

Book title

Waka Sensei

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This book is dedicated to Sensei Nelson Carrión, who taught me to observe carefully, learn humbly, understand deeply, and act with determination. He reminded me that moving forward does not mean ignoring our limits, but understanding them and never losing sight of the path ahead.

And to Sensei Julio Campopiano, with whom that path began in Paysandú in 1987. It was he who first told us about Gigō Funakoshi, the Shōtōkan tiger, and the dōjō that bore that name. His stories awakened questions that stayed with me for almost forty years.

This trilogy is my attempt to answer some of them and to recover the history that first captured my imagination at Goshin-Dō, beneath a small photograph of Gichin Funakoshi that I still remember clearly.

Some stories need time before they can be told. Like a good Rioja, they must be allowed to mature.

Don't you agree?

Oss

Dedicated to Witold Kwieciński, an exceptional karateka who, like Gigō Funakoshi, left us far too soon, leaving behind a legacy that time will never erase.

Special Acknowledgment

As in my previous books, I would like to express my special gratitude to Sensei Salvador Herráiz, an indispensable authority in the historical research of Karate-Dō.

His knowledge and generosity have been invaluable on many occasions, particularly when I needed to resolve the doubts and contradictions that continually arose while constructing this story.

The deeper one investigates, the more paths, testimonies, and different versions begin to intertwine, sometimes making it almost impossible to distinguish where historical fact ends and where legend, oral tradition, or unsupported claims begin.

Having someone to consult on these matters—someone capable of helping me determine what belongs to documented history and what has been shaped by stories repeated over time—has been essential.

Although this work is a novel, my intention has always been to portray everything that truly happened and has been historically recorded as faithfully as possible.

Oss.

Waka Sensei

*Fiction based on the life of Yoshitaka Funakoshi.
Book 3 – Walking Upright Trilogy*

Milton Chanes

Prologue

Tokyo. November 1945

Breathing is a kata.

Gigō discovered this years ago, although he never said it aloud because it struck him as sentimental nonsense, and sentimental nonsense in the dōjō is paid for with push-ups. But it is true: there is a starting position, an intention, a course, and a conclusion. To inhale is yoi. To exhale is to return to the beginning. Between one and the other, the body does what it can with what it has.

What it has on that November dawn is half a lung. Perhaps less.

The doctor spoke of cavities, of lost tissue, and Gigō thought of the caves along the coast of Okinawa, of the sea flowing in and out of the hollow rock. Now the sea flows in and out of him with a faint whistle, like a distant kettle, and every inhalation is a fight without a decisive blow. Barely a truce before the next attack.

The makeshift hospital smells of damp coal, disinfectant, and paper. The cold of the ward penetrates the blankets. Gigō remains half upright in a narrow bed, with two pillows and a folded blanket supporting his back so that each breath costs him a little less.

The grey light of dawn filters through the high windows and passes through the cloth of the folding screen. Through the opening beside the wall, he can see a roof patched with sheets of metal, the bare branches of a persimmon tree and, beyond them, a strip of brown ground where houses once stood crowded together. The B-29s had passed over Tokyo like a red-hot iron, leaving entire neighbourhoods reduced to ashes.

A little more than three months had passed since the Emperor announced the end of the war over the radio. For almost every Japanese person, it was the first time they had heard his voice: faint through the static and wrapped in words that many could barely understand. Gigō heard the broadcast from another room that did not belong to him either and thought, with a coldness that frightened him, that he and his country had both run out of air during the same summer.

Fujiko sleeps sitting in a chair, her chin resting on her chest and her hands folded in her lap, like someone praying without realising it. Near the folding screen, Yukio lies curled up on two blankets, covered with his mother's coat.

Gigō does not wake them.

—Home —he had asked three days earlier, with what little voice he had left—. I want to die at home.

The doctor had remained silent.

There was no home to which they could take him. His father's house and the Shōtōkan had disappeared beneath the bombs. Fujiko and Yukio stayed wherever they could, in rooms lent to them by relatives and acquaintances. And even if they

had found somewhere permanent, Gigō was no longer in any condition to leave the hospital. The journey to any lodging, however close it might be, could kill him before he arrived.

Instead of moving him, they allowed his wife and son to remain beside him for as long as possible. In that Tokyo reduced to ruins, a room divided by a folding screen could become a home, as long as those he loved were inside it.

It was not the home he had asked for, but it was the closest thing to returning there.

Even if it was borrowed.

Borrowed.

The word amuses him. The laugh barely begins to form before it turns into a fit of coughing that folds him over the bed. The handkerchief fills with a dark red, almost black. Fujiko wakes and takes it from him without looking at it, yet without taking her eyes off him, with that double gesture known only to women who have spent years beside a man dying slowly.

Everything in his life has been borrowed. Every year since he was twenty. Every kick. Every student. Every dawn with frost on the windows of the dōjō.

Thirty-two years under threat.

Nineteen lived on credit, without any collector coming to claim them.

Until now.

Fujiko closes her eyes again, overcome by exhaustion. Gigō remains awake.

That moment before dawn belongs to him. It always had: the hour for training alone, when the floor of the Shōtōkan was so cold that the soles of his feet seemed to stick to the wood and warmth had to be earned through low stances, lower, lower still, until his thighs burned and the cold was the one that finally surrendered.

The Shōtōkan.

He does not want to think about it and, precisely because of that, he thinks about it. That is how the mind works, and no master, however great, has ever managed to force it to do otherwise.

It happened in April, after one of those nights when incendiary bombs descended whistling over Tokyo and set the city alight as they touched the ground. When dawn came, almost nothing remained of the Shōtōkan except a plot covered in ashes.

The dōjō that bore his father's literary name above its entrance—Shōtō-kan, “the house of Shōtō”—had disappeared. The house standing in front of it, within the same grounds, had also been devoured by the fire. Between the two buildings, only broken roof tiles, charred beams, and a few posts remained, rising above the ruins like bare ribs.

The students had come to discover what could be saved. They cleared away debris with shovels, staffs, and hands wrapped in rags. They set aside the unbroken tiles, nails, tools, and any fragment of wood that did not crumble when touched.

Gigō had arrived before his father.

They brought him in a truck and helped him down, although he insisted on walking by himself the few steps that separated him from the others. He was too weak to work, but he had not gone there to work.

He wanted to be present when Gichin arrived. He wanted his father to find not only a destroyed home and dōjō, but also his students waiting for him among the ruins.

While they waited, one of the young men approached Gigō carrying a fragment of the old floor. One end was charred; the other still retained the smooth surface that thousands of bare feet had polished over the years.

—Waka-sensei —he said, holding it in both hands—. Perhaps you should keep it.

Gigō took the fragment and slowly ran his thumb across the wood. For a few moments, he said nothing. On that surface, he could still recognise the steps, turns, and stances repeated to exhaustion; everything the fire could no longer reveal, but which the wood seemed to preserve.

—It is a good keepsake —he said at last—. That is why you must keep it.

The young man raised his eyes, surprised.

—A dōjō does not disappear when its walls burn —Gigō continued—. It disappears when those who learned within it forget what they received. This wood belonged to the Shōtōkan, but the Shōtōkan now belongs to all of you.

He returned the fragment with both hands, not like someone refusing a relic, but like someone entrusting another person with the responsibility of guarding it.

Soon afterwards, they heard the engine of the old car bringing his father. The students put down their tools and formed two lines along the path. Gigō remained standing among them, gathering what little strength he had left to receive him.

Gichin stepped out of the car and, before even looking at the ruins, searched for his son among those present.

Gigō remembers that moment more clearly than everything that followed: the look on his father's face when he found him, the brief relief in his expression, and the silent reprimand for having left the hospital.

He could not remain there for long. The coughing shook him again, and Nakayama approached Gichin to tell him what everyone already knew: Gigō had to be taken back.

His father stood before him.

—Gigō, go back to the hospital. You have already done more than you should have.

—But there is so much to do here...

—Everyone knows that. Now you need care that we cannot give you here.

With great difficulty, Gigō accepted. Obata and some of the other students accompanied him to the truck. Before climbing in, he looked back at his father, at the students, and at the blackened ground.

That was the last time he left the hospital.

That night, he wept as he had not done since he was a child, his forearm pressed against his mouth so that no one would hear him. He could not say whether he was crying for the house, for the dōjō, for the students who had died in the Pacific, or for himself, because even then he knew that he would not remain among those ruins for much longer either.

The memory fades.

In the ward, morning has still not fully entered. Fujiko continues to sleep.

The fever, however, is already awake.

It rises at dawn, as punctual as a diligent student. With it comes that uncertain moment when one does not know whether one is asleep or awake. The body remains on the bed, but the mind rises and walks.

It is the twilight between sleep and waking.

And there, Gigō trains.

He stands in a dōjō he does not recognise and which nevertheless contains every dōjō he has ever known. The floor does not creak. The light enters through no window. He bows before an empty front and begins the kata.

Wankan.

The King's Crown.

It was not a kata of his own. It had reached him as all the others had: passed from one master to another, crossing islands, generations, and different bodies. Each man had

preserved something and, perhaps without intending to, changed something else.

That was how karate had survived. Not by remaining motionless, but by adapting enough not to disappear.

Gigō had spent years studying that form. He assembled and dismantled it, stealing hours from the lung that still obeyed him. He wrote sequences on sheets of paper that Fujiko later found in his pockets, between the pages of books, or beneath the futon.

He did not intend to create a new kata. He was trying to understand what place that ancient form might occupy within the karate they practised at the Shōtōkan.

He had simplified some movements, not to impoverish them, but to make their intention more direct. He had changed distances, adjusted transitions, and removed gestures that seemed repetitive. The stances were now lower; the movements longer; the hips engaged with a force that the form as he had received it had barely suggested.

Every modification seemed to bring him closer to something he could feel but still could not name.

Because there was one point that never entirely convinced him.

A movement was not necessarily missing. Perhaps the kata was complete and he was the one who had not yet learned how to understand it. Or perhaps, after so many hands and so many years, some part of it had been lost along the way.

A forgotten intention.

A transition reduced to a gesture.

The answer to a question no one remembered having asked.

That, too, was karate.

His father had received it as Tōde and brought it to Japan transformed into karate. He had taken it out of hidden courtyards and private homes to teach it in schools, universities, and dōjō. They had changed names, stances, and methods of training.

Gigō had added new distances, higher kicks, and movements born from observing other arts. Not because he despised what he had received, but because he believed that respecting a teaching did not mean leaving it motionless.

Nor was a kata a work finished for all time. It was a question transmitted through the body. Each generation asked it again and found a slightly different answer. Some answers illuminated what had come before. Others distorted it.

And no one could say with certainty the precise moment when evolution became betrayal.

In the twilight between sleep and waking, Gigō performs Wankan.

He advances.

Blocks.

Enters.

The kata flows like water through a familiar channel until it reaches that point. Always the same one. The transition

he has repeated hundreds of times and has never been able to accept completely.

He stops. Before him there is no forgotten movement, but an unanswered question. Gigō gazes into the empty space like someone who has reached the end of a bridge that another person began building long before he was born. He has added a few planks. Reinforced the supports. Removed what he considered unnecessary. But the bridge still does not reach the opposite shore. Perhaps it was never meant to reach it.

Perhaps kata are never finished. Perhaps each master builds only the section that belongs to him and leaves the rest to those who come after.

But he has no time left.

Wankan will continue changing after he has disappeared. Karate, too, will continue advancing towards a definitive form that no one will ever know.

And there, before the movement he was never able to resolve, the dōjō begins to fade.

The light goes out. The floor disappears beneath his feet.

