

Man-Mountain Gentian

By Howard Waldrop

Just after the beginning of the present century, it was realized that some of the wrestlers were throwing their opponents from the ring without touching them."

-Ichinaga Naya, *Zen-Sumo: Sport and Ritual*, Kyoto, All-Japan Zen-Sumo Association Books, 2014.

It was the fourteenth day of the January Tokyo tournament. Seated with the other wrestlers, Man Mountain Gentian watched as the next match began. Ground Sloth Ikimoto was taking on Killer Kudzu. They entered the tamped-earth ring and began their shikiris.

Ground Sloth, a sumotori of the old school, had changed over from traditional to Zen-sumo four years before. He weighed one hundred eighty kilos in his mawashi. He entered at the white-tassel salt corner. He clapped his huge hands, rinsed his mouth, threw salt, rubbed his body with tissue paper, then began his high leg lifts, stamping his feet, his hands gripping far down his calves. The ring shook with each stamp. All the muscles rippled on his big frame. His stomach, a flesh-colored boulder, shook and vibrated.

Killer Kudzu was small and thin, weighing barely over ninety kilos. On his forehead was the tattoo of his homeland, the People's Republic of China, one large star and four smaller stars blazing in a constellation. He also went into his ritual shikiri, but as he clapped he held in one hand a small box, ten centimeters on a side, showing his intention to bring it into the match. Sometimes these were objects for meditation, sometimes favors from male or female lovers, sometimes no one knew what. The only rule was that they could not be used as weapons.

The wrestlers were separated from the onlookers by four clear walls and a roof of plastic. Over this hung the traditional canopy and tassles, symbolizing heaven and the four winds.

Through the plastic walls ran a mesh of fine wiring, connected to a six-volt battery next to the north-side judge. This small charge was used to contain the pushes of the wrestlers and to frustrate help from outside.

A large number of 600x slow-motion video cameras were strategically placed around the auditorium to be used by the judges to replay the action if necessary.

Killer Kudzu had placed the box on his side of the line. He returned to his corner and threw more salt onto the ground, part of the ritual purification ceremony.

Ground Sloth Ikimoto stamped once more, twice, went to his line, and settled into position like a football lineman, legs apart, knuckles to the ground. His nearly bare buttocks looked like giant rocks. Killer Kudzu finished his shikiri and squatted at his line, where he settled his hand near his votive box and glared at his opponent.

The referee, in his ceremonial robes, had been standing to one side during the preliminaries. Now he came to a position halfway between the wrestlers, his fan down. He leaned away from the two men, left leg back to one side as if ready to run. He stared at the midpoint between the two and flipped his fan downward.

Instantly sweat sprang to their foreheads and shoulders, their bodies rippled as if pushing against great unmoving weights, their toes curled into the clay of the ring. The two of them stayed tensely immobile on their respective marks.

Killer Kudzu's neck muscles strained. With his left hand he reached and quickly opened the votive box.

Man-Mountain Gentian and the other wrestlers on the east side of the arena drew in their breath.

Ground Sloth Ikimoto was a vegetarian and always had been. In training for traditional sumo, he had shunned the chunkonabe, the communal stew of fish, chicken, meat, eggs, onions, cabbage, carrots, turnips, sugar, and soy sauce. Traditional sumotori ate as much as they could hold twice a day, and their

weight gain was tremendous.

Ikimoto had instead trained twice as hard, eating only vegetables, starches, and sugars. Meat and eggs had never once touched his lips.

What Killer Kudzu brought out of the box was a cheeseburger. With one swift movement he bit into it only half a meter from Ground Sloth's face.

Ikimoto blanched and started to scream. As he did, he lifted into the air as if chopped in the chest with an ax, arms and legs flailing, a wail of revulsion coming from his emptied lungs.

He passed the bales marking the edge of the ring one foot dragging the ground, upending a boundary bale-and smashed to the ground between the ring and the bales at the plastic walls.

The referee signaled Killer Kudzu the winner. As he squatted the gyoji offered him a small envelope signifying a cash prize from his sponsors. Kudzu, left hand on his knee, with his right hand made three chopping gestures from the left, right, and above thanking man, earth, and heaven. Kudzu took the envelope, then stepped through the doorway of the plastic enclosure and left the arena to rejoin the other west-side wrestlers.

The audience of eleven thousand was on its feet as one, cheering. Across Japan and around the world, two hundred million viewers watched television.

