



Station 44: Ishiyakushi

Memories of a Summer Afternoon

Temple bells die out
The fragrant blossoms remain
A perfect evening!
Matsuo Basho (1644-1694)



Ishiyakushi was one of the smallest stations on the Tōkaidō. It was surrounded by rice fields and hills, a peaceful scene in every season. On the way to the next station, Shono, the road followed the Suzuka River through quiet countryside. The town was named for the stone (ishi) statue of Yakushi Nyorai, enshrined in Seifukuji Temple, whose gate is featured in the print. Yakushi Nyorai is worshipped as the Medicine Buddha who heals all diseases, physical and spiritual, including the infirmity of being a woman.

Tetsu stopped for a moment and rested the heavy rake in the furrow. The sharp smell of smoldering rice stalks drifted towards her. Good! Sen'emon, her oldest son, was starting to burn the stubble in their second field. It signaled the end of the rice harvest, just as the sweet fragrance of incense meant the end of evening prayers – a cherished part of her day. It would be some time before the priest rang the temple bell in the late afternoon.

Behind her on the Tōkaidō, Tetsu heard a pilgrim's bell chiming clearly in the cool tenth month air. She continued breaking up the sandy soil, working the row. It gave off a dry dusty smell, so different from the rich odor of the flooded fields in summer. She finished the row, straightened up and glanced over at her garden by the side of the field. As she admired the last ripe vegetables bordered by bright gold and red chrysanthemums, she remembered a day last summer. She could almost see that artist again, sitting at the edge of her field. She'd never met anyone like him before.

The heat of the seventh month had been heavy and the sun had beaten down as she yanked out the weeds sprouting in the rice field. There had been a procession on the Tōkaidō a little earlier. The Shogun's guards with the yearly gift horse passed through that day as it did every year on the eighth day of the seventh month. She'd heard her youngest son, Yuzo, one of the horse boys, singing loudly so that she'd know he was on his way with the procession. She hoped he'd have a job on the way back. The cash Yuzo earned helped the whole family.

The lively folk song Yuzo had sung stayed in Tetsu's head that day and she had been singing it for what seemed the twentieth time when she looked up and saw the stranger sitting on the edge of their irrigation ditch, swinging his feet in the cool water. She had

wiped the sweat out of her eyes and wondered who he was – a farmer from a nearby village? Surely not a traveler; they hardly ever stopped in Ishiyakushi. Tetsu had decided she had time to investigate so she worked her way towards the man, swatting at mosquitos as she pulled a few more weeds that invaded the rows of waist-high green rice plants.

The cicadas had been thrumming incessantly in the heavy heat. When she had moved closer to the stranger, she saw that he was painting. Tetsu dumped her basket of dripping weeds at the edge of the field and walked over to the stranger.

“Good afternoon,” Tetsu said cheerfully as she stepped into the ditch and rinsed her hands. “It’s certainly hot today!”

The stranger had brushed a few strokes on his paper before looking up at her. “Good afternoon. Yes, it’s very hot but this water is wonderfully cool.”

Tetsu had sat down on the edge of the ditch three or four feet from the stranger. The fast flowing stream washed the mud off her toes. She carefully studied the man from his face to his hands as he worked. She had guessed he was between 35 and 40 years old and definitely not a farmer. His accent wasn’t from this area, maybe further east.

He looked up with a broad grin and tilted the paper on his lap so that she could see it more clearly. After studying the sketch and comparing it to the scene before her, Tetsu stated boldly, “You made the hills behind the temple much higher than they really are.”

“True! But that’s how high they felt when we walked from Yokkaichi,” the man laughed so heartily Tetsu just had to laugh with him.

“You’re right, my legs often say the same thing,” Tetsu agreed. “Especially in the last year or two.”

“Every day that we travel, the hills seem to get higher,” the stranger grinned. “We’ve been traveling for eighteen days and we’re going all the way to Kyoto.”

“Really, eighteen days? Where did you start? Oh, excuse me, my name is Tetsu.”