From somewhere within the fever, a voice he has not forgotten in thirty-two years returns. A kindly voice, because sometimes the worst sentences are spoken with kindness.

—It is unlikely that he will live to twenty.

He opens his eyes.

The dimness of dawn has become daylight. Fujiko is awake as well. She supports his head and brings a cup of warm water to his lips, tasting of metal and coal smoke.

Gigō drinks with difficulty and, when he manages to recover a little air, smiles. It is a weak smile, twisted by exhaustion, but still his own.

—Do you know what I was dreaming about?

—You were training —she answers.

It is not a question. After so many years of sleeping beside that man, Fujiko recognises the signs: the tension in his hands upon the blanket, the right foot turning ever so slightly, searching beneath the sheets for a wooden floor that no longer exists.

—Wankan.

He has to stop to breathe.

Everything now happens between pauses. His life has filled with commas.

—I have not finished my work with it.

—Others will finish it.

Fujiko says it without solemnity, as though assuring him that the sun will rise again tomorrow.

And Gigō thinks that perhaps a kata is precisely that: a bridge each master builds as far as his body and his time will allow, trusting that someone will continue from the other end.

From somewhere in the hospital courtyard comes the voice of a child counting aloud.

—Ichi. Ni. San.

Who knows what he is counting: marbles, steps, stones lined up on the ground. Perhaps he is striking with his fists at a post that exists only in his imagination.

Gigō closes his eyes to listen more closely.

He is thirty-nine years old.

They had granted him twenty.

Everything that came afterwards—the sick child from Shuri, the impatient young man in Tokyo, the dōjō raised and the dōjō reduced to ashes, the stances he made deeper, the kicks he carried higher and farther, the arguments with his father, and the endless struggle against his own chest—was time wrested from that sentence.

Borrowed time.

And, like every man who has lived on borrowed time, before returning what he received, he wants to settle the accounts.

Footsteps stop on the other side of the folding screen.

Fujiko raises her head. A nurse calls the family name.

—Funakoshi-san. Your parents have arrived.

Gichin appears first in the doorway. Gozei stands one step behind him, clutching a handkerchief between her hands.

When he sees them, Gigō smiles.

For an instant, the hospital room no longer feels borrowed.

—Father... Mother... Thank you for coming.

Fujiko wakes Yukio and rises to make room for them beside the bed. She moves behind the folding screen with the boy, but does not go far. She remains close enough to hear Gigō's voice and distinguish every one of his breaths.

Gichin sits beside his son and takes his hand with a naturalness that renders any solemn gesture unnecessary. Gozei stands on the other side of the bed, silent, her eyes fixed on him.

—Father, I wanted to see you —Gigō says—. I need to speak to you... before others speak for me.

He coughs. He waits for the air to return without burning.

—Lines are already being drawn out there. Egami and Hironishi see the path one way; Nakayama and the university men see it another. While I was there, everyone experimented and argued, but in the end they returned to the same place. When I am gone, it will be difficult for them to remain together.

Gichin tightens his fingers around his son's hand.

—It is not your fault, my son.

—I feel that it is. I gave them freedom too soon and, without intending to, each group began to believe that its path was the only one. Even kumite, which I wanted to develop, ended up dividing them. Combat, when it has no framework, feeds the ego. You warned me. I understood too late.

—The ego of men is older than we are —Gichin answers without harshness—. You can straighten one person's back. You cannot straighten the thinking of an entire group with a

single pull. It is not your fault. It is the human condition, and the time in which we have been made to live.

Gigō breathes, not to fill his lungs, but to arrange the words he still has left.

—Then teach them as you know how. Small groups, Father. As in Asato's courtyard. Make each student an instructor, so that he can pass it on. If they all understand the line that connects them, there will be variations, but the music will remain the same.

Gichin lowers his gaze towards his son's hand.

—I do not know whether I am still prepared to hold so many together, Yoshitaka.

—You do not have to hold everything together. Only that which no one else can hold.

He pauses. His breath takes time to return.

—The centre.

Gichin raises his eyes.

He promises nothing. Nor is there any need.

Gigō feels that he has finally said what he needed to say. The words he had spent months trying to arrange no longer belong to him. They are now in his father's hands.

Gozei slowly strokes his hair, as though he were still that seven-year-old boy whose legs did not reach the floor.

Gichin does not release his hand.

Behind the folding screen, Fujiko holds her breath each time Gigō's seems to stop.

Breathing is a kata.

Gigō inhales once more.

Barely a thread of air.

Then he exhales slowly, in one final sigh, like someone completing the last movement and returning to the starting point.

The air leaves his body.

And does not return.

Fate, ever capricious, willed that, while I was writing the prologue to this book, my mother's heart should stop beating. These pages are therefore also for you. Wherever you are, I love you. Safe journey, Mum. We will meet again on the other side, when my time comes.

Isabel Filomena Cernicchiaro Cabrera

29 September 1949 – 26 July 2026 †

Part I

The island

Chapter 1

The third son

Shuri, 1906

The woman trains when everything else is finished.

In the Funakoshi household, that happens late. By then, the rice for the following day has been washed and left to soak; the stove cleaned; the bowls stacked; and the lamps checked. The clothes belonging to Gichin and the four children—Giei, Tsuru, Giyu, and Uto—have been mended, folded, and placed where each of them expects to find them in the morning.

She has also dealt with all those small things that hold a household together without anyone remembering that they ever asked for them: a repaired sandal, a tangled ribbon straightened out, a notebook moved away from the edge of the table so that it will not be stained during breakfast.

The fence at the back is still standing thanks to a bamboo cane. Gichin said three weeks ago that he would repair it, but men who mend fences and men who quote the classics are seldom the same man.

The fifth child is on the way, already rounding her belly beneath her working clothes.

When Shuri extinguishes its final lamps, Gozei at last finishes attending to everyone else's obligations.

And begins attending to her own.

That night, however, her husband is late.

It is nothing unusual. Two or three times a week, after dinner, Gichin goes out "to visit a friend". That is how he puts it, wearing the serious expression of a schoolteacher that would not deceive even the most inattentive of his pupils. He returns much later, smelling of sweat and courtyard earth, his knuckles slightly redder than when he left.

Gozei never asks. What would be the point? She does not need to know the names of those friends to understand what they do when they meet. She knows that art as well. She has carried it in her arms, her legs, and her breathing since she was a child.

She steps into the back courtyard with the final bucket of water and leaves it beside the wall. Then she remains still for a few moments, listening to the sleeping house and the empty street. She places both hands at her waist to ease the weight of her belly, which at seven months seems to move one step ahead of her.

The moon is high and round. In its corner, the hen opens one watchful eye.

—Mind your own business —Gozei murmurs to it in the language of home.

And she begins.

Slowly, because now there are two of them.

The child she carries within her demands slower turns and shallower stances. Gozei has adapted the art to her new body with the same naturalness with which she deals with every daily task: without complaint, without asking permission, and without surrendering herself.

A block that pushes the night aside.

A step that barely raises the dust.

Her hips accompany the movement gently, rocking the child as she advances.

She inhales without forcing herself and releases the air slowly. With each exhalation, she feels her belly loosen and the child settle inside her. She has a small superstition she has never shared with anyone: she imagines that the child breathes in time with her, learning before birth what others take years to understand.

I am his first dōjō, Gozei thinks. His first defence, the place that protects him.

She is halfway through a sequence, slowly opening her arms, when she feels someone watching her.

She does not hear the gaze. She feels it on the back of her neck, as one feels the light when emerging from the shadows.

She completes the movement. Always. Her father taught her long ago that abandoning a technique halfway through was worse than never beginning it. Then she brings her feet together, lowers her hands, and only then turns her head.

At the entrance to the courtyard, motionless, his books still tied beneath his arm, stands her husband.

He has returned early from visiting his friend.

Judging by his expression, he has been standing there for quite some time.

Silence falls. The hen looks at one of them and then the other.

—Bad? —Gozei asks.

Nothing more. Her chin slightly raised.

All the years they have been married fit inside that single word: there is no apology, no surprise, no request for permission. If you have something to correct, correct it, Master, because the night is growing cold.

Gichin does not answer immediately. He places the books on the step with the care with which he sets down everything. When he straightens again, Gozei discovers that he is smiling.

—Never bad —he says—. There are two or three things I would do differently, and you shorten the turn because of the tenant.

He indicates her belly with a discreet movement of his chin.

—But the attitude is still correct. It always has been. Technique can be corrected; attitude cannot.

—The details —Gozei says— are what you teach your friends at night.

—The details are what I teach my friends at night — Gichin concedes, very seriously.

Both their mouths tremble at the same time, but neither quite laughs. In that house, laughing openly would be almost as scandalous as embracing in the middle of the street.

Gichin walks towards the centre of the courtyard. He removes his footwear on the stone in two movements, rolls up his sleeves as he did when he was young, and takes his place beside her, at the precise distance kept by two people about to do the same thing at the same time.

—May I? —he asks—. With you.

Gozei looks him up and down, taking her time, like someone examining an applicant.

—As long as you can keep up with me. We have a passenger, and I do not intend to hurry.

—With a passenger —he agrees—. Which one?

She speaks the name it bore then, the one that still preserved the sound of the ancient courtyards:

—Kūshankū.

It was a long and complex form, traditionally linked to a man who had come from China and passed down in Okinawa

from one master to another. Matsumura had taught it to his disciples; Itosu had carried it with him towards a new era. Much later, in Japan, Gichin would call it Kankū.

But that night it was still Kūshankū: ancient, difficult, and, for as long as the kata lasted, theirs alone.

They take their positions. Heels together, hands lowered. The moon gives each of them a shadow.

—Slowly —Gozei warns.

—Slowly —Gichin promises.

They begin at the same time, without a count or signal, with the kind of synchrony that cannot be learned in any courtyard because it is granted only by years of sleeping beneath the same roof and waking to the same roosters.

The opening gesture of Kūshankū is one of the strangest and most beautiful in the entire art. They both perform it with almost ceremonial slowness.

Their open hands rise until they meet above their faces. Their index fingers and thumbs form a triangle between them, a window, an eye through which, if the arms are positioned correctly, the entire sky fits perfectly.

That night, the moon fits inside it too.

Round and shameless, it settles into the space between their hands and remains there, watching them as they watch it.

—Your friend Asato —Gozei murmurs without breaking the posture—, does he frame the moon as well, or is that a luxury reserved for this house?

—My friend Asato says that this opening is not for looking at the sky. It is for measuring it.

—And what does it measure?

—How large everything is and how small we are. He says the kata begins this way to knock the foolishness out of you before the first strike.

—Your friend is a wise man —Gozei replies—. Lower your elbows. You are holding them like a scarecrow.

And the master of the courtyards of Shuri, the man who three nights a week corrects the stances of fully grown men, lowers his elbows without protest.

Their hands descend and open, as though distributing what they have just gathered from above. Then the kata begins to move.

They advance side by side, shadow beside shadow.

The double block. The turn.

Slowly, slowly.

The passenger protests with a small kick, which Gozei receives with the faintest smile. Then comes the cutting hand, the covering hand, the backward step that is not a retreat but an invitation.

Gichin watches his wife from the corner of his eye as he watches his books: searching for what is written and also for what lies hidden between the lines. He recognises a technique learned by another route, turns that he would resolve differently, and habits inherited from an earlier generation.

But beneath all of that remains intact the nameless quality he spends years seeking in certain students without ever managing to find it: complete attention.

Gozei does not merely perform the kata.

She attends to it.

Every gesture receives her full weight, as though it were important, because to her it is.

One is not born with that, Gichin thinks as he tries not to lose the rhythm.

Then he watches her advance and corrects himself:

Well. Perhaps one is.