Ground Sloth Ikimoto had risen to his feet, bowed, and left by the other door.

Attendants rushed in to repair the damaged ring. Man-Mountain Gentian looked up at the scoring clock. The entire match had taken a mere 4.1324 seconds.

It was three-twenty in the afternoon on the fourteenth day of the Tokyo invitational tournament.

The next match would pit Cast Iron Pekowski of Poland against the heavily favored Hokkaidan, Typhoon Takanaka.

After that would be Gentian's bout with the South African, Knockdown Krugerrand. Man-Mountain Gentian stood at 13-0 in the tournament, having defeated an opponent each day so far. He wanted to retire as the first Grand Champion to win six tournaments in a row, undefeated. He was not very worried about his contest with Knockdown Krugerrand slated for later this afternoon. Tomorrow, though, the last day of the January tournament, his opponent would be Killer Kudzu, who after this match also stood undefeated at 14-0.

Man-Mountain Gentian was 1.976 meters tall and weighed exactly two hundred kilos. He had been a sumotori for six years, had been yokozuna for the last two of those. He was twice holder of the Emperor's Cup. He was the highest paid, most famous Zensumotori in the world.

He was twenty-three years old.

He and Knockdown Krugerrand finished their shikiris. They got on their marks. The gyoji flipped his fan.

The match was over in 3.1916 seconds. He helped Krugerrand to his feet, accepted the envelope and the thunderous applause of the crowd, and left the reverberating plastic enclosure.

"You are the wife of Man-Mountain Gentian?" asked a voice next to her.

Melissa put on her public smile and turned to the voice. Her nephew, on the other side, leaned around to look.

The man talking to her had five stars tattooed to his forehead. She knew he was a famous sumotori, though he was very slim and his chon-mage had been combed out and washed, and his hair was now a fluffy explosion above his head.

"I am Killer Kudzu," he said. "I'm surprised you weren't at the tournament."

"I am here with my nephew, Hari. Hari, this is Mr. Killer Kudzu." The nephew, dressed in his winter Little League outfit, shook hands firmly. "His team, the Mitsubishi Zeroes, will play the Kawasaki Claudes next game."

They paused while a foul ball caused great excitement a few rows down the bleachers. Hari made a stab for it, but some construction foreman of a father came up grinning triumphantly with the ball.

"And what position do you play?" asked Killer Kudzu.

"Utility outfield. When I get to play," said Hari sheepishly, averting his eyes and sitting back down.

"Oh. How's your batting average?"

"Pretty bad. One twenty-three for the year," said Hari.

"Well, maybe this will be the night you shine," Killer Kudzu said with a smile.

"I hope so," said Hari. "Half our team has the American flu."

"Just the reason I'm here," said Kudzu. "I was to meet a businessman whose son was to play-this game. I find him not to be here, as his son has the influenza also."

It was hot in the domed stadium, and Kudzu insisted they let him buy them Sno-Kones. Just as the vendor got to them, Hari's coach signaled, and the nephew ran down the bleachers and followed the rest of his teammates into the warm-up area under the stadium.

Soon the other lackluster game was over, and Hari's team took the field. The first batter for the Kawasaki Claudes, a twelve-year-old built like an orangutan, got up and smashed a line drive off the Mitsubishi Zeroes' third baseman's chest. The third baseman had been waving to his mother. They carried him into the dugout. Melissa soon saw him up yelling again.

So it went through three innings. The Claudes had the Zeroes down by three runs, 6-3.

In the fourth inning, Hari took right field, injuries having whittled the flu-ridden team down to the third-stringers.

One of the Kawasaki Claudes hit a high looping fly straight to right field. Hari started in after it, but something happened with his feet; he fell, and the ball dropped a meter from his outstretched glove. The center fielder chased it down and made the relay, and by a miracle they got the runner sliding into home plate. He took out the Zeroes' catcher doing it.

"It doesn't look good for the Zeroes," said Melissa.

"Oh, things might get better," said Killer Kudzu. "Didn't you know? The opera's not over till the fat lady sings."

"A diva couldn't do much worse out there," said Melissa.

"They still don't like baseball in my country," he said. "Decadent. Bourgeois, they say. As if anything could be more decadent and middle-class than China."

"Yet, you wear the flag?" She pointed toward the tattoo on his head.

"Let's just call it a gesture to former greatness," he said.

