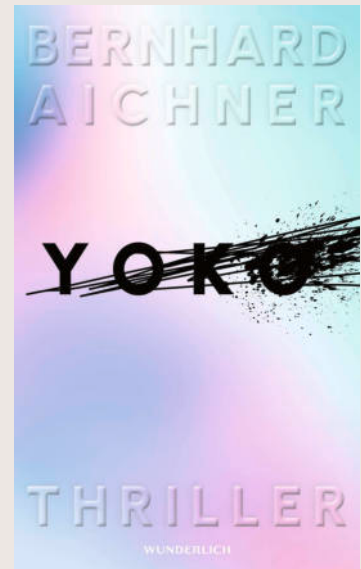


Bernhard Aichner

## YOKO

*Yoko*

- A new, gripping thriller by bestselling author Bernhard Aichner.
- 1 million copies sold of his thrillers altogether!
- His thriller *Totenfrau* was translated into 16 languages and has been adapted into a Netflix series.
- English sample translation available.



August 2024 · 336 pages

### **Yoko is just like you and me, until luck leaves her.**

In her late twenties, Yoko transforms the butcher shop she inherited from her father into a small artisanal shop, packaging happiness into cookies instead of butchering pigs. She is in love, and her life is filled with lightness for the first time.

But then one day she is in the wrong place at the wrong time. While delivering fortune cookies to a Chinese restaurant, she tries to help a small dog in the back alley and is punished by its tormentors. Yoko becomes an easy target for two violent men. Everything falls apart; her life shatters in an instant. But Yoko makes a decision: Her pursuers will not decide when her life ends. Fate will not determine the course of her story. She will do it herself. She does not yet know who she is dealing with, how much suffering she will endure, and the unexpected severity with which she will seek retribution. Everything she holds dear will be taken from her. And so Yoko fights back. Ruthlessly.

**Bernhard Aichner**, born in 1972, lives in Innsbruck and Southern Burgenland. Following his studies in German literature, he worked as a photojournalist and subsequently as a commercial photographer for fourteen years. He has written several radio plays and novels, achieving international acclaim as an author in 2014 with his thriller *Totenfrau*. His books have been translated into 16 languages, and the *Totenfrau* trilogy has been adapted into a series by Netflix. With more than one million copies sold, Aichner is one of the most successful German-language thriller authors. *The Times* describes his work as "original, powerful and gripping". In addition to his novels, Aichner writes plays, organizes Austria's largest crime fiction festival, and is also successful as a visual artist.

**Bernhard Aichner**  
**YOKO**

Sample translated by Helen MacCormac © 2024

**THE END**

In a few moments, the dog will die.

Yoko's life will shatter like a glass full of memories hitting the floor. There's nothing she can do about it, no matter how hard she screams or defends herself. From one moment to the next, all beauty will die.

But right now, she is still happy.

She strokes the scrawny animal. A brown mongrel tied up next to the rubbish bins. Yoko runs her fingers through its soft fur, delighted to see how excited and grateful it is to have someone to play with.

*I'll be back in a minute, little dog. I'll just drop these off.*

She strokes it again before opening the back door of the Chinese restaurant. Walking through the kitchen, she clutches the boxes of cookies in her arms. The kitchen help and the cook look up, greeting her with friendly nods and smiles.

At the bar, she waits for Lin, the waitress who receives the deliveries. Not for a second does Yoko think something awful might happen. She watches the fish swimming in the aquarium, listens to the water sloshing back and forth in the dishwasher and makes a mental note to pop into the supermarket on her way home. The smells wafting over from the kitchen are making her hungry. She starts thinking about what she's going to cook tonight. Vegetables, curry, rice.

Dinner for two.

She's looking forward to this evening.

A friendly nod from Lin indicates she won't be long. When she comes over, she'll have time for a chat. Yoko loves listening to her talk about China, the country she left years ago. Lin eagerly shares stories

about her homeland whenever she can. Thanks to her, Yoko dreams of travelling there: savouring traditional Chinese food, walking along the Great Wall, seeing the Forbidden City, and exploring Shanghai. Each time Yoko visits, she leaves more determined to overcome her fear of the unknown and embark on an adventure.