“My name is Hiroshige. We started from Edo where I live. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Ah, of course! I knew you weren’t a farmer,” Tetsu said then studied the sketch again. She saw her field on the right, the road leading to the temple and village houses beyond the trees. But she was puzzled. “Where are the travelers?”

“I’m not finished yet,” said Hiroshige. “Let me see . . .” and his voice trailed off as his brush hovered over the paper. Tetsu watched, waiting. Then in a few strokes there was a groom leading a horse and rider in front of the temple, two men carrying a load on the path and a figure in her rice field.

Tetsu leaned forward, started and asked. “Oh, is that me in our field?”

“Yes, it seemed right to add you,” Hiroshige said amiably. “Travelers and local people, I put both in my paintings. It makes the scene more interesting.”

“Travelers usually rush past and don’t see us. We’re only poor villagers,” Tetsu said flatly, then added, “But you see us. Thank you.”

Then Tetsu looked again and noticed something strange. “Where are the rice plants? We’ve worked hard and now they’re tall and healthy.”

Hiroshige had looked up and met her gaze. “Well, I’m not sure what season this scene will be in the final painting, so I haven’t put in that detail. Maybe it will be fall.”

“But you’re traveling in the summer,” Tetsu pointed out. “Will you come back again to see what our fields look like in the fall?”

“That would be nice, but there’s no time. My publisher will have lots of work for me to do when I get back,” Hiroshige had said. He studied the sky, where swallows were darting in crazy patterns. “I’ll use my imagination. People like variety – snow on steep roofs, spring fog along a river, the summer blue ocean, maybe an autumn storm in Ise Bay. I’ve got many ideas.”

Tetsu shivered as a cool October breeze tugged at her head scarf. She needed to finish soon. The winter crops had to be planted this month, but first the stubble had to be burned and fertilizer added. Did people in Edo and Kyoto know how hard farmers worked? She bent her back to the weeding and her thoughts to those memories.

“Why are you sketching our village?” Tetsu recalled asking the artist.

“It’s for a new series of woodblock prints, one for each station on the Tōkaidō.” Hiroshige put down his brush and stretched out his arms. “It took almost a year to find a publisher to pay for a design of each station, not just create the designs in my imagination. It took eight months to arrange to travel.”

“Every station? That would be fifty-three paintings!” Tetsu said and almost started singing the counting song that named every one in order.

“No, I’m planning fifty-five.” Hiroshige smiled. “There will be one for Edo and one for Kyoto, too. I know what I’ll paint for Edo, but I think I know what I’ll do for Kyoto.”

Tetsu had pulled a couple of weeds from the grass beside her. She dropped them in the irrigation ditch and watched them slowly float away. “I’ve only traveled as far east as Yokkaichi. I take my flowers to the market in summer and fall. To the west, I’ve been as far as Kameyama.”

“Better than me!” Hiroshige had laughed, reached into his bag and pulled out another sheet of paper. “Until this trip, I’d never been out of Edo. Ishiyakushi is the forty-fourth

station. I can't believe all the drawings I've made in eighteen days – pilgrims, merchants, fishermen and innkeepers, plus harbors and the Hakone Mountains! ”

“Did you see Mount Fuji?” Tetsu had been curious.

“Not in Hakone, Fuji-sama hid herself behind a screen of clouds, but she's come out at other times,” Hiroshige said amiably. “All my life I've seen her from Edo on clear days, but she's far away. Now I've seen the magnificent Fuji-san much closer.”

“Is it really as beautiful as everyone says?” Tetsu had always been skeptical about the children's stories, legends and travelers' tales that praised the sacred mountain.

“Oh, yes,” Hiroshige began to draw a quick sketch as he talked. “Now I've seen her from riversides, across plains and over the top of other mountains. She looks different every time.” Then he fell silent and worked.

Stroke by stroke a scene emerged on the page. First there was a low range of mountains across the center of the paper. A line below seemed to curve down on either side. Hiroshige added a couple of small fishing boats. Ah, it's near the ocean, Tetsu had marveled. Next four large boats, their tall sails billowing in the breeze, appeared on the right. Then, in one fluid brushstroke, he traced a long slope up almost to the top of the page, next a short horizontal jagged line, and finally his brush traveled down making a matching slope on the other side. Tetsu had immediately recognized Mount Fuji.