Perhaps one is born with it, and he married the proof without ever fully understanding it.

In the central passage, when the kata descends towards the ground and the body makes itself small against the earth before rising again, Gozei stops.

—This —she says— the passenger will not sign off on.

—I will do this for all three of us —Gichin replies.

He descends alone, slowly, towards the stone of the courtyard, on knees less young than he likes to admit. Gozei watches him from above, her arms in the correct position and one eyebrow independently expressing certain doubts.

Gichin crouches and looks at the sky from the ground.

That is what the kata demands: fallen and looking upwards. An entire doctrine, in the opinion of a man who always finds a doctrine where others see little more than a movement.

He rises again, somewhat less agile than he would like and considerably more dignified than he imagines.

—Bad? —he asks, brushing off his clothes.

—Never bad —she answers, returning the coin—. Always slow. But the attitude...

—The attitude —he grumbles.

They finish together, as they began. The final gesture, the hands returning, the feet coming together, and the breath settling.

They remain beside one another for a moment, observing the courtyard as though something has changed.

And something has changed.

Until then, each had known the other's art only through its traces: a breath heard from the adjoining room, an exhaustion no one explained, some movement glimpsed but never discussed. That night, for the first time, they have truly seen one another.

They say nothing about it, of course.

Gozei picks up the bucket. Gichin picks up his books.

When they reach the door, he steps aside to allow her to enter first, something he almost never does. She passes without commenting on it, which is precisely her way of commenting on it.

—Your friend —she says once they are inside the house, while Gichin aligns the entire family's footwear, heels along the same line, without realising that he is doing it—. The one from tonight. Did he make good use of the lesson?

—Fairly well —he answers—. His attitude is lacking.

—Poor man —Gozei says—. When it is so easy.

They go to sleep for the few hours that remain. Each settles on their own side of the room, without touching the other, and smiles towards their own wall.

Inside Gozei, the passenger moves, stretches one last time, and finally falls asleep as well, rocked by the rhythm of the kata, every movement stored somewhere before memory. It has been his first lesson. Full attendance, from the best seat in the house.

The child is born in autumn, when the typhoons have already passed and the island is busy counting its missing roof tiles.

It is an uneventful birth, which is the best kind of birth. The midwife says what midwives usually say: that he is beautiful and that he cries strongly. In the second claim, she exaggerates as part of her profession. The child cries quietly, using only the air he needs, as though he had learned before birth that breath must not be wasted.

They name him Yoshitaka.

The same characters permit more than one reading. To the world, he will be Yoshitaka; in the intimate language of the

family, the language spoken within those walls and rarely outside them, he will be Gigō.

Two names. One child.

In the Okinawa of 1906, many things seem to have one name for the inside and another for the outside. The island is Okinawa on the new maps and Uchinā in the mouths of grandmothers. The art is tōde among those who know it and is scarcely mentioned in front of strangers.

The fifth child of Gichin and Gozei—the third of their sons—has entered, without knowing it, a world of double readings: one language for the home and another for the outside.

During the day, his father teaches the language of the outside.

At school, the use of Japanese is encouraged, while the language learned from mothers is gradually relegated to homes and family conversations. Gichin is part of that system and sincerely believes in what it represents: education, progress, and the possibility that the children of Okinawa might find a place in the new Japan.

But he also dreams in the language they are being asked to forget.

He lives inside that contradiction without grand gestures: he teaches one language during the day and returns each night to the other; he obeys the regulations and preserves at home what the school seeks to correct.

One day, that same tension will force him to make decisions far greater than the choice of a word spoken in the classroom.

But that will come later.

That autumn night, there is only a sleeping house, a basket beside the futon and, inside it, a child breathing carefully.

Yoshitaka to the world.

Gigō to his own.

It is past midnight when Gichin, returning from one of those courtyards, stops beside the basket with the lamp held high. The child sleeps on his back, his fists half closed beside his ears, in the absurd and perfect guard of every newborn. His chest rises and falls without effort, but at the end of some inhalations there is a sound, a whistle so faint that it could be the wind slipping through a crack or the brushing of air through a nose too small.

Gichin tilts his head and listens. He has spent years observing bodies and breathing in the courtyards; he knows how to recognise who can repeat something once more, who has reached his limit, and who is trying to conceal his

exhaustion. And yet that sound resembles nothing that can be corrected.

It comes and goes without any precise rhythm. Perhaps it is nothing more than the change of season. The first cold days fill the chests of many children with noises and small coughs.

He places the lamp on the floor, slips one hand into the basket, and rests his open palm on Yoshitaka's chest. Beneath it, he feels the steady rhythm of the heart and the slight movement of his breathing.

Beneath his hand, the small chest rises and falls. At times, the whistle becomes a tiny vibration, like a cricket hidden inside a box.

He remains that way for a length of time he does not measure. He does not pray, because he is not a man of grand prayers.

Nor does he search for an explanation: there is still nothing to explain. He does what he usually does with what he loves and with what he fears. He observes, takes its measure, and stores the sound in his memory, in case one day he needs to recognise it.

Then he removes his hand, picks up the lamp, and walks away. The following morning, he says nothing.

Gozei says nothing either. She had heard that sound before anyone else, during the first night, with that hearing mothers possess, which seems to be made from some other substance. At dawn, she stops beside the basket. Yoshitaka sleeps with his mouth slightly open.

His breathing is barely distinguishable from the brushing of the blanket.

Gozei pulls it up to his chin and straightens one of its folds without thinking. Even blankets must remain in their proper place. Then she leans down until her lips are close to his tiny ear.

She speaks to him in the language of the inside, so softly that no one else could hear her.

They are not words of pity or a prayer. It is something brief and firm, like what one says to a student before beginning.

Gozei brushes his forehead with one finger.

—Slowly —she murmurs—. But keep going.

The child draws breath once more. For a few moments, there is no sound. Then the small, intermittent whistle returns, perhaps caused by the cold, perhaps one of the many passing melodies of childhood.

Gozei remains beside the basket until it disappears again.

She does not yet know that she will remember that sound many years later. For now, she is only a mother listening to her son breathe as dawn rises over Shuri.

Chapter 2

The midnight training sessions

Shuri, 1910 – 1912

The boy is four years old and has a mission: he must cross the room without allowing the floor to betray him.

It is not easy. The Funakoshi house is old and honest and, like all old and honest houses, it has opinions. It expresses them through its floorboards. One board complains beside the chest. Another sighs in front of the ancestral altar. The third—the worst one, the traitor—waits just before the back door. It does not creak when someone steps on it, but when the foot is lifted, at the precise moment when one already believes oneself safe.

Gigō knows all three.

He has spent weeks studying them during the day, discreetly. He crosses them using different parts of his foot and distributing his weight in different ways, like someone trying to tune an instrument that must make no sound. No one has asked him to do it. Nor does anyone seem to have noticed.

In this way, he has discovered the first great truth of his life: at night, his house is incomplete.

He discovered it because he was thirsty. One summer night, he awoke with a dry mouth, rose in the darkness and, as

he passed his parents' room, noticed through the half-open panel the empty space left by his father. Gichin's futon was unoccupied, and the blanket remained folded with that characteristic neatness of his which made even absences appear orderly.

The boy stood looking at it and forgot about the water.

Fathers do not disappear. Fathers are like beams. One assumes they hold up the house and does not ask where they go.

And yet the futon was empty, and everyone slept as though nothing were happening. From somewhere in the back courtyard came a sound unlike any the boy knew. It was not work, or a fight, or an animal. It was a soft, measured impact. A long breath that did not belong to someone sleeping. Between one sound and the next stretched silences so full that they seemed to carry weight.

That first night, he did not go to look.

He returned to his futon with his heart pounding against his chest from within and pulled the covers over his head. For a long while, he tried to decide whether his father was ill, had gone mad, or was speaking with ghosts. Those were the three most terrible explanations the imagination of a four-year-old boy could produce.

He fell asleep without choosing any of them.

The following morning, Gichin occupied his usual place beside the table. He was correcting his pupils' notebooks with

the same expression as always. When he saw Gigō enter, he raised his head.

—Did you sleep well?

—Yes.

It was their first conversation as men.

They both lied out of courtesy.

Gigō did not ask.

That said a great deal about that boy and that house. Another child would have tugged at his mother's sleeve the following morning to find out where his father went at night. Another mother would have offered some explanation, true or otherwise, and the mystery would have ended there.

But Gigō was a son of that house. Along with the language of the inside and the customs no one explained, he had learned that important questions were not asked immediately.

They were allowed to incubate.

They were stored in some corner of the chest, and one waited—weeks or years, if necessary—until the answer fell under its own weight.

So he did what came naturally to him.

He began to study.

He studied the floor, board by board, until he had drawn a silent path inside his head. He had to pass close beside the chest, take two long steps, place the edge of his foot down first in front of the altar, and avoid the traitorous board altogether. To cross it, he had to support himself with his left hand against the frame and make a short jump. His right hand had to remain free, although he did not yet know why.

He also studied the nights.

He discovered that his father did not train in the courtyard every night. He did so twice a week, sometimes three times, once every breath in the house had settled into the same rhythm. On some nights, he left the house and returned much later, with earth on his feet and weariness in his shoulders. He never trained in the courtyard when it was raining heavily or when there were visitors. He always finished before the first rooster crowed.

He also studied his own body, which was the most unpredictable instrument of all. That change of season had left him with a mild and unpredictable cough. Gigō discovered that if he drank warm water before going to bed and kept his breathing short and quiet, he could remain for quite some time without his throat betraying him.

No one taught him any of this.

Or perhaps the house taught him, which was almost the same thing.

Many years later, he would say that his first training had begun neither with a strike nor with a stance. It had consisted

of moving the entire weight of his small body through a sleeping house without waking a single floorboard.

Control of weight. Control of breath. Patience. An objective.

Nothing was missing.

He even possessed the thing that takes many people years to find.

A reason.

On the night when he finally decided to approach, Gigō was already awake and waiting.

He followed the silent path. He passed beside the chest, left the altar behind, and cleared the traitorous board with the small jump he had practised. He reached the back door, which remained slightly open, leaving a gap the width of a finger.

He placed one eye against it.

He looked with his entire body behind that eye.

And at last he saw what his father did at night.

He understood nothing.

He had expected to discover a secret shaped like a secret. A treasure, a machine, a meeting of conspirators, or even another family. Instead, he found only Gichin, barefoot on the packed earth of the courtyard, his sleeves rolled up, moving slowly against no one.

He took a step. Turned. His arms cut through the air with immense care, as though the air might break.

Then he stopped, breathed, and repeated the same phrase of movements.

Once.

Again.

And once more.

With every repetition, something changed, something so small that the boy could not discover what it was. He understood only that his father could perceive the difference, because sometimes, after performing a sequence that appeared identical to those before it, he would remain motionless, his head slightly tilted, as though listening to his own arms.

Then something in his face said that he had found it.

There was no enemy and no story Gigō could follow. There was nothing he knew how to name.

And yet Gigō remained beside the opening until his knees began to ache.

The cough did not come.

The silence he had managed to earn lasted far longer that night than he had expected. He was watching something that appeared to fill everything while still meaning nothing, like a prayer spoken in an unknown language.

When he returned to his futon, his feet were cold and he carried a happiness he did not understand.

He fell asleep immediately.

That night, for the first time, he dreamed of movements.

The nights became a habit and the habit, a profession.

At five years old, Gigō was already the world's greatest specialist in a subject that did not exist. He knew his father's nocturnal training as well as it could be known through a narrow opening.

He knew things he had not realised could be known.

He had learned that Gichin always began with slow movements and ended in the same way. Speed, when it appeared, occupied the centre. It was brief and terrible, like lightning between two silences.