*Have you booked yet?* Lin asks.

Yoko shakes her head and smiles.

She shrugs, looking at the boxes of fortune cookies.

*As soon as I can afford some time off work,* she says.

Lin opens one of the boxes, and takes out a fortune cookie. She grins.

*It's good for me you are such a scaredy cat. We ran out of cookies three days ago. Our luck has been going downhill ever since.*

She giggles and winks at Yoko.

The two women get on really well. Yoko drinks the espresso that Lin pushes across the counter towards her, enjoying the break. This is her last delivery today. The fifth restaurant she has visited. Yoko delivers all her wares personally - beautifully wrapped delights for customers to enjoy at the end of a meal. No mass-produced products. Every cookie has a soul. Yoko is living the dream. She makes fortune cookies for restaurants, weddings, company events and advertising agencies. Yoko's business is only two years old, but she has already made a name for herself.

*You really must give me the recipe,* Lin says. *These are the only fortune cookies that actually taste great.*

Yoko thanks her and, for the umpteenth time, invites Lin to come and visit the factory. She'd love to show off her production line, and share a few secrets about her special batter.

*You're welcome any time,* Yoko tells her before saying goodbye.

She heads back through the kitchen. Several chickens lie on the counter, their wings and breasts expertly severed, with their innards neatly collected in a bowl beside them. The smell of oyster sauce wafts through the air. Yoko gets another smile from the man doing the dishes, but the cook is swearing to himself. He has cut his hand and there's blood dripping onto a pile of chicken skins.

*I hope it's not serious,* Yoko says.

The cook does his best to hide the pain and gives her a crooked smile.

Yoko goes on her way. She remembers the small dog. Its sad eyes. If only she could take it home and look after it. It had seemed so lost and dejected, tied up like that. How Yoko would love to set it free. Right away. Then simply climb into her car and drive off with it sitting on her lap.

When she steps into the yard and sees the two men, she knows something is terribly wrong. Yoko has never seen either of them before. The taller one grins as he grabs the dog's chain, while the smaller one wields a wooden club. They ignore the dog who is barking frantically.

Everything changes instantly.

Yoko tries to grasp what is happening.

*Stop!* she shouts.

But the man strikes the first blow.

The small dog yelps and whines.

The men laugh and hit the poor animal again.

Brute force for no reason.

*You can't do that!*

Yoko can't believe her eyes. There is no time to fetch help, to call Lin or the cook, who is still swearing in the kitchen. Yoko has to act. She's in shock. She screams at the two men.

*Stop it for fuck's sake! Leave the dog alone!*

She starts shrieking as the club crashes down on the howling animal for the third time. Yoko hears a damp thud, and the clinking sound of the chain.

*What did it do wrong?* she yells.

And without thinking about the consequences, she charges towards the men. Tries to push them away, batting them with her fists. It is a useless attempt to stop the violence. They easily fend Yoko off. Most of her punches hit the air. The taller one pushes her away, again and again. Keeping her at a distance. Nothing she does or says achieves anything.

*You fucking pigs.*

*You're killing it.*

*Stop!*

But they don't stop.

Instead, they start kicking the animal.

Their feet against its head.

It's whimpering now. No one comes to help. Yoko is the only one there. But she makes matters worse. The louder she yells, the more she protests, the more distress and torment there is. More blows with the club, more kicking. Ten minutes ago, this scenario would have been unthinkable - but it is reality now. All the joy and happiness in Yoko's life turns to a despair deeper than anything she has ever experienced.

She watches the dog shudder from head to toe as it exhales for the last time. Then it lies there motionless.

Yoko kneels down.

She touches its bloody fur.

For a moment or two everything stands still. No life left. The sad eyes broken. No way to bring the small dog back. Just the men leering down at Yoko, promising more evil to come.