Hiroshige sat back and surveyed his work. He added one more fishing boat in the center, farther from shore, showing tiny figures. “There! It's the view from Satta Pass, between Kambara and Yui. I always heard it was the best view on the Tōkaidō. It's true! It's incredible!”

All Tetsu could manage was, “It's so beautiful,” and fell silent, admiring the painting and feeling like there was magic in the artist's brush.

It's been three months, yet Tetsu remembered every word of that conversation with Hiroshige about Mount Fuji and all he'd seen. She sneezed. The fields were so dusty in the fall! She wanted rain but not until everyone had burned their fields. She looked over as two men passed on the road, just as in Hiroshige's sketch last summer. She followed their progress along the road to the temple and wondered if he'd really painted every station on the Tōkaidō. What a big project! She would like to see those fifty-five prints.

Once she found a Tōkaidō guidebook that someone had left at the temple. She'd waited to see if anyone returned to claim it, but it was there a few days later and the priest said she could take it home. On the rare days when she had time, she liked to read about the famous places and study the tiny black and white illustrations. She hoped Hiroshige's prints would be bigger.

“Mother, hello!” Tetsu and Hiroshige had both looked up as they heard the cheery call. Tetsu had been happy to see Omine was safely home and her basket looked empty.

“Good afternoon,” Omine said more quietly to Hiroshige, clearly curious about the stranger in their village. She knelt close to Tetsu on the side away from Hiroshige.

Tetsu stood up and quickly began introductions. “Hiroshige, this is my youngest daughter, Omine. Omine, this is Hiroshige. He’s an artist from Edo.”

Omine blushed, bowed and suddenly looked very young. “Pleased to meet you, Hiroshige-sama,” she said quietly. Hiroshige bowed politely in return.

“Omine! How is Otane?” Tetsu had been eager to hear the news.

“Oh, Mother, Otane is getting bigger every day!” Omine began to chat happily. “Her mother-in-law is taking very good care of her. And Otane loves the vegetables that you sent. She’s so hungry now!”

“A new grandchild, Tetsu-san?” Hiroshige asked gently.

“Yes, thank you. My older daughter is married and living at the next station, Shono,” Tetsu said proudly. “Otane’s husband is a respected craftsman.”

“Mother, Otane let me feel her belly. The baby kicks very hard!” Omine continued and turned to smile at Hiroshige. “She’s so uncomfortable until the baby goes back to sleep.”

Omine stopped talking. She’d caught sight of the painting in Hiroshige’s hand. Tetsu had watched as her daughter studied every detail, from the top of the great mountain down to the simple fishing boats. Hiroshige had moved his hands so that she could see it more clearly.

“What do you think, Omine-san?” Hiroshige had seemed to really want her opinion.

Omine hesitated a moment, then blurted out, “It’s Mount Fuji! Does it really look like that, so perfect? It’s beautiful! “

Hiroshige laughed, “Thank you. My poor brush has only captured some of her beauty.”

Omine continued to gaze at the image. She bowed to Hiroshige. “Thank you for showing me your painting.”

Hiroshige got a small fan out of his obi and waved it briskly over the painting. He inspected the ink strokes closely before handing it to Omine. “It’s dry now. Please, let me give it to you as a present.”

Tetsu could see that Omine was just as shocked as she was. It was a beautiful painting and by an artist from Edo! Tetsu recovered first.

“Thank you, Hiroshige-sama,” Tetsu bowed low. “This is a great honor for my daughter.”

“Yes, thank you very much, Hiroshige-sama,” Omine bowed even lower. Hiroshige turned the painting back towards himself and signed it and completed it with his seal. Again, he fanned it briskly. When he was satisfied, he held it out to Omine. She hesitated at first then reached for the painting which she held gently in her hands.

“Mother, can we show this to the girls in class tonight?” Omine said slowly as she finally looked up.

“Yes!” Tetsu agreed quickly. “Why don’t you go home now and get our things ready? We’re at Kitagawa-sama’s home this evening. Be careful with the painting!”