There were nights of arms and nights of legs. There were also entire nights devoted to a single tiny thing. Half a turn of the hips, repeated one hundred or two hundred times while the moon travelled from one roof tile to the next.

Gigō knew when his father was satisfied. It did not show on his face, but in the fact that he finished earlier. When something failed to convince him, he continued until the night itself seemed about to run out.

One winter night, Gigō learned something else.

His father was not always alone.

First, he heard two people breathing instead of one. Then, beside Gichin, he distinguished the silhouette of another man. He was older and broader than his father, with hands whose stillness impressed the boy more than any movement could have done.

The two men spoke so quietly that their words reached the door without strength, like waves arriving at the far end of the beach.

Gigō gathered what he could.

He heard the name Asato, spoken with a familiarity he did not understand. Then he heard the name Matsumura. At that name, both voices dropped a little lower, as though they were speaking of a mountain or a shared ancestor.

At last, he heard a word that was not a name and yet carried more weight than all of them.

They spoke it only once, with the natural care used when mentioning a dead relative.

Tōde.

Gigō placed it in the deepest place he could find.

He did not know what it meant, but he immediately understood that he had discovered the name of the secret. The art his father practised against no one had a name. Because they had spoken it quietly, the boy concluded that the name itself must also be kept safe.

At five years old, by his own decision, he became the guardian of a treasure no one had entrusted to him.

It seemed fair.

After all, he was working too.

While Gichin trained on the other side of the door, Gigō practised his own art on this side. He remained motionless and silent, his entire being concentrated behind a single eye. Neither of them abandoned his post.

Gozei knew, of course.

She knew from the second night or, at the latest, the third. She did not need much time to discover what was happening beneath her own roof. Besides, Gozei knew the craft of moving without waking anyone very well.

She heard the footsteps that were too carefully measured. She recognised the excessively perfect silence. Sleeping children produce a careless kind of silence. This one had been worked on, sustained through effort.

One dawn, in the dimness of the corridor, she made out a small figure pressed against the back door. Gigō was wearing his sleeping clothes, one eye placed against the opening, so absorbed that he did not sense his mother standing behind him.

Gozei did not lift him from the floor.

She did not scold him, order him back to his futon, or reveal her presence.

She walked past.

The following morning, while arranging the house, she remarked, without addressing anyone in particular, that the chest was obstructing the passage. She moved it half a span. With the piece of furniture in its new position, the route to the back door was one step shorter and avoided two of the noisiest floorboards.

It took the boy three nights to discover the gift.

When he did, he stopped in the middle of the corridor. His hair was dishevelled, and he looked at the chest as though someone had left a letter there written exclusively for him.

He understood two things, although he would not yet have known how to express them.

In that house, it was possible to keep a secret in front of everyone. And someone was correcting his technique without needing to explain it to him. He did not know who had moved the chest. For some time, he suspected that the house itself had done it, having finally accepted him as an ally.

Gozei and he never spoke of it.

Not then, nor during all the years they still had left together.

Some collaborations are so delicate that naming them might spoil them.

At last, the night that matters arrived: a night towards the end of 1912.

Gigō was six years old and already considered himself a veteran. He had spent two winters beside the opening and had gathered an entire catalogue of nameless movements. Since he did not know what the adults called them, he had given them names of his own.

The one that sweeps.

The one that asks.

The bird one.

That night, Gichin was training alone and was performing precisely the bird one, his son's favourite movement.

His arms rose open until they met above his face. His index fingers and thumbs drew a small window and, if Gigō tilted his head correctly behind the opening, he could see a piece of sky through it.

He did not know that the kata was called Kūshankū or that Gozei knew those same movements. Nor could he imagine that, before he was born, he had already accompanied them from inside his mother's womb, the closest place from which anyone could attend a lesson.

He knew only that when his father performed the bird movement, he stopped thinking about his own breathing.

And in his case, not having to think about it felt a little like rest.

He was watching him when it happened.

Halfway through the sequence, Gichin stopped.

It was not one of those pauses during which he seemed to listen to his own arms. He slowly lowered his hands and remained standing upright, facing the courtyard with his back to the door.

He did not turn around. He did not look towards the opening. He did not even change his tone of voice.

With the same voice he might have used to ask for rice during dinner, he said into the darkness:

—If you are going to watch, watch properly.

And he continued training.

Gigō did not move.

His heart suddenly seemed to occupy his entire body. He could feel it beating in his chest, in his ears, even in the soles of his feet.

He had seen him.

Perhaps he had only just discovered him. Perhaps he had known from the first night. Perhaps everyone in that house had known his secret for two years and had been helping him to preserve it.

For an instant, he felt ashamed. Two years spent studying floorboards, restraining his footsteps, and postponing coughs, only to discover that he had never been invisible.

But the shame immediately disappeared, overcome by something much greater.

His father had not ordered him to return to his futon.

Nor had he asked him to come out into the courtyard. He had not offered him a place beside him or promised to teach him anything the following morning.

The door remained between them.

Gichin stood on one side and Gigō on the other.

What he had received was something else. A permission made to the precise measure of that boy and that family.

He had not merely told him to watch.

He had told him to watch properly.

As though watching were a task that could be performed correctly or badly. As though the opening were not a hiding place, but a post that demanded attention. As though that art required, in addition to bodies capable of practising it, eyes willing to understand it.

Gigō settled himself once more in front of the opening.

His knees hurt. His feet were cold, and a small cough was waiting its turn until he returned to his futon. He remained there until the end, more upright than ever and watching in a different way.

He did not look for the fastest or most spectacular movements. He watched the feet. The way the weight was distributed. The pause between one technique and the next. The moment when his father breathed and the moment when he seemed to suspend the air.

He watched everything.

He watched properly.

When he had finished, Gichin dried his face, placed a cloth over his shoulders, and crossed the courtyard. He passed close to his son without turning his head, smiling, or saying a word.

Before stepping onto the wooden veranda, he crouched beside the zōri, the family's sandals. He arranged them side by side, their heels perfectly aligned and their toes pointing towards the courtyard, ready for the following morning. Then he stood and entered the house.

Gigō, who was already retreating along his silent path, turned his head.

He noticed that too.

Many years later, transformed into a thin man who struggled to breathe, he would try to explain it to a group of young men gathered in a freezing dōjō. He would not tell them the story of the opening.

He would tell them only that many men first learned to strike and only afterwards, with luck, learned how to observe. He had travelled the opposite path, because his body arrived late for almost every appointment except that one.

For a long time, he believed that this had been the compensation reserved for a sickly child. But it was not compensation. It was his way of learning.

That night, his father did not name him a student, an heir, or a master. He simply allowed him to remain there and observe. That was the first place Gichin granted him: not in front of him, but beside him; not to imitate him, but to discover for himself what others failed to see.

The place of the one who watches properly.

Chapter 3

Twenty years

Shuri and Naha, Autumn 1913

The boy has invented a trick. The trick works, and that is the problem.

When the slope leading to school becomes too long for him, Gigō does not stop to catch his breath. Stopping to catch his breath would mean admitting that he is ill, and Gigō is unwilling to do that. He stops to look.

A wall with a lizard on it.

A cat on a roof, busy with its own affairs.

A ship in the bay below, its sails the colour of aged rice.

Gigō stands before any of these things with his hands clasped behind his back, as he has seen old men do in front of noticeboards. He looks with exaggerated attention while, inside him, his chest makes its calculations and the air gradually returns through that narrow passage that seems to lead to his lungs.

No one suspects a curious child. The neighbours on the slope even greet him fondly.

There goes the youngest Funakoshi boy. What an attentive child. He looks at everything.

If only they knew.

It is his first important lie, and it is a lie made of breath. At seven years old, he is already rationing the air he lacks and concealing how much of it he lacks. To do so, he uses the very thing his father taught him to do properly.

To watch properly.

The observation post has become an alibi: the boy who learned to watch through a narrow opening now studies lizards to avoid falling to his knees halfway up the slope.

The trick deceives the neighbours, his teachers, and his siblings. For a time, it also deceives Gichin, who sees his son arrive last everywhere and attributes it to his temperament.

Contemplative, like his mother.

Slow, as children who think too much often are.

Perhaps Gichin allows himself to be deceived because he recognises something of himself in the boy. He too had been a frail child. He too had worried his parents, and training, the passing years, and an obstinate will had eventually strengthened him. Without realising it, he expects his son to repeat the same story.

Parents search for the beginning of their own story in their children and trust that they will share its ending as well. But children rarely repeat the whole of it.

Gozei, however, is not deceived by the trick.

During his first years, she had occasionally heard a whistle deep within her son's breathing. It appeared with the cold, with a fever, or after he had been running, and then disappeared for weeks. She had never thought that the boy had

been born ill. The chests of small children fill with sounds that come and go without ever acquiring a name.

That autumn, however, the sound changes.

It is no longer merely an occasional whistle. On some nights, when she leans over Gigō's futon, she can hear his chest working. The air enters with difficulty and leaves as though it has been forced to clear a path for itself.

Gozei observes without alarming him. She waits several days, compares one night with another, and measures the boy's exhaustion by the way he sets his bowl down on the table. Until one dawn, kneeling beside him, she holds her hand suspended above his chest and makes a decision.

The following morning, she communicates it as decisions are communicated in that house. Without asking permission.

—On Thursday, I will take the boy to Naha. To the doctor at the hospital.

Silence spreads around the table.

In that house, as in so many others on the island, fevers and coughs are always treated with what is familiar. Infusions, warmth, moxa, the advice of an older woman, and time. Travelling to Naha to consult a hospital doctor means something else. It means admitting that fear no longer fits inside the house and must be taken out into the street.

Gichin raises his eyes from his bowl.

Gozei does not look at him. She continues serving rice with the expression of someone who is doing nothing more than serving rice.

Gichin understands that he has been misreading his son for months. His wife has seen something that he either could not or would not see. The boy does not linger on the slope because he finds the world fascinating.

—On Thursday, I will go with you —he says.

No one asks Gigō.

The boy has listened to the entire conversation while studying the bottom of his bowl with enormous interest. He does not ask any questions either.

He is too busy breathing without allowing anyone to notice.

The consulting room smells of camphor and the sea.

The doctor listens to Gigō's chest for a long time. He examines him from the front and from behind, first with the instrument and then with his ear pressed directly against the boy's skin.

—Take a deep breath.

The boy obeys.

—Again.

Little air enters, and it leaves with a whistle.

The doctor asks him to cough. He examines his fingernails, weighs him, measures him, and asks him simple questions so that he can hear him speak. Throughout the examination, he maintains a calm expression. He even ruffles the boy's hair before telling him to dress again.

Then he asks Gichin and Gozei to accompany him to the other side of the folding screen.

Adults believe that lowering their voices is the same as closing a door.

Gigō remains seated on the examination table, slowly fastening his clothes. His legs do not reach the floor. From behind the folding screen, he hears a word.

Haibyō.

Disease of the lung.

He does not know exactly what it means, but he recognises its nature. It is one of those expressions adults pronounce near closed doors and which cause visitors to avert their eyes.

It can change not only the life of the person who is ill, but also the way others begin to look at him.

Then he hears another.

Tuberculosis.

The doctor's voice remains kind as he explains that the disease appears advanced for a child of his age. He recommends nourishing food, clean air, care, and a life without excesses.

After a pause, he speaks the sentence that will divide Gigō's life into a before and an after.

—It is unlikely that he will live to twenty.

Outside, a cicada insists from the courtyard.

The silence that follows seems larger than the room.