*You're next*, she hears one of them say.

Yoko knows she has to get out of here. Panicking, she looks around desperately. How can she escape, how can she defend herself? Make them back off, and run! It's her only chance. As fast as lightning, Yoko leans forward and grabs a rod of steel half-hidden under a rubbish bag.

*You'll pay for this*, she says.

But she is too slow. The whole idea is ridiculous. Before she even raises her arm, one of the men steps on her hand. The other one pulls her back by her hair.

*It's not us who are going to pay. It's you.*

AND WHAT SHE THINKS OF NEXT

Her father comes to mind.

He always used to cheer Yoko up. If anything went wrong. If she hurt herself or was sad about something. She remembers how quickly he could magic her tears away, help her forget the bad.

*Trust me, my little one. I'll look after you, Yoko.*

Suddenly all the pictures come flooding back.

Things Yoko hasn't thought about for years.

Swimming together in the pond, going for walks in the surrounding woods. The huge portions of ice cream they'd buy in the old part of town, pretending to be tourists.

Yoko hears his voice as she regains consciousness. Past and present merge. For a brief moment, she can't tell what is real and what isn't. Her pounding head keeps the fog from clearing. All Yoko can feel are the ties on her hands and feet, and a gag in her mouth - a stinking rag that is choking her.

*Please don't, she says. Papa what is happening to me?*

In her mind, Yoko appeals to him. She wants him to tell her that everything is all right, and put an end to this nightmare. To whisper away her fears as he puts a finger on her lips.

*Nothing bad is going to happen, Yoko.*

*Everything is going to be fine.*

Yoko wants to believe him.

Like she did when she was a child.

Yoko and Franz. He was a gentle, patient father from the day her mother died after she was born. He was Yoko's guardian angel, and she trusted him completely. He assured her nothing would ever change, or turn her life upside down. They stayed close until he died. They didn't want an ordinary life without each other; staying with him was her only option.

That's why she took over his business.

Years before she started making fortune cookies, Yoko was a butcher.

She hadn't even turned 20 when she decided to follow in her father's footsteps. Franz was already 70, frail and ill from all the hard work. It was cancer in the end. A long good bye in instalments. Franz grew weaker and weaker, lost weight and couldn't run the business by himself. Yoko stepped in. As long as she could remember, it was the place she called home. The production line and the slaughter house had been her play area as a child. The butchery lay at the edge of the historic town centre: an old half-timbered house, the paved terrace with tables and chairs and parasols. It included the charming butcher's shop,

which sold snacks, and the courtyard with an entrance for the animals to be delivered. Yoko had been a part of it all ever since she could walk. The butchery was her home. There was no way she could turn her back on this way of life.

Although she had thought about studying German while she was at school and had even checked out the lecture plans online, she decided to do an apprenticeship as a butcher when she finished school. She didn't want to abandon her father, and it was a great opportunity to perfect the skills she had learned since she was small.

- I am going to stay even if you try to talk me out of it. Whether you like it or not, I am going to take over the business. You have been running it far too long as it is, and this is what I want to do.
- You have put up with far too much as it is. While the other girls were playing with dolls, you were filling sausages. Or skinning rabbits. And cutting up meat. Enough is enough. If I get too ill, I'll close the shop.
- No, you won't And you know why? Because I've always felt better with a knife in my hand than with any sort of toys. I am choosing this path, no matter what you say, so you might as well get used to it!
- You'd rather take care of an old man instead of going off to university in a beautiful city?
- There'll be plenty of time to do that once you are gone. As long as you have enough energy to get on my nerves, I am going to be here to look after everything.
- It might take longer than you think for me to die.
- I don't care how long it takes.

She had made up her mind.

To do an apprenticeship instead of a degree. To stay instead of go.

So, Yoko simply stuck to the path she had been on all her life, never planning to take off in a different direction, and never doubting for a minute that this was the right thing to do. She was so used to the smell of blood that spread through the house that she she didn't even notice it, although it often made other people feel sick. The slightly sweet smell clung to carpets and curtains, and crawled into every corner.