“Yes, Mother,” Omine stood up gracefully. She bowed low to Hiroshige. “Thank you, Hiroshige-sama. Thank you.”

Tetsu had watched her daughter walk slowly down the path towards their farmhouse, cradling the painting. She looked forward to telling all the girls and the other women about this amazing visitor. She turned back to Hiroshige and had seen him smiling.

“Your daughter said that you have class tonight. You have a school with night classes in Ishiyakushi?”

“Of course, we have a *musume yado* (girls’ room),” Tetsu explained. “In our village every girl goes to *musume yado* from age fourteen until she is married. I teach sewing. Other women in the village teach music, flower arranging, gift-wrapping and tea ceremony.”

“Tea ceremony?” Hiroshige couldn’t hide his surprise.

Tetsu had been indignant. “All you Edo people think that we’re ignorant out here in the country! Kitagawa-sama teaches tea ceremony twice a month. She goes to Yokkaichi for lessons. She’s been going once a month for more than twenty years.”

“I’m sorry,” Hiroshige apologized right away. “Most children in Edo only go to school until they’re nine or ten. They just learn basic reading, writing and math. Tell me more about your school.”

“It’s not exactly a school.” Tetsu had decided to forgive him. “We meet in various homes, depending on who is teaching that night. Tonight we meet at the Kitagawa home. They’ve been wealthy silk merchants in Ishiyakushi for over two hundred years.”

“You work all day in the fields and then teach at night?” Hiroshige had clearly been impressed.

“Yes, some of us,” Tetsu answered. “We want our daughters and for some women, granddaughters, to be good wives. There are many skills to learn to be a good wife. The tea ceremony teaches them to be polite, respectful and graceful.”

“And you teach sewing?” Hiroshige continued to ask questions.

“Yes, simple towels and head scarves at first, then farm clothes and kimono.” Tetsu had checked her own head scarf to make sure it was still neat. “It’s very useful for all the families. We work together and make a lot of our families’ clothes.”

Suddenly a swallow had dropped low and raced along the edge of the ditch, catching mosquitos. It was so close Tetsu thought she could count its feathers.

“Look at that!” Hiroshige had said with delight, following the bird’s zigzag flight. “Since I started this trip, I feel like I have new eyes. Now I’m seeing everything – the birds, trees, flowers, rivers – as they really are.”

“What else would they look like?” Tetsu remembered thinking that was a very strange thing for Hiroshige to say.

“Cramped, confined – everything in Edo is controlled,” Hiroshige had frowned. “All the gardens are full of carefully trimmed trees and bushes. The flowers are planted in tight patterns. Perfect circles of lotus flowers float in artificial ponds bordered by rocks, each selected for its color or size. Now I realize that it’s not real.”

“Well, I’ve seen gardens like that in some Yokkaichi temples,” Tetsu had objected. “And I think they are very nice.”

“Yes, but those gardens aren’t real. This is real!” Hiroshige countered, sweeping his hand across the scene. “You know nature as it really is. I’m seeing that for the first time. You are surrounded by all this beauty every day. It inspires me! Even the rain feels different, especially along the sea coast. The air is fresher. I didn’t realize there were so many colors of green. Sometimes I feel drunk on beauty.”

Hiroshige had stopped talking, just smiled at the landscape in front of him. Tetsu didn’t know what to say. She tried to see her village, fields and hills as the artist saw them. They both sat quietly, as the water played around their feet. Then Hiroshige swatted at a mosquito and laughed. “We have these pests in Edo, too, but the sound of the frogs in the fields at night? I’ve never heard such a grand noise.”

“You don’t have frogs in Edo?” Tetsu wouldn’t believe that.

“Oh, I can hear a few frogs in Edo if I’m near one of the larger ponds or along a canal,” Hiroshige had admitted. “But on nights when our inn is near rice fields, I’d swear there are millions of frogs – little ones peeping and big ones croaking.”