Bottom of the seventh, last inning in Little League. The Zeroes had the bases loaded, but they incurred two outs in the process. Hari came up to bat.

Things were tense. The infield was back, ready for the force-out. The outfielders were nearly falling down from tension.

The pitcher threw a blistering curve that got the outside. Hari was caught looking.

From the dugout the manager's voice saying unkind things carried to the crowd. Eight thousand people were on their feet.

The pitcher wound up and threw.

Hari started a swing that should have ended in a grounder or a pop-up. Halfway through, it looked as if someone had speeded up a projector. The leisurely swing blurred.

Hari literally threw himself to the ground. The bat cracked and broke neatly in two at his feet.

The ball, a frozen white streak, whizzed through the air and hit the scoreboard one hundred ten meters away with a terrific crash, putting the inning indicator out of commission.

Everyone was stock-still. Hari was staring. Every player was turned toward the scoreboard..

"It's a home run, kid," the umpire reminded Hari.

Slowly, unbelieving, Hari began to trot toward first base.

The place exploded, fans jumping to their feet. Hari's teammates on the bases headed for home. The dugout emptied, waiting for him to round third.

The Claudes stood dejected. The Zeroes climbed all over Hari.

"I didn't know you could do that more than once a day," said Melissa, her eyes narrowed.

"Who, me?" asked Kudzu.

"You're perverting your talent," she said.

"We're not supposed to be able to do that more than once every twenty-four hours," said Kudzu, flashing a smile.

"I know that's not true, at least really," said Melissa.

"Oh, yes. You are married to a sumotori, aren't you?"

Melissa blushed.

"The kid seemed to feel bad enough about that fly ball he dropped in the fourth inning. Besides, it's just a game."

At home plate, Hari's teammates congratulated him, slapping him on the back. The game was over, the scoreboard said 7-6, and the technicians were already climbing over the inning indicator.

Melissa rose. "I have to go pick up Hari. I suppose I will see you at the tournament tomorrow."

"How are you getting home?" asked Killer Kudzu.

"We walk. Hari lives near."

"It's snowing."

"Oh."

"Let me give you a ride. My electric vehicle is outside."

"That would be nice. I live several kilometers away from--"

"I know where you live, of course."

"Fine, then."

Hari ran up. "Aunt Melissa! Did you see? I don't know what happened! I just felt, I don't know, I just hit it!"

"That was wonderful." She smiled at him. Killer Kudzu was looking up, very interested in the stadium support structure.

The stable in which Man-Mountain Gentian trained was being entertained that night. That meant that the wrestlers would have to do all the entertaining. Even at the top of his sport, Man-Mountain had never gotten used to the fans. Their kingly prizes, their raucous behavior at matches, their donations of gifts, clothing, vehicles, and in some cases houses and land to their favorite wrestlers. It was all appalling to him.

It was a carry-over from traditional sumo, he knew. But Zen-sumo had become a worldwide, not just a national, sport. Many saved for years to come to Japan to watch the January or May tournaments. People here in Japan sometimes sacrificed at home to be able to contribute toward new kesho-mawashis, elaborate, heavy brocade and silk aprons used in the wrestlers' ring-entering ceremonies.

Money, in this business, flowed like water, appearing in small envelopes in the mail, in the locker room, after feasts such as the one tonight.

Once a month Man-Mountain Gentian gathered them all up and took them to his accountant, who had instructions to give it all, above a certain princely level, away to charity. Other wrestlers had more, or less, or none of the same arrangements. The tax men never seemed surprised by whatever amount wrestlers reported.

He entered the club. Things were already rocking. One of the hostesses took his shoes and coat. She had to put the overcoat over her shoulders to carry it into the cloakroom.

The party was a haze of blue smoke, dishes, bottles, businessmen, wrestlers, and funny paper hats. Waitresses came in and out with more food. Three musicians played unheard on a raised dais at one side of the room.

Someone was telling a snappy story. The room exploded with laughter.

"Ah!" said someone. "Yokozuna Gentian has arrived."

Man-Mountain bowed deeply. They made two or three places for him at the low table. He saw that several of the host party were Americans. Probably one or more were from the CIA.

They and the Russians were still trying to perfect Zen-sumo as an assassination weapon. They offered active and retired sumotori large amounts of money in an effort to get them to develop their powers in some nominally destructive form. So far, no one he

knew of had. There were rumors about the Brazilians, however.