Dying animals were a part of life

Just like her dying father.

It took six years until it was over.

Yoko watched him decline as she ran the business. She enjoyed her work, aiming for perfection in everything she did. Slaughtering animals, making sausages, managing her employees, the accounts, marketing, sales. The weaker Franz grew, the more her workload increased. Yoko negotiated with local farmers, stood behind the counter, discussed recipes with Franz, and created new products. Yoko and her team invented new delicacies, and Franz couldn't have been more proud, right to the end when he weighed forty-three kilos and could hardly eat a thing.

Yoko's gift of wielding knives and numbers, impressed him as much as the selfless way she cared for him. She was there for her father all the time. She functioned. She did what he had always secretly hoped she would, looking after him until that day, two years ago, when she hugged him for the last time.

– Don't be sad, Yoko.

– I'm not.

– My big strong girl.

– Don't say anything. It's too tiring for you.

– Perhaps you will be able to forgive me one day.

– I don't know what you are talking about Dad. There is nothing to forgive.

Yoko shook her head.

And gave him morphine.

The words faded in his mouth.



But she still heard him.

*Don't be scared Yoko!*

Bound and gagged in the back of her delivery van, Yoko sees her father standing before her.

Hears his voice.

Whispering those familiar words.

*My little princess.*

*Don't cry.*

## **WHAT SHE FEELS**

Tears are streaming down her face.

Yoko can't hold them back, can't prevent what is happening. She knows the worst is yet to come.

The thought is overwhelming.

The little princess is terrified.

Those men beat her unconscious, tied her up and threw her into the back of the van. Desperately, Yoko thrashes this way and that, but she can't do anything, can't free herself. She is helpless. They grabbed the metal rod before she could use it. Her only glimmer of hope. Her attempt to escape the monsters failed.

*Wrong place, wrong time, Yoko.*

If she had arrived at the restaurant ten minutes earlier, she'd be on her way to see Maren now, ready for a hug. She would never have heard the howling dog, nobody would have grabbed her hair and smashed her head against the ground.

Everything is cold and numb.

Her head is throbbing. She's a prisoner, being driven somewhere in her own car. Yoko knows this evening is going to end badly. There'll be no dinner with Maren, no happy end. Yoko imagines what they are going to do to her soon. She can hardly breathe.

Yoko knows that they are in the woods now. She knows the highways and byways. The distances. She could walk blind from one area to the next: from the bottom end of town to the top, along the river she loves, which links the different parts: the historic city centre, the industrial areas on the outskirts.

Yoko grew up here. She knows where the Chinese men are taking her. Soon the car will come to a halt. She hears the tyres rolling along the gravel, feels the potholes as the van bumps along the track at a snail's pace. Yoko is being driven to her own execution. To a place where no one ever comes at this time of day. No hikers, no families out picking mushrooms, no hunters or wood workers. Just silence at the end of the road. An idyllic clearing where Yoko's life will end. Or life as she knows it.

The two men killed a dog, knocked Yoko unconscious, abducted her and stole her car. Still in the yard, they left Yoko in no doubt about what they were going to do to her. Before she blacked out, the two men egged each other on, making fun of the flat-chested animal lover, gloating over a girl who looked more like a boy. No tits, not enough bum, hair cropped short.

The lust and greed in their eyes.

Anticipating the violence to come.

*We are going to fuck you to bits.*

They said that in perfect German, slowly and clearly, making sure Yoko understood every word. Making sure she understood she was going to be punished for getting involved. That it would have been wiser to mind her own business. Naïve and stupid, she had stayed put when the only sensible thing to do was flee. She'd made a clueless mistake, which was going to cost her dearly.

*You should have got into the car, she tells herself. You'd be safe now, instead of terrified, expecting the worst. You fucked up, Yoko.*

She knows there is no way back. Yoko would do anything for a second chance. She'd leave the Chinese restaurant with her eyes down. Ignore those men, walk past them with her eyes glued to the ground. She wouldn't even look in the rear mirror. Just drive off. Never touch the bloody fur of that poor animal.

