

London is cold and gloomy, but it has beautiful names. Here's one: Saffron Hill, near Farringdon Station.

This trip has nothing to do with my novel. I've stopped researching, absolutely stopped. Nick and I came for his mother's birthday. But it just *happens* that while we are passing through, so is Professor Tadashi Kobayashi, the reigning expert on Hokusai--and his daughter Oi.

We meet in an Indonesian restaurant. It is minimalist, concrete, with pipes in the ceiling and a view into the cavernous streets of the City. Kobayashi-sensei is a charming, silver-haired man. There are 8 of us. The rest are all people whose life work is the study of *ukiyo-e* and the artists who made them. We order drinks and delicious little appetizers.

At some point Nick leans back behind the other diners at the long table, reaches over and taps my back.

"She's thirty-nine," he mouths, indicating the female graduate student sitting between us, who is Japanese, very poised and speaks perfect English.

I wonder why this is news, but decide to humour him.

"She doesn't look it," I say.

He laughs, used to our Pinter-esque conversations. "No, no," he whispers. "She's THIRD IN LINE."

I look blank.

"To the Emperor. She's his niece. Studying at Oxford."

*Oh.*

"She only has one name."

I spoke to her over the olives. "How long have you been in England?" I said. "Have your parents come to visit?" She said yes, they've been here; they'd studied at Oxford, too. I see now that she wore a small patient smile. I wonder if she minds patronizing questions, and decide she is delighted when her identity is secret. It must be rare enough.

We talk about Oi-- who to them is the little-known daughter of the great Hokusai, and to me is a full-blown obsession. We discuss her strange fate. She

died in Kanagawa or Kanazawa or Totsuka or Edo, by accident or pestilence or design, her own or others', in 1857 or 1867. No record has ever been found of her death.

People suggest that this is a bonus to me, an author. "You can do what you like!"

I guess. But not such a bonus to her.

Kobayshi-sensei muses about another artist, who *chose* to disappear, because he was in trouble with the Shogun. That's a new possibility. We talk about whether women ever signed their art before the Meiji era. I wonder if third in line is the same as not in line, when you're female.

"Good night! Good night!"

We stand dead centre on the shiny wet black street. We are dwarfed by empty buildings with blank windows. I watch the Imperial back disappear down the street with her rolling suitcase, and into the subway station. And I smile and smile and smile.

It is wonderful that 150 years later we should sit under tempestuous skies a world away and ponder Oi, otherwise known as "Hey you", or "Miss Topsy". And it is a delicious irony that the charming Miss One-Name, third in line to the throne of Japan, should participate. Because, funnily enough, Oi had no surname either. Artists in Edo were of such low rank that they didn't merit last names. Princesses, on the other hand, rank so high that they don't need one.

The next day, taking off for home, I dangle head-down over England. If I arch my neck I can see its little green squares fading into mist. It's funny how, with a little distance and a new angle, everything looks different.