We had watched many scenes like this since his return, with Papa acting so crazy sometimes you could almost laugh at the samurai in him, trying to cow her with sheer noise and fierce display. But these were still unfamiliar visits from a demon we had never seen when we lived in Ocean Park. There had always been doors to keep some moments private. Here there were no doors. Nothing was private. And tonight he was far too serious—he seemed to have reached some final limit.

Inside my own helplessness I cowered, sure he was going to kill her or hurt her very badly, and the way Mama lay there I believed she was actually ready to be beaten to death. Kiyo must have felt something similar, because at the height of Papa's tirade he threw his covers back, and in his underwear he jumped out of bed yelling, "Stop it, Papa! Stop it!"

With his cane in both hands high above his head, Papa turned from the waist. Kiyo sprang across the room, one arm cocked, and punched Papa square in the face.

No one had ever seen such a thing before. Papa's arms went limp. The cane fell clattering to the floor. He reached up and touched his nose. Blood was pouring onto his shirt, dripping down onto Mama's dress, Kiyo stepped back, crouching, staring at the blood. This was like bloodying the nose of God. His face, contorted, looked ready to cry, but even his tears were stopped by the knowledge of what he had done. He waited paralyzed for whatever punishment might strike him down. Papa couldn't move either. He stared at Kiyo, his eyes wide with both outrage and admiration that his son had the courage to do this. They stood like that until Papa's gaze went bleary from the drink in his veins and dropped to the damp shirt, to the blood still spattering onto Mama's dress.

Kiyo turned and bolted out the door. I ran over to Mama, whimpering with relief that this ghastly scene was over and she had been saved, yet aching with a great sadness I could not at the time find words for, I was proud of Kayo and afraid for what would happen to him; but deeper than that, I felt the miserable sense of loss that comes when the center has collapsed and everything seems to be flying apart around you.

Kiyo had fled to one of my married sisters' barracks. For two weeks he hid there. When he finally returned it was to admit that he had been in the wrong and to ask Papa's forgiveness. He too wanted some order preserved in the world and in the family. Papa accepted his apology, and this settled the waters some. But that aching sadness did not go away. It was something un-definable I'd already been living with for months, now enflamed by Papa's downfall. He kept pursuing oblivion through drink, he kept abusing Mama, and there seemed to be no way out of it for anyone. You couldn't even run.