*Why did you have to get involved, Yoko?*

Every word she'd yelled at the two men made matters worse, caused another blow or kick. Every punch bounced off them, and only incited them to drag Yoko across the yard and drive her away to a place where no one will hear her scream.

There is no one out there.

To help her.

## **PAST HAPPINESS**

The funeral was beautiful.

A sense of great sadness settled across the churchyard. Several hundred people stood at his grave. Half the town showed up. Frank had spent decades serving beer braised pork and bratwurst sausages. Now everyone came to pay their respects.

All his friends and many of his customers were there. There were oceans of flowers. His name was written on the ribbons.

*Our beloved Franz.*

*Loving father.*

*Forever in our hearts.*

They played his favourite song.

John Lennon.

*Imagine.*

Yoko remembers how he explained her name to her.

At fifteen, when she was fighting everything - not just his taste in music, but also herself and the whole world, she tried to rebel against the decisions that her father wanted to make for her. She repeatedly clashed with him, determined to demonstrate her feelings and fears. Yoko had grown into a young woman and was overwhelmed by everything. On some days she could be friendly and angry at the same time.

- I know how much you adore that weirdo with the nickel glasses, but I can't listen to his cringy songs anymore. Stop trying to brainwash me.
- Lennon brought a lot of joy to your mum and me. We were crazy about his music. Sometimes we danced to it all night long.
- So, you wanted a boy instead?
- What do you mean?
- Me being a girl wrecked your plans, didn't it?
- What makes you think that?
- John was the singer, not Yoko.
- But John loved Yoko.
- So? Just because two celebrities had sex in the seventies, I have the same name as a bowl of Japanese rice soup?
- Oh, Yoko!
- I'm serious. Yoko blew up the Beatles, millions of people bawled their eyes out because of her.
- Your mum wanted that name for you. If you had been a boy, you would have been called John. But then her dream came true.
- Her dream?
- She really wanted a girl. She always did. She said you were the best thing that ever happened to her. Even when she was pregnant. She was so happy. And in the end, her wish came true.
- To die in childbirth? It was her plan to leave me alone with you? Was that really what she wanted?
- What are you talking about?
- She shouldn't have fucking died.

He cried then.

He missed his wife so much that he'd made her an icon. His bedroom walls were covered in pictures of her. Photographs that Yoko grew up with. Her mum in her white apron, standing behind the shop counter. Mum in a sundress in the beer garden down by the river. Mum pregnant, holding a broom outside the butcher's shop. Franz idolised her. He couldn't see her any other way.

*She was so strong, even when she was pregnant.*

*She stood in the shop right up until the day you were born.*

*She wasn't just a pretty face, she was a really good worker.*

Whenever he talked about her, he couldn't stop smiling. His memories of her grew more beautiful year by year. All Yoko's life, Franz had put her mum on a pedestal and worshipped her. He spent more time living in the past than the present and Yoko couldn't help feeling that the mother she'd never had was the most important person in his life.

*You remind me her all the time, he'd always said. You look like her. Move like her. I love you, Yoko.*

He said it so often, that Yoko started to wonder if he was talking to her or her mother. As she grew older, she looked more and more like her mum. When she put on the summer dresses Franz had kept all these years, she and the woman in the photos looked like twins, two sun flowers side by side. She had the same deep voice and facial gestures. Her dad's true love lived on in her.

In some ways, Yoko almost replaced her mother. She was like a partner to Franz. As far back as Yoko can remember, they were always together, Franz was like a second skin she couldn't shake off, even if she tried. She never thought badly of him. No matter what he said or did, Yoko stayed with him. While other people her age moved away to other cities or foreign countries, she never wanted to leave. It was always the two of them. Yoko couldn't imagine anything ever being any other way.