Gigō looks at his knees. He does not fully understand what it means to be twenty years old. It seems like a distant age to him, almost as though it belonged to someone else. But he understands that the doctor has just placed a limit at the end of his life.

Then he hears his father.

—You have said how much time you believe he has left. But what my son does with that time will be for him to decide.

The doctor takes a moment to answer.

He does not seem offended. He remains silent with the weariness of someone who has watched many parents argue against sentences they cannot accept. Then he repeats his recommendations and accompanies the family to the door.

Gigō leaves the consulting room between his parents.

He does not ask what tuberculosis means.

Nor does he ask how long remains before he turns twenty.

He has already begun to calculate it.

Gozei remains in Naha. She says that she has some errands to run and takes another street. Gichin and the boy set out alone on the road back to Shuri.

The road begins to climb almost immediately. The sea falls behind them, lower and lower, and silence walks beside them.

Gigō walks three steps behind his father. That day, he does not stop before the walls or search for lizards. The trick now embarrasses him, as though the doctor had also discovered that small lie.

He breathes through his narrow passage and watches Gichin's back.

He knows it well. It is a straight, well-proportioned back and, in its own way, easy to read. His stride is the same length as always, but its rhythm is too regular. Gichin walks as he does when he trains at night and repeats a sequence he has still not managed to resolve.

He is searching for something.

Gigō does not know what.

Perhaps an answer. Perhaps a movement.

When they reach a point from which the sea becomes visible again, Gichin stops. He remains there for several moments, looking at the water. Then, instead of continuing directly towards Shuri, he descends along a path leading to the coast.

The boy follows him.

They reach a small beach sheltered between rocks. Gichin leaves his belongings in a dry place, removes his zōri, and gathers his clothing above his knees. Then he steps into the shallows.

The water barely covers his ankles.

He gestures to Gigō.

—Come.

The boy removes his footwear and steps into the water. The wet sand sinks beneath the soles of his feet.

Gichin places his feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart. He bends his knees and allows his weight to settle.

—Like this.

Gigō tries to imitate him.

The first wave appears small, but when it strikes his legs, it pushes him backwards. When the water retreats, it drags the sand from beneath his heels and steals his support. The boy flails his arms and barely manages to remain standing.

He looks at his father.

Gichin has scarcely moved. The water flows in and out around his legs, but his body remains firmly settled upon the sand.

—Bend your knees more —he says—. And grip the ground with your toes.

Gigō tries.

—Like the lizard on the wall.

The boy raises his head.

His father knows about the lizard.

He also knows about the slope. Perhaps he knows everything.

In that family, knowing without saying anything seems to be one of the forms affection takes.

Another wave arrives.

This time, Gigō lowers himself a little more. The water pushes him, but his feet do not move as far. With the next wave, he learns not to tense his entire body. He allows the impact to pass through his legs and disappear behind him.

Gichin offers no explanation. He merely observes and corrects him with a few words.

—Lower.

—The heel.

—Do not look at your feet.

For several minutes, the boy learns something he cannot yet put into words. A body can be weak and still remain upright. It is not always necessary to answer force with greater force. Sometimes it is enough to lower oneself, establish one's position, and allow whatever is pushing to continue on its way.

Then the cough comes.

Gigō folds in on himself. The first fit triggers another and then a third. He covers his mouth and waits for his chest to obey him again.

Gichin does not look away.

Nor does he rush towards him or pretend that nothing is happening. He observes his son's face, the colour of his lips, and the time it takes him to recover his breath. He is prepared

to carry him out of the water if necessary, but there is no pity in his expression.

When the coughing stops, he waits several seconds longer.

—Once more —he says.

Gigō returns to his position.

He separates his feet.

Bends his knees.

The wave arrives, and he remains where he is.

It is the first time he hears those two words spoken in that tone. He will hear them many times throughout the rest of his life and will eventually speak them to others.

But the first time occurs there, on a beach near Naha, on the afternoon when a kindly doctor has just placed a date on his life.

Once more.

It does not mean that he is not ill.

It does not mean that the diagnosis is false.

It means only that he can still try one more time. On the way back to Shuri, Gichin speaks to him about the sea. He tells him that experienced fishermen do not struggle head-on against every current, and that the reed survives the typhoon because it yields above while preserving its roots.

He does not mention the doctor.

He does not speak of lungs or twenty years.

Gigō listens and observes, as is his profession. At some point during the climb, he realises that he is no longer walking three steps behind his father.

He is walking beside him.

That night, for the first time in the boy's memory, his parents argue behind a closed door.

Gigō listens from the corridor.

Gozei's voice comes first. She speaks quietly and quickly, in the language of the inside. She does not cry. When Gozei is afraid, she argues.

She speaks of warmth, food, and rest. She recalls a cousin who spent years ill and eventually recovered, and a neighbour who died after insisting on carrying on as though nothing were wrong. She repeats the doctor's instructions and warns that the boy cannot be turned into a test of anyone's faith.

Then she says something Gigō does not fully understand, although he will never forget it.

—I can tend a flame for as many nights as necessary. But do not ask me to help you blow upon it.

Gichin answers in a voice lower still. The boy must press his ear against the wood.

He does not dispute the food, the warmth, or the rest.
He does not intend to ignore the doctor.

—I do not want to blow upon the flame —he says—. I want to give it air.

Gozei replies with something the boy cannot understand.

—I know what training can do —Gichin continues—. I also know that it cannot cure everything. But locking him away, preventing him from moving, and reminding him every day that he is ill would mean beginning to say goodbye to him before his time.

—And demanding too much of him could make that time even shorter.

Gichin remains silent.

When he speaks again, all firmness has left his voice.

—I know.

That answer frightens Gigō more than the argument.

His father is not certain.

Neither of them is.

—If I am wrong —Gichin says after a moment—, I will carry the burden of it. I will not ask you to forgive me. Nor will I ask him.

There are no doors slammed and no tears. The argument ends as many things end in that house: with a long silence on the other side of the door.

Gigō returns to his futon.

He spends much of the night staring at the ceiling. He does not understand every word, but he understands what matters. His mother wants to preserve him. His father wants to prevent him from living imprisoned inside his illness.

They are both afraid.

They both love him.

And both of them, impossible as it may seem, can be right at the same time.

Many years later, already accustomed to doctors, X-rays, and shadows in his lungs, Gigō will understand that the stance on the beach could not cure tuberculosis. His father had not discovered a secret treatment.

He had given him something else. A way of relating to the body he had been given. A way of living within the body he had been given.

Gozei had wanted to keep him alive. Gichin had wanted to prevent the illness from becoming his entire identity.

Between them, without knowing it, they traced the narrow path Gigō would walk for the rest of his life.

To care for himself without surrendering. To demand something of himself without denying the illness. To know the limit without allowing the limit to decide every one of his movements.

The courtyard is cold and swept clean when dawn arrives.

Gichin is already waiting there.

Gigō appears barefoot, shivering from the morning air and from something he cannot name. Beside the edge of the wooden veranda, he finds a cup of warm water and a clean cloth.

Gozei has been there before them.

She has not said that she agrees. Nor has she prevented the boy from going outside.

Even so, she has prepared what is needed.

Gichin leads his son to the centre of the courtyard. He gives no speech. He places one hand on his shoulder and the other on his hip. He turns him slightly, corrects the position of his feet, and makes him bend his knees a little.

The gesture lasts only a few seconds.

Its effect will last much longer.

Gichin stands before him and performs a simple movement. His arm crosses in front of his body, rises, and turns at the end.

The elbow remains close to the body.

He repeats it slowly.

Once with one side.

Then with the other.

Finally, he points to the boy with his chin.

—Now you.

Gigō raises his arm.

He does it too quickly. His elbow opens and his shoulder rises.

Gichin corrects him.

The boy tries again.

On the third repetition, the cough comes. It folds him forwards and fills his eyes with tears. While he waits for it to pass, he searches his father's face.

He is afraid of finding pity.

He does not find it, but neither does he find indifference. Gichin watches attentively, prepared to stop him if his breathing does not return. He does not turn the cough into a tragedy. He waits as one waits for a brief shower to pass.

When Gigō straightens again, his father indicates the starting position.

—Once more.

The arm rises across the body.

The hand turns at the end. This time, the elbow does not open.

Somewhere deep within the boy, beside the word *tōde* and the sentence heard behind the folding screen, a clock begins to move.

The twenty-year clock.

The doctor has set it in motion without intending to. Neither Gichin can stop it nor Gozei conceal it. None of them knows how long it will continue to mark time.

All they can do is teach the boy another way to read it.

Not as a count of the years he has left.

As a measure of everything he can still do.

That morning, no decision is made about whether Gigō will live. That is in no one's hands in that courtyard. What is decided is how he will live for as long as air continues to enter and leave his chest.

One morning at a time.

One movement at a time.

Everything begins in that early hour, outside the school timetable and beyond the doctor's records.

—Once more —Gichin says.

And Gigō raises his arm again.

Chapter 4

The old man with still hands

Shuri, 1913–Early 1915

Before meeting the man, the boy came to know the weight of his name.

For some time, Gigō had been listening to the adults' conversations from corridors, behind panels, and beside doors that no one ever closed completely. He did not always understand what they were saying, but he knew how to recognise when the air in a room changed.

There was one name capable of producing that change.
Itosu.

The men might be speaking of harvests, taxes, or the price of pork, their voices relaxed and their fans moving without haste. It was enough for someone to pronounce that name for the fans to slow, the voices to deepen, and their backs to straighten slightly, as though the old man himself might be listening from somewhere nearby.

They spoke of Itosu as his father spoke of typhoons: with facts, with respect, and with the caution not to raise one's voice too much before something whose power was beyond dispute.

For more than a year, Gigō constructed an image of that man from the stories he managed to catch.

They said that, when he was young, a notorious brute had challenged him and that Itosu had defeated him without taking his hands out of his sleeves. Others claimed that he had stopped a runaway bull by seizing it by the horns. Sometimes the bull became a horse; at others, two men armed with staffs. The story changed depending on who told it, but Itosu always remained motionless at the centre, larger than everyone else.

Once, only once, Gigō heard someone say that he too had been a weak and fearful child.

He stored that sentence in the deepest part of himself.

Another one, he thought. Another who had begun at a disadvantage.

Then Matsumura had come, the Bushi from whom all paths seemed to descend, and had transformed him through years of discipline and training.

But the story that most divided the adults was not about fights or feats. It was about schools.

Itosu, already an old man, had committed what some considered the greatest act of audacity in the history of the art. He had not given it another name, but another way of existing. He had taken it out of courtyards and closed rooms, adapted its teaching for the young, and brought it into the island's schools, where children began to practise it in daylight, arranged in rows and counting aloud.

—He saved the art —some said—. Without the schools, it would die with us.

—He gave it away —others replied—. What took centuries to protect, he placed in the schoolyard.

When asked for his opinion, Gigō's father did something highly unusual for him: he remained silent. He looked at his hands for a few moments and eventually said:

—The master will know.

Gigō understood this in his own way: there were questions so great that even his father preferred not to answer them.

Many years later, he would understand that Gichin remained silent not because the question had been resolved, but because it remained open. One day, Gigō too would have to confront it.

School or courtyard. Education or combat. Preserve or transform.

Good questions are not inherited with their answers.

After hearing so many stories, Gigō expected to meet a giant.

That was why, one afternoon in the spring of 1914, when his father told him that the following day he must put on his good clothes because they were going to pay their respects, the boy asked to whom, although his stomach already knew the answer.

He barely slept that night.

Lying in the darkness, he rehearsed one bow after another before the man he had not yet seen.

The house was simply a house. That was the first thing that unsettled him.