Tetsu had heard the wonder in Hiroshige’s voice. “It’s hard to believe,” he said. “I’ve walked over rugged mountains and through dense forests, crossed wide rushing rivers and once saw a storm come in from the ocean.”

Hiroshige sighed, “In Edo, we’re packed in all around the castle and the commoners’ homes are even closer together downtown.”

“Castle? You live near Edo Castle?” Tetsu couldn’t believe what she just heard.

Hiroshige had turned to face her and hesitated, but just for a moment. “Well, yes, I live inside the third moat of Edo Castle. I was born a samurai and inherited my father’s assignment in the fire brigade.”

“What? You’re a samurai?” Tetsu was stunned. “You don’t act like a samurai. You’re talking to me, just a farmer. You’re polite.”

“And you say what’s on your mind. I like that!” Hiroshige had laughed and then assured her. “You’re not just a farmer and not all samurai are arrogant.”

Tetsu had to admit this samurai was definitely not arrogant. She realized that Hiroshige was enjoying their conversation. She decided he was unusual and she wanted to know more. “But if you’re a samurai, why are you an artist?”

“Our family is very low class. Like all samurai of our level, we need another job. My father was an archery teacher. I’m an artist.” Hiroshige held up his sketches as if for proof.

The temple bell had rung, the sound rolling across the fields and echoing from the hills. After a long pause, the bell sounded again, low and resonant.

“Oh, no! Is that the evening bell?” Hiroshige began to quickly gather up his papers and brushes, placing them carefully in his bag. “I’m traveling with the Shogun’s procession and now I’ll be late again. They’re stopping for the night in Shono.”

“It’s only two miles, you’ll be there soon.” Tetsu had been sad that the artist had to leave. “Thank you for the painting. You are most generous.”

“Thank you for an interesting afternoon,” Hiroshige bowed and hurried up the path. When he reached the Tōkaidō he turned and bowed to her again, then was gone.

The temple bell rang, bringing her back to her October field. She realized that all this time she’d been working and now she’d finished preparing the soil. Good! She put her rake away and walked over to her garden where she cut red and gold chrysanthemums, their fragrance a welcome contrast to the smoke from the burning rice field.

Tetsu walked to the temple and through the gate, but went past the worship hall and up the small hill to the cemetery. Following her familiar daily ritual, she changed the flowers at her husband’s grave and quietly told him of her day. A small bell chimed inside the worship hall. She retraced her steps and entered the simple worship hall as the priests began evening prayers. A peaceful calm surrounded her.

At the end of the ceremony, she joined the few worshippers at the front of the hall. When it was her turn, she placed a tiny pinch of sweet incense on the burning coals in the small brazier. She drew the soft smoke towards her and rubbed it on her aching shoulders and

hands. She said a quick prayer for her very pregnant daughter and also one for Hiroshige. She hoped that some day she'd see the results of his big project.



Photo for Ishiyakushi, Station 44: At Sensoji Temple in Tokyo, worshippers buy bundles of incense, light them, and place them in great bronze vessels. Here and at many other temples, young and old fan the vapors towards themselves, believing that the incense smoke will relieve pain. People rub it on their heads, necks and shoulders. Older people pat it on their arthritic hands and knees.

Chapter Notes: Ishiyakushi is even smaller today. When we visited in 2008, the nearest train stop was at Shono and we walked two miles into the village. The head priest at Seifukuji Temple generously gave us a forty-five minute tour of the temple and showed us photos of the worship hall taken about 1880. We had planned to return to Shono, but met Hideaki Kitagawa, a retired university professor and town historian who also researches the Tōkaidō. We traded information as we ate our bento lunches on the porch of his new home. His wife served us tea and gave me a short lesson on the *ichigenkin*, the one-string *koto*. Mr. Kitagawa proudly showed us his mother's Edo Period home and garden, which he is restoring. In one room are tools for spinning silk, the former family business. Later Mr. Kitagawa escorted us around the village. Suddenly we walked up a slight rise where the path joined a small road and there was Tetsu's field on the right, the path leading to the temple on the left and the temple roof in the distance. I was standing exactly where Hiroshige had stood when he stretched his idea for the Ishiyakushi print.