They had settled down together on the first floor above the butcher's shop. Two apartments next door to each other. He had his flat, she had hers. Yoko had insisted on her own space when she turned eighteen. But everything was in flow: work, living, free time, care. The selfless daughter was always there for her father. She washed and cooked for him, caring for his aching body in the end. She read to him and managed his medication.

She did what she had to do.

Even though there were times she wanted to run away, she clung to the image of the perfect family. In all those years, she never lifted the lid to see what might be lying beneath the surface. Yoko played the same old tunes, stuck to the same routines, as if she'd decided to hold her breath and keep smiling, even if she didn't feel like it.

She kept it up until Franz died. Then she could breathe easy at last. Be strong without him and start anew, leave the trodden path. No matter how much she'd enjoyed her work as a butcher, it was time to try something different.

During the weeks that followed those sad goodbyes, Yoko stopped eating meat on an impulse and started thinking about the next stage of her life. It was a big decision to give up the relative safety of her familiar job and try something that really mattered to her. In the end, she followed her gut feelings and called in her employees.

Her workers weren't surprised. They had been expecting to lose their jobs once Franz died. Most of them were able find work in other businesses, and Yoko did everything she could to make sure they were all okay. She gave them a generous amount of redundancy money and organised a goodbye party for everyone. Together, they celebrated Franz's life one last time out in the courtyard under the old nut tree, which was decorated with bunting and lanterns. The older members of staff shared stories from the early days when he'd founded his business. It was an emotional evening; the young shop assistants weren't the only ones to cry. Even the stocky butchers were moved.

It was a new beginning for them all.

The tools were switched off and cleaned for the last time, to be left standing there until Yoko decided to sell them when she was ready. Bright and shiny, the machines just stood there, like silent witnesses of what was to come. The slaughterhouse needed to be given a different purpose. It would be a few more weeks before anyone knew what that might be. In the end, chance decided.

The smell of blood was replaced by the smell of cookie batter.

Yoko had seen the add online:

*Fortune cookie factory for sale.*

*Machines for producing the beloved good luck cookies.*

*Ovens, mixers and packing machines.*

A pensioner had bought the lot at auction and was reselling it all. Yoko drove four-hundred kilometres to see if she could build a future with what was on offer. On the car journey, she started making lists of prospective customers and the kinds of cookies she wanted to make. And she hoped she might be able to put her love of writing to good use.

Yoko longed to be creative and she loved playing with words. She had briefly considered doing the degree she had put off years before, but had disregarded the idea again. She felt too old and didn't want to sit around with students who were years younger than her, or have to live on a tight budget. But Yoko still wanted to work with words.

Poetry instead of butchery.

She wanted to turn her father's business into a fortune cookie factory. Where the pig halves used to hang, she was going to store eggs, milk, and butter. Yoko wanted to make people's faces light up when they opened her cookies. She wanted to write things that made people feel happy and got them thinking at the same time. Not standard slogans. Instead, she planned to write literary miniatures to slot inside the freshly baked fortune cookies. Small works of art that Yoko would print on coloured paper, fold up and send out into the world.

She knew it was going to work, but was still daunted by the prospect of making the wrong decision. She couldn't make up her mind. So, in the end, she let luck decide. She picked a euro coin from Finland, threw it up in the air, and caught it in the palm of her hand. She had chosen the side with the birds. Swans flying across lake lands. Everything smelled of freedom and new beginnings all of a sudden.

Yoko paid in cash, packed the machines into the back of her van and drove home. Back in the half-timbered house that now belonged to her, she started a new chapter in her life.

For two years luck was on her side.

Something beautiful began.

This is where it ends.

## HOW IT BREAKS

The gag in her mouth robs her of all hope.

No words to make it better. Nothing to stop the terror. The fear of the men in the front of the van. Yoko can hear them laughing. They are having a great time, driving through the woods in a frenzy thinking about what they are going to do to Yoko. She thrashes around in the back of the truck, desperately trying to free her hands and feet.