Giants should not live in places like that, he thought: behind a stone wall, with a broom leaning beneath the eaves and a wooden bucket resting against the wall.

A woman from the family received them. The greetings lingered in the courtyard, at the foot of the veranda. Gigō performed the bow he had rehearsed throughout the night, corrected and perfected in the darkness. No one made the slightest comment. He took that as a good sign. On that island, what was correct was recognised precisely because it did not need to be pointed out.

—How is he? —Gichin asked.

—He is better today. Knowing that you were coming has lifted his spirits. There are days when he barely has any strength, but today he feels well.

The woman stepped aside and invited them in with a gesture of her hand.

—Please.

Then she led them to the veranda overlooking the courtyard.

The man was there.

He was sitting on a cushion, with a light blanket spread over his legs, although the afternoon was warm. His face was broad and his eyes calm. When he greeted Gichin, he inclined his head only slightly, with the naturalness born of many years shared between them.

And Gigō recognised him.

Not from the stories told after meals, but from the narrow opening.

It was him.

The man from that night in the courtyard of their house. The one with the broad shoulders and the second breath. The one who had spoken Asato's name with familiarity and Matsumura's with his voice slightly lower. The same man who had spoken, only once and with the care reserved for the dead, the word the boy guarded as a secret.

The giant from the stories and the visitor to the nocturnal courtyard were the same person.

Gigō felt a slight and delightful sense of vertigo, like the first time the world reveals its seams.

Things that had seemed separate could touch. The world he had watched through a narrow opening was beginning to reveal its connections.

The adults began their customary liturgy: health, the weather, the harvests, the names of the absent and the dead.

The tea appeared at precisely the right moment, as though it too had been waiting.

Gigō remained seated at one end of the veranda, under the unspoken instruction to occupy as little space as possible.

And he prepared to do his work.

He watched.

Not ten minutes had passed when he found the detail that seemed to explain the whole man.

The hands.

They rested on his thighs, above the blanket, one on each leg. They were half open and relaxed.

And completely still.

Although he was still a child, Gigō believed he knew everything about the hands of old people. He knew those of the grandmother across the road, which trembled when she threaded a needle; those of the tofu seller, which rubbed together endlessly, as though he were washing them without water; those of the old men at the shrine, always searching for something among their sleeves, their laps, or the air.

As far as he knew, the hands of old people never rested. They moved by themselves, restless, like small animals unable to find a place to lie down.

Itosu's did not.

They rested like tools in a carpenter's workshop: each in its proper place, worn but whole, without a single unnecessary movement.

They carried within them all the work they had performed and also the work they were still capable of doing. Perhaps that was why they had no need to prove anything.

Gigō spent much of the visit waiting for them to move.

When the right hand finally rose to take the cup, he experienced it as an event. It lifted without haste, followed the shortest path, and held the ceramic with three fingers. It brought the cup to his lips, returned it to its place, and went back to the thigh, where it became motionless once more.

Like a cat crossing a room and lying down again to sleep.

The rest of Itosu moved naturally. His head nodded, his mouth smiled when appropriate, and his eyes travelled from Gichin to the courtyard, from the tea to the entrance. His hands, however, appeared to remain apart from all of that.

They had completed their part, the boy thought.

Or they were saving themselves for something that had not yet happened.

Many years later, on another island and with far less air, he would try to explain this to a student who could not endure slow exercises. He would tell him that stillness was not the absence of movement, but movement contained, preserved until the precise instant when it became necessary.

He had learned it there, watching a pair of hands that did almost nothing throughout an entire afternoon and which, precisely because of that, taught him so much.

The visit was already well under way when the other thing happened.

During a pause, Itosu moved his eyes away from his cup and looked towards the end of the veranda, where Gigō was striving to exist as little as possible.

The look lasted barely two or three seconds.

But the boy, who understood looks, knew that this was neither one of courtesy nor one of those indulgent glances adults reserved for children.

It was an appraising look.

The old man examined him as one studies a freshly cut piece of wood: the grain, the knots, the moisture, what might be made from it, and what it would never allow itself to become.

He had watched generations of island boys pass before him, first in courtyards and later in schools, arranged in rows and counting aloud. He knew how to read them as Gichin knew how to read a breath.

When he had finished observing him, he did not address the boy.

He spoke to his father.

He did so without changing his tone, as though he were continuing to speak about the weather or the harvests, and uttered the only sentence Gigō would remember as having been intended for him:

—This one breathes short. Teach him to breathe long.

Then Itosu picked up his cup, and the conversation continued from where it had left off.

No one looked at the boy.

Gigō remained motionless at the edge of the veranda while the sentence fell slowly inside him, turning until it found a place among the other things that already carried weight: the word Tōde, the sentence heard behind the folding screen, the chest moved half a span, and that “once more” he still did not fully understand.

It was not a diagnosis. He already had those.

Nor was it a prophecy.

It was something simpler and more practical.

That night, lying on his futon, with the whistle advancing and retreating inside his chest, he understood what kind of thing it was: a craftsman’s instruction.

Neither pity nor mystery.

If air came in short supply, he would have to be taught how to make it last.

And the instruction had not even been given to him. That too belonged to the order of his household. Important things always reached him indirectly, overheard from one edge and addressed to another.

It had been given to his father.

Gigō’s task was the same as always: to remain attentive and discover how it would be carried out.

The instruction would be fulfilled, although it would take three decades to complete.

It began with breathing exercises performed at dawn, which the boy never connected with that visit. It continued in the young man who learned to turn scarcity of air into a

principle of combat: waste neither a step, a movement, nor a breath; reach the correct distance and strike only once.

It passed into the man who would teach others to preserve their breath before teaching them to fight.

And it reached the end, in a room in Tokyo, when a dying man travelled through entire kata in the twilight between sleep and waking, barely moving his body and wasting not a single breath.

The longest breath of his life within the shortest chest.

Teach him to breathe long.

Itosu had requested a technique.

Time transformed it into a biography.

They returned during the following months, once, perhaps twice. They were brief visits, limited by the master's increasingly fragile health.

During the last one, Itosu seemed to have shrunk beneath the blanket and spoke little. Gigō immediately searched for his hands, as one searches for someone familiar. They still rested upon his thighs, motionless. But that stillness was no longer the same. It no longer resembled a cat conserving its strength, but the tide as it withdraws.

At the beginning of 1915, Gichin brought the news home.

He did not announce it. He simply released it.

He entered, removed his footwear, and straightened his zōri before raising his head.

—Itosu-sensei has died.

He said it in a dry and precise voice, as though delivering a notice that permitted no questions.

Then he went out into the courtyard. Until dinnertime, he slowly repeated the same movement. From his narrow opening, Gigō watched a sequence he had never seen him perform before.

Gichin never performed it again.

Many years later, his son would think that perhaps it had belonged to the dead man. Some forms of mourning are not fulfilled through tears, but by returning for the final time what was lent to us.

It seemed to him that all of Shuri had attended the funeral. He had never seen so many people gathered together and, from his height, the crowd appeared endless.

Among the relatives, neighbours, and former students were men he had never seen before but whom he recognised immediately. They were betrayed by the way they walked, their worn hands, and that manner of occupying a place without claiming it. They wore no insignia and carried nothing that distinguished them from the others, and yet they stood out like iron among reeds.

Tōde was no longer entirely secret. Itosu had brought it into the schools, and many children practised it in daylight. But

to Gigō, it still belonged to secluded courtyards, to doors that were never completely closed, and to names spoken in low voices.

That day, he saw it walking through the street.

Men from different courtyards advanced together behind the master who had tried to open the art to everyone. They were branches the boy had always imagined as separate and which, by gathering together, revealed the tree from which they came.

Gigō walked beside his mother, as did his brothers and sisters. Gozei was dressed soberly and observed in her own way, attentive to every bow and every name Gichin spoke quietly. From below, between the adult bodies blocking his view, Gigō managed to notice things that perhaps the grown men, looking at the back of the person walking ahead of them, did not see with the same clarity.

He saw the men of iron weep.

Not openly, but in a way that was more difficult to bear.

He saw an enormous old man, with hands like roots, whose chin trembled as he kept his eyes fixed ahead, holding his face together through the pure discipline of his posture. He saw another wipe his eyes with a handkerchief, fold it into four with almost furious precision, and put it away as though returning a blade to its sheath.

The invincible men of the stories, the men of the courtyards and the conversations after meals, carried water

suspended in their eyes for an old man who, during his final months, had barely left his veranda.

And he saw his father not cry.

Gichin walked among the former disciples, upright as always, although that day he seemed to have straightened his back a little more. He performed each gesture in the proper order, his face composed and his gaze where it belonged.

He did not cry there or upon returning home.

Much later, Gigō would understand that this was neither coldness nor a display of fortitude. It was Gichin's way of mourning. A grief that was not spent in public because it would be paid in full within him, in instalments, for the rest of his life.

Some men weep for their masters. Others spend the years straightening their backs a little more, aligning another pair of zōri, or correcting an elbow, because every gesture properly performed is a small offering to the person who taught it to them.

At the time, Gigō would not have known how to decide which of those forms of mourning was deeper.

He recognised only the one belonging to his family.

That night, lying on his futon, he did something he told no one about.

He placed his hands on his thighs, one on each leg, half open and without tension. Then he tried to keep them still.

Completely still.

He did not last long. Children's hands tingle, escape, and long to touch and do things. But during the brief time in which he managed to control them, breathing as deeply as his narrow chest allowed, he felt as though he had brushed against the edge of something immense and serene.

Like finding the seabed beneath one's feet where one had expected deep water.

Itosu had not been his direct teacher. He had neither corrected a stance nor taught him a kata.

And yet a line connected them within the art: from Itosu to Gichin and from Gichin to Gigō.

What no family tree could record was that other, quieter inheritance that had begun on the veranda.

Many years later, already in Tokyo, when new students asked where that karate of his came from, Gigō answered with the appropriate names, dates, and masters. But within himself, he always saw the same scene: a veranda open to the courtyard, a blanket spread over a pair of legs, and two broad, worn hands resting upon an old man's thighs.

That man had barely spoken to him. A look and a sentence addressed to his father had been enough to leave him an inheritance that would take a lifetime to understand.

Sometimes, it is enough to have watched properly.

Chapter 5

Many masters, the same path

Shuri, 1916–1919

In the Okinawa where Gichin had learned, a single master did not necessarily have to be enough.

At least, he had never believed so.

Asato had taught him to observe the man standing before him. Itosu had shown him how to transmit the art to many without emptying it of meaning. From one he had received the root; from the other, the branch. Even the few words he had heard from Matsumura had remained within him like an ancient stone upon which he could still place his feet.

Gigō had heard that story more than once.

Over the years, he would come to know several of those men, although not all of them would be his masters in the same way. With some, he would train for months; from others, he would receive only a few lessons; others he would scarcely do more than watch as they performed a kata or corrected a student. Gigō would eventually understand that the importance of a master did not always depend on the amount of time spent beside him. Sometimes it depended on something more difficult to measure: how much he managed to understand of what that man was trying to transmit.

His father never spoke of tōde as though it belonged to a single man. He described it as a channel fed by different currents. Each master knew one part of the terrain, and recognising what one did not know was not a source of shame, but an obligation.

That was why Gichin never intended his son to learn from him alone.

He would teach him everything he knew.

And, when the time came, he would place him before other men.

Before one of those masters appeared, however, Gigō had to confront the one who had been dead for years: Ankō Asato.

Gigō had never known him. The aristocrat who had trained his father in the nocturnal gardens of Shuri had disappeared when he himself had only just begun to live. Yet in the Funakoshi household, his name was heard more frequently than those of some living relatives.

He was present in the corrections.

