



THE IIZUKA SISTERS OF GUNMA

Misao, Kazuko, Toshiko and Yoshiko Iizuka in the winter of 1944-45

Yoshiko Iizuka Sellers is much younger than her three sisters. In a black-and-white studio photo, which was taken decades ago as American bombs fell on Japan's major cities, little Yoshi stands at far right, next to her seated older sisters. She was nine years old or close to it. Misao was 21, Kazuko 17 and Toshiko 19. The three young Iizuka women and the family's *imoto* (youngest daughter) lived with their parents, grandparents and two brothers in Gunma Prefecture's Komochi Village, now part of Shibukawa City, which prides itself on being the geographical center of the Japanese archipelago. The region is Japan's belly button, its residents brag. I've always wanted to attend Shibukawa's Belly Button Festival in July, during which everybody gets his or her exposed belly button painted fancifully, while getting drunk. But Yoshi's sisters say the festival is vulgar, so I've been discour-

aged from going, not wanting to be vulgar. Misao and Kazuko still live in Shibukawa, about 150 miles northwest of Tokyo. Toshiko lives in Saitama City closer to the capital. Up a mountain from Shibukawa lies the famed Ikaho spa, where Yoshi and I always stay when we visit. We have our "own" suite at Ikaho's Kishigon, an inn with iron-rich bathing waters. The sisters dine with us there. At below left is Misao. At below right are Toshiko, Kazuko and Yoshi. A legend says Gunma women are strong-minded, even to the extent of wearing the pants in their families. It's just a joke. I think so. I'm not sure. Certainly the legend is alive and well, everywhere I go in Japan. When I tell Japanese men, in bars and at hot springs, that I'm married to a Gunma woman, I always get grinningly joshed. And I get advice, too. It seems I don't beat her enough.

Jackson Sellers, November 2006