He could see it now, a future with premiers, millionaires, presidents, and paranoids in all walks of life wearing wire-mesh clothing and checking their Eveready batteries before going out each morning.

He had been approached twice, by each side. He was sometimes followed. They all were. People in governments simply did not understand.

He began to talk, while sake flowed, with Cast Iron Pekowski. Pekowski, now 12-2 for the tournament, had graciously lost his match with Typhoon Takanaka. (There was an old saying: In a tournament, no one who won more than nine matches ever beat an opponent who has lost seven. That had been the case with Takanaka. Eight was the number of wins needed to maintain current ranking.)

"I could feel him going," said Pekowski, in Polish. "I think we should talk to him about the May tournament."

"Have you mentioned this to his stablemaster?"

"I thought of doing so after the tournament. I was hoping you could come with me to see him."

"I'll be just another retired wrestler by then."

"Takanaka respects you above all the others. Your dampatsu-shiki ceremony won't be for another two weeks. They won't have cut off all your hair yet. And while we're at it, I still wish you would change your mind."

"Perhaps I could be Takanaka's dew sweeper and carry his ceremonial cloth for him when he enters his last tournament. I would be honored."

"Good! You'll come with me then, Friday morning?"

The hosts were much drunker than the wrestlers. Nayakano the stablemaster was feeling no pain but still remained upright. Mounds of food were being consumed. A businessman tried to grab-ass a waitress. This was going to become every bit as nasty as all such parties.

"A song! A song!" yelled the head of the fan club, a businessman in his sixties. "Who will favor us with a song?"

Man-Mountain Gentian got to his feet, went over to the musicians. He talked with the samisen player. Then he stood facing his drunk, attentive audience. How many of these parties had he been to in his career? Two, three hundred? Always the same, drunkenness, discord, braggadocio on the part of the host clubs. Some fans really loved the sport, some lived vicariously through it. He would not miss the parties. But as the player began the tune he realized this might be the last party he would have to face.

He began to sing.

"I met my lover by still Lake Biwa
just before Taira war banners flew . . ."

And so on through all six verses, in a clear, pure voice belonging to a man half his size.

They stood and applauded him, some of the wrestlers in the stable looking away, as only they, not even the stablemaster, knew of his retirement plans and what this party probably meant.

He went to the stablemaster, who took him to the club host, made apologies concerning the tournament and a slight cold, shook hands, bowed, and went out into the lobby, where the hostess valiantly brought him his shoes and overcoat. He wanted to help her, but she reshouldered the coat grimly and brought it to him.

He handed her a tip and signed the autograph she asked for.

It had begun to snow outside. The neon made the sky a swirling, multicolored smudge. Man-Mountain Gentian walked through the quickly emptying streets. Even the ever-present taxis scurried from the snow like roaches from a light. His home was only two kilometers away. He liked the stillness of the falling snow, the quietness of the city in times such as these.

"Shelter for a stormy night?" asked a ragged old man on a corner. Man-Mountain Gentian stopped.

"Change for shelter for an old man?" asked the beggar again, looking very far up at Gentian's face.

Man-Mountain Gentian reached in his pocket and took out three or four small ornate paper envelopes that had been thrust on him as he left the club.

The old man took them, opened one. Then another and another.

"There must be more than eight hundred thousand yen here," he said, very quietly and very slowly.

"I suggest either the Imperial or the Hilton," said Man-Mountain Gentian, then the wrestler turned and walked away.

The old man laughed, then straightened himself with dignity, stepped to the curb, and imperiously summoned an approaching pedicab.

Melissa was not home.

He turned on the entry light as he took off his shoes. He passed through the sparsely furnished, low living room, turned off the light at the other switch. He went to the bathroom, put depilatory gel on his face, wiped it off.

He went to the kitchen, picked up half a ham, and ate it, washing it down with three liters of milk. He returned to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, went to the bedroom, unrolled his futon, and placed his cinder block at the head of it.

He punched a button on the hidden tape deck, and an old recording of Kimio Eto playing "Rukodan" on the koto quietly filled the house.

The only decoration in the sleeping room was Shuncho's print The Strongest and the Most Fair, showing a theater-district beauty and a sumotori three times her size; it was hanging on the far wall.

He turned off the light. Instantly the silhouettes of falling snowflakes showed through the paper walls of the house, cast by the strong streetlight outside. He watched the snowflakes fall as he listened to the music, and he was filled with mono no aware for the transience of beauty in the world.