—Asato-sensei taught me that hands and feet must be treated like swords. They are not displayed without necessity.

Or he appeared when Gichin observed a stranger from the other side of the street:

—Before taking an interest in a man's technique, learn to recognise his character.

He also appeared while the zōri were being arranged, while bowing, while choosing which words should be spoken and which were better kept inside.

At first, Gigō had liked that presence. To him, Asato-sensei was a kind of invisible grandfather. A man who seemed to have thought of every important thing before anyone else.

But as he grew older, it began to trouble him.

It was impossible to argue with someone who was not there.

The opportunity came one afternoon in 1916. The heat remained trapped between the courtyard walls, and Gigō had spent too long repeating a movement he could not resolve. His arm rose correctly, but at the end his elbow moved away from his body.

Gichin corrected him once.

Then again.

On the third occasion, he took hold of his arm and moved it into the correct position.

—The elbow must protect the side. Asato-sensei used to say...

—Asato-sensei is dead.

The sentence escaped before Gigō could stop it.

The courtyard seemed to shrink around them.

A hen was scratching beside the wall. It was not the same one from the previous years, although it performed identical duties and observed family disputes with the same

severity. When it heard the boy's voice, it stopped disturbing the earth.

Gigō felt the heat rise from his neck to his ears.

He waited for a reprimand.

Gichin studied him for a few moments. There was no anger in his face. Only that complete attention which was more difficult to endure than a shout.

—Yes —he finally replied—. That is why I must remember correctly what he taught me.

He placed his elbow back where it belonged.

—Again.

The lesson continued.

Gigō obeyed, although for the rest of the afternoon he could think of little else.

He had not been punished.

Nor had his father denied what was evident. Asato was dead. He could not return to complete a sentence, correct an interpretation, or defend himself against someone using his name for convenience.

That was precisely why he had to be remembered correctly.

At that moment, Gigō understood only that in his house it was possible to speak an uncomfortable truth, provided it was not done out of laziness or mockery. Many years later, he would understand what his father's answer had truly contained.

Being faithful to a master did not mean repeating him without thought.

It meant not using his memory as a wall.

The dead can no longer correct those who quote them.
That responsibility remains in the hands of the living.

One morning in the autumn of 1918, shortly after Gigō turned twelve, a small parcel wrapped in cloth appeared beside his bowl.

The boy examined it as he sat down.

Gichin continued eating as though the parcel had always been there.

—On Tuesday, you will go to Ōshiro-sensei's house—he said—. You will give it to him when you arrive.

Gigō looked at the parcel and then at his father.

—Alone?

—Alone.

This would not be a visit like the previous ones. His father was not sending him to pay his respects or to observe from the end of a veranda. This time, he was sending him as a student.

—At what time?

Gichin gave him the precise time.

—You will not be late. Nor will you present yourself before the appointed time.

Gigō hesitated.

The first prohibition was obvious. The second was not.

—Why can I not arrive early?

—Because someone who arrives late takes time the master had already granted him. Someone who arrives too early demands time that does not yet belong to him.

Gozei placed a little more rice in her son's bowl.

—You can wait in the street —she added—. There is no need to disturb anyone for that.

On Tuesday, Gigō left with plenty of time.

He carried the parcel between both hands. The closer he came to Ōshiro's house, the heavier it seemed. It was not a real weight; the contents remained unchanged. It was another kind of burden, born from the possibility of arriving late, bowing incorrectly, or delivering the gift clumsily.

He waited outside for several minutes, in the shade of a wall.

When he judged that the moment had arrived, he crossed the entrance.

Ōshiro Chōjō came out to receive him, drying his neck with a cloth. He did not possess the venerable appearance Gigō still associated with the word master. He was around thirty years old. His body was compact, his shoulders strong, and his hands hardened by years of practice with the bō.

Gigō bowed and presented the parcel.

—My father sends his respects.

Ōshiro received it with both hands and returned the bow. Then he placed the gift beneath the eaves.

—Funakoshi's son —he said, as though confirming something he already knew.

Gigō bowed again.

Ōshiro led him into the courtyard. Several staffs of different lengths rested beside the wall. He chose one and placed it before the boy.

It was a six-shaku bō, taller than Gigō and polished by so many hands that the wood reflected the light.

—Hold it.

The boy took the staff by the centre.

Ōshiro observed his hands.

—Again.

Gigō changed his grip.

—I did not ask you to change it. I asked you to hold it again.

The boy relaxed his fingers and tried once more.

Ōshiro tilted his head.

—Better. Now do not support it with your arms alone. Allow your entire body to receive its weight. If you carry the staff only with your arms, it will teach you how long your strength lasts.

That was how it began.

There was no ceremony or speech about the art. During his first lesson, Gigō learned only how to hold the staff, change the position of his hands, and move it without striking his knees.

He returned home with aching forearms.

—What did he teach you? —Gichin asked.

—How to hold the bō.

—Then he taught you a great deal.

Gigō thought his father was mocking him, but Gichin had already returned to his meal. It would take him time to understand that his father had sent him to Ōshiro precisely because he taught differently. A father's duty did not consist of repeating himself through his son, but of bringing him before men capable of showing him what he himself could not make him see.

During the following weeks, Gigō began to understand Ōshiro's way of teaching.

His teaching did not contradict Gichin's. It arrived at the same place from another direction.

With Gichin, he understood intention more clearly: what a technique protected, what distance it resolved, and why it had to be executed in a particular way. With Ōshiro, he understood weight, trajectory, and the instant when the body stopped fighting against the wood. One explained through words and images; the other allowed the bō to correct on his behalf.

Gigō did not need to decide which of the two was right. He needed to discover which language allowed him to understand each thing better.

Ōshiro began with the wood.

—Try.

Gigō tried.

—Now do it without raising your shoulders.

The boy repeated it.

—Turn your waist.

The bō then traced a different path.

—Did you feel it?

Sometimes Gigō had felt nothing, but he soon learned that lying in that courtyard only meant having to repeat the movement more times.

—No.

—Then do it again.

The bō revealed errors without the need for grand speeches. If the body did not participate, the arms became exhausted. If the grip hardened too much, the staff stopped. If the hands fell behind, the tip traced a clumsy curve or struck the ground.

Gigō discovered that he did not need to confront the wood.

He had to accompany it.

When his hips turned at the precise moment, the bō seemed to become lighter.

The impulse was born in the feet, passed through the hips, and reached the staff without becoming trapped in the shoulders.

That interested him immediately.

Not because the weapon could cure his chest. No one in that courtyard confused training with medicine. But the staff

punished every unnecessary expenditure. A poorly constructed movement demanded too much air; a properly coordinated one seemed to sustain itself.

Ōshiro knew about his illness.

Gichin had spoken with him before sending the boy, although neither of them told him. Gigō understood it from the way the master watched the colour of his lips when the coughing began and measured the time it took for his breathing to return.

There was never pity in his expression.

Nor carelessness.

When the fit ended, Ōshiro asked:

—Can you continue?

If Gigō nodded too quickly, the master waited several more seconds before allowing him to do so.

The first weeks left blisters on his palms and a persistent pain in his left shoulder. At night, Gozei washed his hands with warm water and examined the wounds.

She did not say that she approved of those lessons.

Nor did she ask him to abandon them.

—Tomorrow, you must be able to close your fingers — she warned as she placed the cloth—. If you cannot close your hand, you will hold nothing.

Gigō obeyed.

As long as his health allowed it, he never missed a Tuesday.

One afternoon, Ōshiro showed him a descending trajectory. The tip of the bō had to descend diagonally and stop close to the ground, without striking the earth or rebounding upwards.

Gigō spent several weeks trying to reproduce it.

Sometimes he stopped it too soon. At others, the staff touched the ground. When he tried to stop it using the strength of his arms, he ended up losing his balance.

Until one afternoon he succeeded.

The bō descended with a brief whistle and remained motionless only a few fingers above the earth.

Ōshiro raised his eyes.

—I did not teach you that.

—No.

—Who did, then?

—I saw it.

—Where?

Gigō hesitated.

—You sometimes do it when you finish, when you think I have already left.

Ōshiro remained silent. Then he looked at the staff, the boy's hands, and once again at his face.

—So you are one of those who watch.

Gigō did not know whether this was an expression of approval.

—My father says I must watch properly.

—Your father says many things.

Ōshiro took another bō and stood before him.

—Do it again. Having seen it once does not mean you have understood it.

The boy returned to the starting position.

Something, however, had changed. For the first time, a master outside his family had recognised that way of learning which had begun behind a narrow opening: watching until the movement began to explain itself.

The incident Gigō would never tell anyone about occurred during the summer of 1919, after several months of training with Ōshiro.

That day, the master had assigned him one hundred repetitions of the same movement. It did not appear complicated: raise the bō, allow the body to turn, guide the staff diagonally, and stop it before it reached the ground.

Gigō counted quietly.

Ichi.

Ni.

San.

For years, he had known the calculations of his own body.

He knew how many steps he could climb before needing a pause, how long his chest took to settle after running, and how many repetitions he could complete before the cough appeared.

With that exercise, it usually came at around the twentieth.

On some days, it appeared at eighteen. On the best days, at twenty-two. It was not an exact rule, but it was consistent enough for Gigō to organise his effort around it.

He never tried to defeat it.

He reached twenty with some air held in reserve, waited for the fit to pass, and continued from where he had stopped.

That afternoon, he reached the twentieth repetition.

Nothing happened.

He did not notice immediately. He performed the next movement and then another.

Twenty-three.

Twenty-four.

Then he realised that the cough had not come.

He did not change the rhythm. He feared that any excitement might disturb the balance and summon what still remained absent.

Twenty-five.

His chest was working. The air continued to enter through the same narrow passage as always. The whistle had not disappeared, nor had any miracle occurred.

But the cough still did not come.

Thirty.

The courtyard smelled of dry earth and wood warmed by the sun. Ōshiro practised on the other side, without looking at him directly.

Thirty-five.

Gigō allowed the movement to begin in his feet. His hips turned. His arms guided the bō, but they no longer carried its weight alone.

Forty.

He understood then that economising a movement did not mean reducing it, but allowing every part of the body to perform only the task that belonged to it.

The feet supported.

The hips transmitted.

The arms guided.

The staff completed the movement.

The cough appeared at fifty.

It bent him forwards, although the fit was shorter than usual. Gigō placed one end of the bō on the ground and waited.

Ōshiro stopped moving.

He did not approach.

—Can you continue? —he asked.

Gigō waited until he had recovered his breath before answering.

—Yes.

Ōshiro observed his face for several moments.

—Then continue.

Fifty-one.

Gigō completed the hundred repetitions.

When he placed the bō beside the wall, his eyes were wet. Ōshiro must have attributed it to the effort or the dust, because he said nothing.

Gigō said nothing either.

He did not know what had happened.

Perhaps it had merely been a favourable day. Perhaps the cough had been delayed for no comprehensible reason. Or perhaps his body had learned to distribute its effort more effectively through the way he moved the staff.

He could not know.

The only certainty was that, that afternoon, the cough had arrived thirty repetitions later than usual.

That night, he lay on his back and placed his hands upon his chest, as Gichin had done when he was a newborn.

He breathed slowly.

Listened.

The whistle was still there, small and persistent.

He was not cured.

The doctor's sentence had not disappeared.

But for one afternoon, the limit had moved.

Gigō stored that discovery as he had learned to store questions: without rushing to transform it into words.

The doctor in Naha had given him a deadline.

Twenty years.

A frontier pronounced behind a folding screen in a kindly voice.

Until then, Gigō had imagined that limit as an immovable wall. That afternoon, he understood that perhaps it was not.

He could not tear it down.