If anyone does see the van bumping down the track, they won't realise that something awful is about to happen. Even if someone is out at this time of day, they'll probably be amused at the idea of a van full of fortune cookies driving through the woods. The company logo is displayed on the side in beautiful lettering. They might even give the two men in the driver's cab a friendly wave.

No matter how many times Yoko imagines what is going to happen next, it always ends in catastrophe. She can't stop the avalanche racing towards her. Kicking the back door of the van achieves nothing. It's a last, useless act of rebellion. What Yoko needs is a miracle. She prays the two men will come to their senses at the very last minute. She tries to convince herself that they just want to scare her - that that is as far as they are going to go.

To stop going mad, she has to believe she'll be saved.

A woodworker who hears the car engine will approach when her two abusers stop the car. He'll ask to see their permit for driving in the woods. Then, upon hearing Yoko beating against the doors, he'll set her free. He'll untie her and take her home. Her tormentors - are punished, and Yoko survives unscathed.

A gruesome fairy tale with a happy ending.

Yoko imagines it just minutes before the van comes to a halt. She squeezes her eyes shut and prays she'll wake up from this nightmare. That someone other than her kidnappers will open the back of the van. The wheels are turning very slowly now. The path is more and more overgrown. The journey is over.

Yoko prays.



Although she doesn't believe in God, she pleads for help. Now. She whimpers and whines just like the dog before the men bludgeoned it to death. Yoko would give anything to escape. Her house, every cent of money in her bank account. Her father's gold coins. She'd gladly give up a thousand things for the sake of a friendly smile, a hug and a little solace.

As the engine dies, Yoko's greatest wish is to be walking through the castle grounds hand in hand with Maren. Sitting at the edge of the well next to the water-spouting lions, dangling their toes in the water. It's where they kissed for the first time. Their lips touched, and she tasted Maren, caught her scent. Yoko wants that moment to last forever. The closeness. Maren smiling. Her heartbeat and the looks they share. Yoko lets the memories of that afternoon swamp her mind. May they numb her and ease the pain.

Yoko simply disappears.

Her body is still there.

But her spirit flies away.

Lets her witness everything from a distance. As if none of this has anything to do with her.

Yoko accepts things as they are

She hears the birds chirping.

As the two Chinese men get out of the car.

They thrust open the door.

Pull Yoko out of the van

And tear off her clothes.

## **AND HER SKIN SCREAMS**

Three years ago, Yoko stood admiring herself in the mirror.

She sighed contentedly and studied the work of art on her body for the very first time. Azad had painted a picture. He'd spent hours piercing her skin with needles. The pain was almost unbearable. Several times, Yoko had been on the verge of calling it off, but she'd managed to keep going. Hour by hour she'd grown fonder of the flowers on her body.

Green leaves.

Petals in red and orange.

Japanese peonies on her hips, her chest, her arm. Roses without thorns. Yoko had chosen them because she wanted to see a sea of flowers in the mirror. A motif from the country where her name originates. Nothing threatening; she wanted something colourful, and joyous. When her father was confined to bed and his state of health started deteriorating rapidly, she decided to change. To fend off the weight of death in the house, to feel life on her own skin.

Yoko started to shine.

She had never been interested in fashion trends. Apart from her leather jackets, there were no clothes in her cupboard she cared about. She never wore anything extravagant, just jeans and T-shirts, no earrings, no necklaces or bracelets, no bags and no dresses. Then all at once, she adorned herself.

She liked what she saw in the mirror, proud of the magic Azad had worked with his different coloured inks. It had taken him three days, doing his very best for Yoko. He had spent months perfecting his art, practising his tattoos with utter dedication. Yoko had watched him time and again and it wasn't long before she trusted him. Although Azad hadn't turned sixteen when he tattooed Yoko, his artistic skills were already remarkable.

Azad had shown up about three years ago, back when Frank was still fully in charge. He was a laid-back, stocky teenager seeking work, having recently moved into the neighbourhood with his mother, just a few houses away. They lived in a small two-room flat that overlooked the road and the butcher shop.