Man-Mountain Gentian pulled up the puffed cotton covers, put his head on the building block, and drifted off to sleep.

They had let Hari off at his house. The interior of the runabout was warm.

They were drinking coffee in the near-empty parking lot of Tokyo Sonic #113.

"I read somewhere you were an architect," said Killer Kudzu.

"Barely," said Melissa.

"Would you like to see Kudzu House?" he asked.

For an architect, it was like being asked to one of Frank Lloyd Wright's vacation homes or one of the birdlike buildings designed by Eero Saarinen in the later twentieth century. Melissa considered.

"I should call home first," she said after a moment.

"I think your husband will still be at the Nue Vue Club, whooping it up with the money men."

"You're probably right. I'll call him later. I'd love to see your house."

The old man lay dying on his bed.

"I see you finally heard," he said. His voice was tired.

Man-Mountain Gentian had not seen him in seven years. He had always been old, but he had never looked this old, this weak.

Dr. Wu had been his mentor. He had started him on the path toward Zen-sumo (though he did not know it at the time). Dr. Wu had not been one of those cryptic koan-spouting quiet men. He had been boisterous, laughing, playing with his pupils, yelling at them, whatever was needed to get them to see. There had been the occasional letter from him. Now, for the first time, there was a call in the middle of the night.

"I'm sorry," said Man-Mountain Gentian. "It's snowing outside."

"At your house, too?" asked Dr. Wu.

Wu's attendant was dressed in Buddhist robes and seemingly paid no attention to either of them.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" asked Man Mountain Gentian.

"Physically, no. This is nothing a pain shift can help. Emotionally, there is."

"What?"

"You can win tomorrow, though I won't be around to share it."

Man-Mountain Gentian was quiet a moment. "I'm not sure I can promise you that."

"I didn't think so. You are forgetting the kitten and the bowl of milk."

"No. Not at all. I think I've finally come up against something new and strong in the world. I will either win or lose. Either way, I will retire."

"If it did not mean anything to you, you could have lost by now," said Dr. Wu. Man-Mountain Gentian was quiet again.

Wu shifted uneasily on his pillows. "Well, there is not much time. Lean close. Listen carefully to what I have to say."

"The novice Itsu went to the Master and asked him, 'Master, what is the key to all enlightenment?'"

"'You must teach yourself never to think of the white horse,'" said the Master.

"Itsu applied himself with all his being. One day while raking gravel, he achieved insight."

"'Master! Master!'" yelled Itsu, running to the Master's quarters. 'Master, I have made myself not think about the white horse!'"

"'Quick!'" said the Master. 'When you were not thinking of the horse, where was Itsu?'"

"The novice could make no answer."

"The Master dealt Itsu a smart blow with his staff."

"At this, Itsu was enlightened."

Then Dr. Wu let his head back down on his bed.

"Good-bye," he said.

In his bed in the lamasery in Tibet, Dr. Wu let out a ragged breath and died. Man-Mountain Gentian, standing in his bedroom in Tokyo, began to cry.

Kudzu House took up a city block in the middle of Toyko. The taxes alone must have been enormous.

Through the decreasing snow, Melissa saw the lights. Their beams stabbed up into the night. All that she could see from a block away was the tangled kudzu.

Kudzu was a vine, originally transplanted from China, raised in Japan for centuries. Its crushed root was used as a starch base in cooking; its leaves were used for teas and medicines; its fibers, to make cloth and paper. What kudzu was most famous for was its ability to grow over and cover anything that didn't move out of its way.

In the Depression Thirties of the last century, it had been planted on road cuts in the southeastern United States to stop erosion. Kudzu had almost stopped progress there. In those ideal conditions it grew runners more than twenty meters long in a single summer, several to a root. Its vines climbed utility poles, hills, trees. It completely covered other vegetation, cutting off its sunlight.

Many places in the American south were covered three kilometers wide to each side of the highways with kudzu vines. The Great Kudzu Forest of central Georgia was a U.S. national park.

In the bleaker conditions of Japan the weed could be kept under control. Except that this owner didn't want it to. The lights playing into the snowy sky were part of the heating and watering system that kept vines growing year-round. All this Melissa had read. Seeing it was something again. The entire block was a green tangle of vines and lights.

"Do you ever trim it?" she asked.

"The traffic keeps it back," said Killer Kudzu, and he laughed. "I have gardeners who come in and fight it once a week. They're losing."

