

# [The skies of westport are always changing](https://assignbuster.com/the-skies-of-westport-are-always-changing/)

October was a little over half gone when Minako came to this small fishing village in southwest Washington State for a five-day stay. Ever since the giant expanse of the Pacific Ocean captivated her some years earlier, she and husband Shigeo had spent two weeks here each July. What drew her to the area this time, though, was an unquenchable desire to see the deserted autumn shoreline, which must be very different from its look in summer. Shigeo had said there was no way he could take off from work, so she decided to leave him at home and take her first solo trip, a prospect she found both daunting and liberating.

The low off-season rent was another attraction. Nearly 34 years had gone by since Minako and Shigeo immigrated to America. Now 65, Shigeo ran a restaurant in Seattle. Minako at 53 was a full twelve-year cycle younger than Shigeo by the traditional calendar. She had been a high school student in Yokohama when he first spotted her and began ardently pressing his suit. They married as soon as she graduated despite the unified opposition of her friends and family. Minako had a complicated family background. Her mother was a fairly famous model who, instead of a husband, had a steady stream of boyfriends.

Minako did not know her father. She was raised by her mother's mother. She was one-eighth white, enough to endow her with nearly transparent white skin and naturally curly chestnut hair. These attracted the interest and envy of her teachers and classmates, some of whom proceeded to bully her. By the time Shigeo came along, Minako felt ready to escape. Shigeo was earning a good salary then as head chef in one of Yokohama's top hotel restaurants, but he had always wanted to go independent, and his determination only increased when he married Minako.

Sushi and sashimi were just beginning to gain popularity in America in those days, so when a major food company moved to open a chain of authentic restaurants there, Shigeo leaped at the chance to join them. He assumed it would be easy to start his own business after several years' work in America, and Minako of course had no objection to going there right away. During their first three years in America, Shigeo established a reputation as one of the city's best sushi chefs while Minako stayed at home with first one and then another baby boy.

Finally Shigeo was able to open his own restaurant, Hama-Sushi, in the center of the city, and bring Minako in as its hostess. Her exotic looks and slim figure helped attract customers. Not all the patrons of Hama Sushi were there to see Minako, of course, but it was clear to everyone that her warm welcome and attention to detail contributed greatly to the restaurant's success. Shigeo was pleasantly surprised to discover that Minako possessed a sharp business sense as well.

With her talent for instituting one fresh idea after another and Shigeo's dependable skill in the kitchen, the success of the team was all but guaranteed. Hama-Sushi expanded in scale year after year until it had become one of Seattle's top three Japanese restaurants. Now that their eldest son was de facto manager, Minako had long since stopped working at the restaurant and was concentrating her energy on photography, which was now much more than a hobby to her. Shigeo, meanwhile, could take off anytime he liked, but getting him to actually do so was next to impossible.

He insisted that work was still everything to him. Minako wondered how true this could be. He had been out of the house so often for " work" these past several months that she had begun to suspect there might be a woman involved. She felt ashamed of herself for not being able to bring herself to ask him about it directly. All passion, all love eventually fades with time: it was the theme of a million movies and novels, but she prided herself on the fact--and wanted to believe--that she and Shigeo were different. A thin fog had settled over the Pacific since early morning.

Thick, gray clouds closed off the sky as far as the horizon, contrasting subtly with the ocean's surging whitecaps. Both the well-manicured lawn outside the large picture window of Minako's room and the tall, greenish-yellow dune grass beyond it she saw filtered through the mist. On the other side of the dune, the sea was no more than twenty yards away. Just as Minako was beginning to fix herself a simple supper, a spot in the sky grew suddenly bright. The wind must have come up and started the clouds moving. Minako grabbed her jacket and camera and flew out the back door.

She had been here four days, hardly speaking to anyone aside from her nightly calls with Shigeo. Her only concern was to capture everything with her camera: the changing faces of the sea, the fishing boats and the distant passing freighters piled high with logs, the tiny birds that came to peck at the seeds of the dune grass, the shapes and colors of the pebbles and driftwood she gathered on her morning and evening beach strolls, and, once the sun had gone down, the deer from the neighboring state park that would pass by the window. The beach was deserted, the sea a deep blue-gray.

The tide was probably at its lowest point, the waves breaking far from the dunes. Several dozen gray-dappled sanderlings, moving as a unit, started running toward the water as soon as a wave pulled back. In the space until the next wave came, they pecked furiously at the wet sand, all moving to the dry beach again when the water rushed in, and then mechanically repeating the monotonous cycle. Gone were the soaring masses of pelicans and cormorants that had all but darkened the summer sky in their hunt for fish, enthralling Minako with each daring plunge into the dark waters.