Nor could he pretend it did not exist.

But he could advance towards it differently. He could ration his air, care for his body, eliminate unnecessary movements, and complete one more repetition before stopping.

Deadlines could not be abolished.

Perhaps they could be negotiated.

One morning at a time.

One breath at a time.

One repetition at a time.

With the answer that house had taught him from the beginning: Again.

A few days later, Gichin called him into the courtyard.

Beneath the eaves, a bō rested against one of the pillars. Gigō recognised it as one of the old staffs belonging to the house, although he could not remember ever having seen his father use it.

Gichin pointed towards the centre of the courtyard.

—Do you think you know why I sent you to Ōshiro-sensei?

Gigō had learned to distrust answers given too quickly. He took a moment.

—To learn how to use the bō.

—That is what you have been doing.

—To improve my balance.

Gichin inclined his head slightly.

—That too.

—To maintain distance.

—That too.

—And to learn how to defend myself with a weapon.

—None of those answers is wrong.

Gigō waited.

His father added nothing.

—Then why?

—I asked whether you think you know. I did not say that I would answer you.

Gigō lowered his gaze towards the bō. During the previous months, he had learned to recognise its weight before even picking it up. He could imagine the pressure of the wood against his palms, the length extending from both sides of his body, and the instant when a poor position of the shoulders transformed the staff into a burden.

He thought of the trajectories Ōshiro had made him repeat.

Then he thought of his father's kata.

—Did the kata once contain a bō? —he asked.

Gichin looked at him more closely.

—Interesting.

Gigō raised his head.

—What is?

—That you should ask that. Why did you think of it?

The boy placed his hands in front of his body, separated as though holding an invisible staff.

—Some movements resemble it. In Naihanchi, for example. Now, when I perform them, I feel as though I have something between my hands.

Gichin remained silent.

—As though the bō had been there in the beginning — Gigō continued— and someone later removed it.

—Perform Naihanchi.

Gigō looked towards the staff.

—Without the bō?

—As you always perform it.

The boy occupied the centre of the courtyard. He adopted the starting position and began the kata.

He tried not to think about the staff, but he could not.

Whenever his arms crossed in front of his body, he imagined the wood passing from one side to the other. When one elbow drew back, he felt the other hand pushing the opposite end. As his hips turned, he remembered Ōshiro's corrections and the way the bō ceased to feel heavy when the whole body participated.

He completed the kata and remained still.

—What did you see? —Gichin asked.

—The bō.

—You saw it because you have spent months using one.

Gigō frowned.

—But the movements resemble each other.

—Some do, yes.

—Then the bō might once have been there.

—It might —Gichin admitted—. And there are also movements in the kata that can be used against a man armed with a staff: deflecting it, entering before he completes its path, seizing it, or preventing it from moving again.

He approached the weapon and picked it up.

—But the fact that a movement can respond to a bō does not mean that the kata once contained one and that someone later removed it.

He offered him the staff.

Gigō received it with both hands.

—Do it again.

—Naihanchi with the bō?

—Do whatever you can recognise from the kata. Do not attempt to copy every movement. Preserve what the body can preserve and change what the wood forces you to change.

Gigō adopted the starting position.

He began cautiously. As he crossed his arms, the length of the staff prevented him from following the usual trajectory. One end dropped too low and nearly struck the earth.

He stopped.

—It does not fit.

—The wood fits —Gichin replied—. What does not fit is the solution you have chosen.

Gigō returned to the beginning.

This time, he paid less attention to his hands and more to his feet. He preserved the stance, the lateral movement, and the brief turn of the hips. He allowed his hands to slide along the staff.

The bō crossed in front of his body and stopped towards one side.

Gigō recognised the trajectory.

Ōshiro had corrected it for weeks.

He continued. During the following movement, he had to change his grip, but the impulse began in the same place.

The feet supported.

The hips initiated.

The arms guided.

When he reached the other end of the courtyard, he stopped.

—It is the same movement —he said.

—No.

Gigō turned his head towards his father.

—But I felt it.

—You felt the same body.

Gichin approached and placed one hand on the staff.

—With the bō, your hands remain connected by the wood. If one pushes, the other must respond. The distance is greater and the trajectories change. The possibilities also change when you reach your opponent.

He instructed him to leave the weapon on the ground.

—Without the staff, your hands are free. One can seize while the other strikes. You can use your fingers, forearms, or elbows. You can enter more closely and change direction without dragging six shaku of wood with you.

Gigō examined his own hands.

—Then it is not the same.

—It is not the same —Gichin replied—. But neither is it entirely different.

He pointed towards his feet.

—The ground remains beneath you. Your legs still support the weight. Your hips must connect what happens above with what occurs below. The shoulders cannot act separately from the rest of the body. With a weapon or without one, you have two arms, two legs, and a single centre.

Gigō looked again at the bō.

—That is why the movements resemble each other.

—Some resemble each other. Others share only the principle that makes them possible.

Gichin picked up the staff and traced a brief path. It was not exactly a technique from Naihanchi, but Gigō recognised the same turn of the hips within it.

—When you learn other forms of combat, the same thing will happen again —his father said—. For a time, you will find the most recent thing you have learned inside everything that came before it. If you study grappling, you will begin to see holds in every kata. If you practise with weapons, you will discover weapons everywhere. If someone teaches you to fight at very close range, you will believe that every movement was created for that distance.

—And was it not?

—Sometimes.

Gichin placed the bō in front of him.

—But not always.

The boy waited.

—There are principles that appear again and again because the human body is the same. Maintaining balance. Using weight. Protecting yourself while acting. Entering before the other person completes his movement. Not wasting strength where it is unnecessary.

He slid one hand along the wood.

—In words, those principles may appear identical. In practice, every master finds a different way of using them. Some explain distance well. Others know how to teach balance, breathing, or the way to receive force. That is why listening to only one man is not enough.

Gigō thought of Gichin and Ōshiro.

His father spoke of intention, danger, and opportunity.

Ōshiro placed a staff between his hands and ordered him to repeat until the wood revealed the error.

—Which of the two is right? —he asked.

—That is not always the correct question.

—Then what is?

—What can you understand from each of them?

Gigō remained silent.

Gichin continued:

—You will not remain with every master for the same amount of time. Some will accompany you for years. From others, you will receive only a few lessons. Perhaps one of them will show you only a single movement or correct you once. That does not mean they should all occupy the same place, but neither does it mean you can learn only from the person you consider your principal master.

—How will I know what I should preserve?

—You will not know immediately.

—Then I might choose wrongly.

—You will choose wrongly many times.

Gigō raised his eyes.

Gichin was not smiling.

—That is why you must continue learning. A teaching you do not understand today may become clear when another master shows you the same idea from a different place. And something that appears true to you today may cease to do so when you try to use it.

—Then masters can also be wrong.

—Masters are men.

The answer remained suspended between them.

—You must listen to them with respect —Gichin continued—, but you must not surrender to them the responsibility of understanding on your behalf.

Gigō thought again of Ōshiro. Of the weight of the bō, of his hands split open by blisters, and of that fiftieth repetition.

—Is that why you sent me to him?

—I sent you because he could show you something I had been unable to make you feel.

—But you also know how to use your body that way.

—Knowing something does not necessarily mean knowing how to teach it to everyone.

Gichin picked up the staff and handed it to him once again.

—Sometimes a student understands through a word. At other times, he needs an image, a correction, or an object with weight between his hands. And there are occasions when he must hear the same teaching from another mouth in order to recognise it.

Gigō held the bō before his body.

—Now everything seems related to the staff.

—Because you have spent months using it. When you study something else, you will return to the kata and find something different.

—Then I will never finish understanding them.

—I hope not.

Gigō looked towards the end of the wood.

—Is distance what changes?

—Distance, the instrument, and the possibilities. But not necessarily the purpose.

—What is the purpose?

Gichin considered his answer.

—It depends on the moment. Protecting yourself. Controlling the other person. Opening a path. Ending the confrontation before it can continue. The aims may resemble each other, although the path for reaching them is different.

He moved aside to give him space.

—Perform *Naihanchi* again.

Gigō adjusted his hands upon the *bō*.

This time, he did not search for a hidden weapon inside the *kata*.

Nor did he attempt to transform the *kata* into a form of *bōjutsu*.

He searched for what Ōshiro had allowed him to recognise and what his father had spent years trying to teach him: the same body could speak different languages without ceasing to be the same body.

He began.

And as he advanced laterally across the courtyard, he understood for the first time that learning from other masters did not mean changing paths.

It meant returning to one's own with more than one way of seeing it.

The Walking Upright Trilogy



Thank you for reading this preview of *Waka-sensei*, the concluding novel in the *Walking Upright Trilogy*.

If these pages have brought you closer to Gigō Funakoshi—his struggle against illness, his awareness of time, and his contribution to the development of Karate-Dō—I invite you to discover the complete story.

Behind the legendary figure was a young man shaped by family, discipline, war, and the certainty that his life might be shorter than the path he had chosen. His story brings to a close a narrative that begins among the old masters of Okinawa, continues with Gichin Funakoshi's journey to mainland Japan, and culminates in the technical and personal vision of his son.

Waka-sensei is available on Amazon as a Kindle eBook, paperback, and hardcover, as well as in several languages.

By purchasing the novel, you are supporting a literary project dedicated to preserving and sharing the history, humanity, and ideals behind Karate-Dō.

If you enjoyed this preview, please consider sharing it with Karate practitioners, instructors, students, and readers interested in martial arts, Japanese history, and Budō.

Thank you for walking this path with me.

About the *Walking Upright Trilogy*

The *Walking Upright Trilogy* consists of three historical novels: *Bushi: The Guardian of Shuri*, *Walking Upright*, and *Waka-sensei*. Together, they trace the development of Okinawa's traditional fighting art from the world of Tōde to the emergence of modern Karate-Dō.

Bushi: The Guardian of Shuri returns to the final years of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the lives of the early Okinawan masters.

Walking Upright follows Gichin Funakoshi as he brings the art to mainland Japan and seeks to secure its place within a changing society.

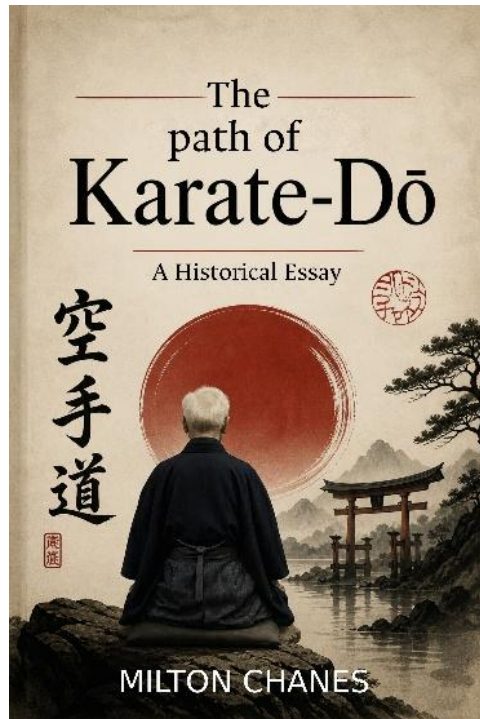
Waka-sensei focuses on Gigō Funakoshi, whose brief life and innovative approach left a lasting mark on the Karate practiced by later generations.

The novels are accompanied by *The Path of Karate-Dō*, a historical essay that examines the factual background behind the fiction, including Ryukyuan society, Shuri Castle, the

transmission of Tōde, its principal figures, and the events that shaped its evolution.

Together, these four books offer complementary literary and historical perspectives on the origins and development of an art now practiced throughout the world.

Milton Chanes



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