valley located a couple of miles from the ocean; a traditional structure with huge hand hewn beams supporting the upper floors, and a traditional pounded dirt floor for an entrance. There were hand painted calligraphy and family heirlooms adorning the walls. There was no central heat in these old houses so in winter, charcoal braziers, and kerosene heaters were placed on tatami mat floors, alongside kotatsu; tables placed on the floor with a quilt cover sandwiched between the frame and the table top. In winter, hot green tea, or hot sake helped the visiting guest stay warm.

Immediately outside the house was the garden; a single branch from a twisted and very old Red Pine tree had been trained to grow horizontally over the entrance, beckoning visitors to enter. Old stone lanterns, their surfaces weathered and worn by time were covered in a thick, plush, green, moss, carpet. Lanterns strategically placed with painstaking attention to composition with other parts of the garden, carefully nestled between plants and trees, looked as though they had sprouted up from the ground. or had existed there previously without human intervention.

Sitting on the wooden veranda, just outside the sliding paper screen doors and shutters of the exterior walls, I would share a cup of tea with Kabumoto san. Above our heads was a wide overhanging roof line and beyond that, the somber gray, skies stretching outwards, heavy with approaching rain. On such days, I would find peace and serenity, as I viewed the garden taking note of the rain as it began to soak the moss, and stone, and Pine needles. There was a certain feeling that was at the same moment both sad and beautiful; wabi sabi. This term is bantered about in the West as a way of ‘understanding’ the Japanese aesthetic. But, I believe that in trying to intellectually explain this concept, it has already lost some of the importance it carries. It is more about emoting a particular feeling that is evanescent, the somber beauty that would be felt at the moment rather than explained.

Kabumoto san was an enigma to me, larger than life, powerful, strict, and yet a generous and kind being. He had spent time in a monastery when he was young and continued to lead an ascetic and demanding lifestyle. He was very harsh and critical of himself and in so doing always had great expectations of those people around him. He would write Buddhist sutras every morning, first preparing the sumi ink, paper and brushes, writing the same sutra over and over, day after day. He also had the spirit of a samurai. Awakening each morning before dawn, he would retreat to a small room and draw the family heirloom sword and meditate upon the first rays of sun to reflect off the perfectly honed blade. He also became a sort of surrogate father to me while I was living on the Japan Sea Coast. And in time, after numerous visits to my studio to watch, learn, and practice ceramics, he became a consummate potter as well.

And so began the convoluted relationship that was to ensue for the next thirty years, and continues to evolve and to reveal the layers of complexity that are still being discovered as they unfold today. Whether it is a matter of destiny, synergy, or fate, I believe the relationship has continued to evolve, The saga by virtue of its nature continues to keep me questioning and challenging myself.

But let me ask the reader’s indulgence to digress and explain how I, a nice Jewish boy from the suburbs of New York, eventually came to enter such a relationship.