Unlike the white sand beaches of Waikiki or Miami, the " mud flats" of the Washington coast were composed of fine gray sand that sloped gently out to sea. Now, the broad gray stretches revealed by the low tide were dyed nearly black by the retreating sea water, reflecting the color of the sky as if covered by a thin sheet of mirror-like ice. Shining through a wide opening in the bank of cloud that stretched over the horizon, the sun was level with Minako's eyes. There could be little more than half an hour until sunset. Too intense to look at directly, the great red ball threw a long, glowing pillar of fire down on the mirroring sand.

As the distance between the sun and its reflection narrowed, the pillar stretched ever longer and closer to Minako. Pale yellow, gold, orange, pink, red, crimson: a crazy glut of color burned the sky. The rose color in the beach's mirror also gradually increased until the whole expanse looked as if it had been scattered with gorgeous lotus blossoms. Minako snapped the shutter again and again. This was the first intense sunset she had seen since arriving here. She moved gradually to the right, pursuing the fading colors. There were incomparably more drift logs washed up on the beach than she had seen here in summer.

Whole giant trees, torn up by the roots and long exposed to the scrubbing of the waves, lay cruelly scattered here and there, lending the vast, empty shoreline a still more desolate air. As she continued moving down the beach toward the long stone jetty, Minako caught sight of something near the dune that had not been there in the summer. It looked like a small log hut. She found herself heading toward it. Nothing but an assemblage of large and small pieces of driftwood, the structure might have been an oversized dog house. Minako approached it and peered in between two logs.

She was shocked to find a person inside seated cross-legged on the sand, head bowed, stooped shoulders draped in a faded red blanket. Homeles. Minako spun on her heels and started away when, much to her surprise, she heard a woman's voice pursuing her--and speaking in Japanese. " Anta, Nihonjin darou. You must be Japanese," the voice said. " So am I. " Minako felt a chill run through her that brought her up short. She had never imagined she would meet a fellow Japanese in a place like this. Fearfully, she turned toward the voice. A white-haired old woman raised her head. The setting sun dyed her sunburned face a reddish brown.

She must have been eighty or thereabouts. Her big, bony hands, which suggested a lifetime of heavy labor, were well matched with her bare, angular face. Her eyebrows, which, in her youth, must have given an impression of thickness and strength, were also flecked with white. Her mouth was small, though, and the thin lips gave her face an oddly unbalanced touch of elegance. By far, though, the woman's most notable feature was her eyes. Neither large nor small beneath their single-fold eyelids, they had unusually large, black irises--so large that there was hardly any white to be seen at all.

They could have been the painted eyes of a doll. When the old woman lowered the red blanket to chest level, the image of her was suddenly overlaid with another image for Minako, that of the bibbed Jizo statue she used to see by the roadside when, hand-in-hand, she would go out shopping with her grandmother. The driftwood hut seemed like the tiny shrine enclosure sheltering the two-foot high Jizo, guardian deity of travelers and children. " What a surprise! " Minako said, " to meet another Japanese in a place like this! " " Don't be afraid. I'm not a homeless person or anything.

I've been living here more than fifty years. " " Such a long time! " " Mind if we talk a little? I haven't seen another Japanese here for years. " Minako hesitated. Still standing, she turned toward the sea. " Don't let me force you," the woman said. " No, that's not it. Oh, look at the sun! " Minako pointed toward the horizon. It was the moment when the sun begins to look as if it is sinking into the sea. Once it started down, the bright red disk sank with surprising speed, taking no more than two or three minutes to disappear entirely. The surrounding golden light increased in brilliance.

The opening in the cloud bank turned salmon pink. The thin strips of cloud hanging high in the sky darkened from rose to deep umeboshi red. As the upper sky, which had been blotted out by the sun's glare, reclaimed its blueness, the clouds up there began to spread, changing both shape and color. Camera aimed at the sky, Minako took one picture after another. " It's so fantastic! " she said. " I envy you, being able to see sunsets like this all the time. " " Not exactly all the time. " " But still, that you can live by such a marvelous shore . . . " " Well, you don't live here, so you don't know . . . " Minako returned her gaze to the woman. She did not know what to say.

" My name is Sueh," the old woman said. " Sueh Ryan. " Sueh's husband must be an American. Minako pictured some of Hama-Sushi's regular customers--women who had married American soldiers stationed in Japan during the Occupation and the Korean War. Most had lost their husbands and, ranging in age from their late seventies to their nineties, were living in Keiro Home, Seattle's home for elderly Japanese. Minako sat down next to the hut. Having gone from dark red to deep purple, the sky was losing its color. " I'm Minako Miyashita. "