They went into the green tunnel of a driveway. Melissa saw the edge of the house, cast concrete, as they dropped into the sunken vehicle area. There were three boats, four road vehicles, a Hovercraft, and a small sport flyer parked there.

Lights shone up into a dense green roof from which hundreds of vines grew downward toward the light sources.

"We have to move the spotlights every week," he said.

A butler met them at the door. "Just a tour, Mord," said Killer Kudzu. "We'll have drinks in the sitting room in thirty minutes."

"Very good, sir."

"This way."

Melissa went to a railing. The living area was the size of a bowling alley, or the lobby of a terrible old hotel.

The balcony on the second level jutted out from the east wall. Killer Kudzu went to a console, punched buttons.

Moe and the Meanies boomed from dozens of speakers.

Killer Kudzu stood snapping his fingers for a moment. "Oh, send me! Honorable cats!" he said. "That's from Spike Jones, an irreverent American musician of the last century. He died of cancer," he added.

Melissa followed him, noticing the things everyone noticed—the Chrome Room, the Supercharger Inhalorium, the archery range ("the object is not to hit the targets," said Kudzu), the Mososaur Pool with the fossils embedded in the sides and bottom.

She was more affected by the house and its overall tawdriness than she thought she would be.

"You've done very well for yourself."

"Some manage it, some give it away, some save it. I spend it."

They were drinking kudzu-tea highballs in the sitting room, which was one of the most comfortable rooms Melissa had ever been in.

"Tasteless, isn't it?" asked Killer Kudzu.

"Not quite," said Melissa. "It was well worth the trip."

"You could stay, you know," said Kudzu.

"I thought I could." She sighed. "It would only give me one more excuse not to finish the dishes at home." She gave him a long look. "No, thank you. Besides, it wouldn't give you an advantage in the match."

"That really never crossed my mind."

"I'm quite sure."

"You are a beautiful woman."

"You have a nice house."

"Hmmm. Time to get you home."

"I'm sure."

They sat outside her house in the cold: The snow had stopped. Stars peeped through the low scud.

"I'm going to win tomorrow, you know," said Killer Kudzu.

"You might," said Melissa.

"It is sometimes possible to do more than win," he said.

"I'll tell my husband."

"My offer is always open," he said. He reached over and opened her door on the runabout. "Life won't be the same after he's lost. Or after he retires."

She climbed out, shaking from more than the cold. He closed the door, whipped the vehicle in a circle, and was gone down the crunching street. He blinked his lights once before he drove out of sight.

She found her husband in the kitchen. His eyes were red, he was as pale as she had ever seen him.

"Dr. Wu is dead," he said, and wrapped his huge arms around her, covering her like an upright sofa.

He began to cry again. She talked to him quietly.

"Come to bed. Let's try to get some sleep," she said.

"No, I couldn't rest. I wanted to see you first. I'm going down to the stable." She helped him dress in his warmest clothing. He kissed her and left, walking the

few blocks through the snowy sidewalks to the training building.

The junior wrestlers were awakened at four A.M. They were to begin the day's work of sweeping, cleaning, cooking, bathing, feeding, and catering to the senior wrestlers. When they came in they found him, stripped to his mawashi, at the three-hundred kilo push bag, pushing, pushing, straining, crying all the while, not saying a word. The floor of the arena was torn and grooved. They cleared up the area for the morning workouts, one junior wrestler following him around with the sand trowel.

At seven A.M. he slumped exhausted on a bench. Two of the juryo covered him

with quilts and set an alarm clock beside him for one in the afternoon.

"Your opponent was at the ball game last night," said Nayakano the stablemaster. Man-Mountain Gentian sat in the dressing room while the barber combed and greased his elaborate chon-mage. "Your wife asked me to give you this."

It was a note in a plain envelope, addressed in her beautiful calligraphy. He opened and read it.

Her letter warned him of what Kudzu said about "more than winning" the night before, and wished him luck.

He turned to the stablemaster.

"Had Killer Kudzu injured any opponent before he became yokozuna last tournament?" Man-Mountain asked.

Nayakano's answer was immediate. "No. That's unheard of. Let me see that note." He reached out.

Man-Mountain Gentian put it back in the envelope, tucked it in his mawashi.

"Should I alert the judges?"

"Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it," said ManMountain Gentian.

"I don't like this," said the stablemaster.