*Why a butcher?* Yoko had asked.

*Why not?* He replied. And grinned.

He didn't tell her that he had dropped out of school at first.

Or that he was there because of the pigs' skins, which he needed to practise on.

But he was deeply grateful to Yoko for employing him and being so kind to him from the start. Azan did his very best to make a good impression in the slaughter hall. He was not afraid of hard work, or disgusted by the smells, the blood, or the innards which he was soon extracting from the dead animals. He

enjoyed the daily work and stepped in wherever he was needed - he was up for anything. He worked hard and didn't mind doing overtime.

It took Yoko a couple of weeks to find out why.

Long past closing time, she found him in the chilling room, working on a pig's skin, concentrating so hard that he didn't even notice when she came in. He was oblivious to everything except the hum of the needle and the pattern he was drawing - so lost in what he was doing that he no longer registered the world around him. Yoko stood watching him for a long time. She didn't want to disturb him, didn't want to interrupt his art. From that very first moment, Yoko was fascinated. She recognised his talent immediately, understood his focus.

When she finally spoke up, he was appalled that she'd found him out, apologising profusely for failing to get permission until he confessed how much he loved tattoos. He told her everything, that he'd been drawing ever since he was a small child. That he would hide away in his room with a pencil and a piece of paper for hours on end, or spend days hanging around town looking for new patterns. No one cared. His mother had no idea what he was up to, let alone that he wanted to be a tattoo artist when he grew up.

Although Azad didn't let on, Yoko honed in on the neglected child. No one stopped him eating junk or staying out all night. No one cared whether he came home after work or not. There was no one waiting to take him shopping or cook for him. Azad felt ashamed and grateful that he could eat any left over lunch specials so that he didn't have to live off sweets and fast food all the time.

Yoko felt he was alone in the world.

*Should I be worrying about you,* she asked him.

Azad shook his head and smiled.

– Are you sure? A teenager who secretly tattoos sides of pork instead of doing his homework?

It sounds a bit complicated, doesn't it?

– Everything is cool. I've got a plan.

- Which involves hanging around a slaughterhouse after midnight. Your parents must be worried about you.
- Don't mention my parents
- Do you want to talk about it?
- There's not much to say.
- What's up with your dad?
- He's a lorry driver. He drove off and never came back.
- I'm sorry.
- You don't need to be. He wasn't a good father, while he was still around. I'm glad he's gone.
- And your mum?
- She works as a hairdresser's during the day and then helps out at a pub where she's her own best customer.
- And what about school? You could give it a try maybe? Qualifications are really useful. Believe me. There would be more doors open to you than if you stay working here.
- I'm happy here, Yoko. Can't I just work for you and practise my art on the pigskins? And maybe one day, I'll be able to pay you back.
- How?

Azad pointed to his tattoo machine and grinned.

Yoko ran her fingers through his hair.

*All right then. I'll keep an eye on your pigs. If I ever see a motif I like, I'll let you know. Who knows what you'll end up doing!*

Azad looked surprised. But Yoko was serious.

She had already made up her mind. To let him give her a tattoo one day.

Azad was the little brother she'd never had. She looked after him and he did his best. No matter what needed to be done, Yoko could always count on him. They turned the two small flats into one large

one after her father's death, knocking down the walls together. They put in floorboards, plastered the walls and wallpapered everything. Azad became her right hand man. He was the only employee she took with her when she closed the butchery. He too swapped the butcher's knife for a spatula. Azad worked at the factory from day one, and at the same time, he started earning money with his tattoos.

The news soon spread that he was a talented artist who, despite his lack of experience, could already be able to tattoo large, complicated motifs. He was the rising star in the scene and Yoko made sure that people knew about it. She took every opportunity to promote his work, raving about his talent and showing off the artwork that Azad created on her skin.

A sea of flowers now under fire. Exposed and unprotected on the forest floor. All beauty lost and gone for ever.

The Chinese men tear off the petals.

One by one.

And Yoko screams.