Three hefty junior wrestlers ran in to the dressing room carrying Gentian's kesho-mawashi between them.

The last day of the January tournament always packed them in. Even the maegashira and komusubi matches, in which young boys threw each other, or tried to, drew enough of an audience to make the novices feel good.

The call for the ozeki-class wrestlers came, and they went through the grandiose ring-entering ceremony, wearing their great kesho-mawashi aprons of brocade, silk, and gold, while their dew sweepers and sword-bearers squatted to the sides.

Then they retired to their benches, east or west, to await the call by the falsetto-voiced yobidashi.

Man-Mountain Gentian watched as the assistants helped Killer Kudzu out of his ceremonial apron, gold with silk kudzu leaves, purple flowers, yellow stars. His forehead blazed with the People's Republic of China flag.

He looked directly at Gentian's place and smiled a broad, crooked smile.

There was a great match between Gorilla Tsunami

and Typhoon Takanaka, which went on for more than thirty seconds by the clock, both men straining, groaning, sweating until the gyoji made them stop, and rise, and then get on their marks again.

Those were the worst kinds of matches for the wrestlers, each opponent alternately straining, then bending with the other, neither getting advantage. There was a legendary match five years ago which took six thirty-second tries before one wrestler bested the other.

The referee flipped his fan. Gorilla Tsunami fell flat on his face in a heap, then wriggled backwards out of the ring.

The crowd screamed and applauded Takanaka.

Then the yobidashi said, "East - Man-Mountain Gentian. West-Killer Kudzu."

They hurried their shikiris. Each threw salt twice, rinsing once. Then Man-Mountain Gentian, moving with the grace of a dancer, lifted his right leg and stamped it, then his left, and the sound was like the double echo of a cannon throughout the stadium.

He went immediately to his mark.

Killer Kudzu jumped down to his mark, glaring at his opponent across the meter that separated them.

The gyoji, off guard, took a few seconds to turn sideways to them and bring his fan into position.

In that time, Man-Mountain Gentian could hear the quiet hum of the electrical grid, hear muffled intake of breath from the other wrestlers, hear a whistle in the nostril of the north-side judge.

"Huuu!" said the referee, and his fan jerked.

Man-Mountain Gentian felt as though two freight trains had collided in his head. There was a snap as his muscles went tense all over and the momentum of

the explosion in his brain began to push at him, lifting, threatening to make him give or tear through the back of his head.

His feet were on a slippery, sandy bottom, neck high wave crests smashed into him, a rip tide was pushing at his shoulder, at one side, pulling his legs up, twisting his muscles. He could feel his eyes pushed back in their sockets as if by iron thumbs, ready to pop them like ripe plums. His ligaments were iron wires stretched tight on the turnbuckles of his bones. His arms ended in strands of noodles, his face was soft cheese.

The sand under him was soft, so soft, and he knew that all he had to do was to sink in it, let go, cease to exist.

And through all that haze and blindness he knew what it was that he was not supposed to think about.

Everything quit: He reached out one mental hand, as big as the sun, as fast as light, as long as time, and he pushed against his opponent's chest.

The lights were back, he was in the stadium, in the arena, and the dull pounding was applause, screams.

Killer Kudzu lay blinking among the ring bales.

"Hooves?" Man-Mountain Gentian heard him ask in bewilderment before he picked himself up.

Man-Mountain Gentian took the envelope from the referee with three quick chopping motions, then made a fourth to the audience, and they knew then and only then that they would never see him in the ring again.

The official clock said 0.9981 second.

"How did you do it, Man-Mountain?" asked the Tokyo paparazzi as the wrestler showered out his chon-mage and put on his clothes. He said nothing.

He met his wife outside the stadium. A lone newsman was waiting for her, "Scoop" Hakimoto.

"For old times' sake," begged Hakimoto. "How did you do it?"

Man-Mountain Gentian turned to Melissa. "Tell him how I did it," he said.

"He didn't think about the white horse," she said. They left the newsman standing there, staring.

Killer Kudzu, tired and pale, was getting in his vehicle. Hakimoto came running up. "What's all this I hear about Gentian and a white horse?" he asked.

Kudzu's eyes widened, then narrowed.

"No comment," he said.

That night, to celebrate, Man-Mountain Gentian took Melissa to the Beef Bowl.

He had seventeen orders and helped Melissa finish her second one.

They went back home, climbed onto their futons, and turned on the TV

Gilligan was on his island. All was right with the world.