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Five Stories by Kunikida Doppo

<i>Gen Oji</i>	源 叔 父	Old Gen
<i>Wasureenu Hitobito</i>	忘れえぬ人々	Unforgettable People
<i>Kōgai</i>	郊 外	The Suburbs
<i>Shōjikimono</i>	正 直 者	An Honest Man
<i>Take no Kido</i>	竹 の 木 戸	The Bamboo Gate

TRANSLATED BY JAY RUBIN

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

KUNIKIDA DOPPO (1871–1908) was an irregularly employed journalist who published nearly eighty stories between the years 1896 and 1908. His major writing appeared during that long transitional period in the development of modern Japanese fiction between Tsubouchi Shōyō's (1859–1935) epoch-making call for artistic fiction, *Shōsetsu Shinzui* (The Essence of the Novel) of 1885, and the sudden rise to prominence of the first indisputably modern Japanese writers, men like Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), Tayama Katai (1871–1930), and Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943), following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. In these two decades of furious literary activity it was Doppo alone who produced a coherent body of mature works of fiction that still speak to the modern reader.¹

This is not to suggest that Doppo's stories were consistently excellent; even the best of them are flawed. But Doppo's are the errors of a serious literary artist. We can evaluate his writing by the degree to which it fulfils his intentions. In the case of his contemporaries it is more often their very intentions we call into question. Doppo wrote in an age when an ingenious plot and an elegant style were the most sought-after

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¹ Other works of the era important for their intrinsic literary value include Futabatei Shimei's (1864–1909) *Ukigumo* (The Drifting

Clouds, 1889), Higuchi Ichiyō's (1872–96) *Takekurabe* (Growing Up, 1895–6), Izumi Kyōka's (1873–1939) *Kōya Hōjiri* (The Kōya Priest, 1900), and Nagai Kafū's (1879–1959) *Tume no Onna* (The Woman of Dreams, 1903).

qualities in fiction. Since few publishers were willing to risk printing the full-length novel of an unknown, all but the most prestigious writers found themselves working in short fiction, in which attempts to spell out a convoluted series of incidents often resulted in little more than plot summaries. It was to the credit of Izumi Kyōka and Kawakami Bizan (1869–1908) that, in their stories of 1895–6, they attempted to scale down the intricate sagas of their teacher, Ozaki Kōyō (1867–1903), and concentrate on one or two central incidents of a melodrama with a quickly summarized background. Along with Hirotsu Ryūrō (1861–1928) they brought to the short story a certain degree of correspondence between form and material. They learned to discipline their storytelling and make each work an intense, self-contained unit. Their accomplishments, however, were merely technical. Having nothing to say which they themselves considered important, they invented increasingly bizarre incidents. Ryūrō, especially, favored disfigured characters, grotesquely scarred men, or idiot dwarfs with abnormal sexual inclinations. Bizan resorted to gore and necrophilia. Murder and suicide began to seem like normal behavior. In presenting such unpleasant characters and incidents, these writers felt—and the critics seem to have agreed with them—that they were being more realistic than Kōyō with his brave heroes and beautiful heroines. The more respectable stories of this period were called *kannen shōsetsu*² (idea fiction) because they attempted to express some clearly articulated idea. Bizan's *Uraomote* (Behind the Facade, 1895), for example, warns us that in society things are not always what they seem on the surface. He depicts a well-known philanthropist who is in reality a housebreaker. (The truth is discovered when he burglarizes the home of his innocent daughter's high-minded lover.) Kyōka's *Gekashitsu* (The Operating Room, 1895) challenges conventional ideas of love by showing a pair who die for an 'illicit' spiritual passion: 'I ask you, o men of religion, is it possible for these two, bearing such guilt, to ascend to heaven?' *Shinkoku shōsetsu* (serious fiction) or *hisan shōsetsu* (distressing fiction) differed from *kannen shōsetsu* in that they sought only the bizarre, without any saving 'idea'.³

Never in Doppo's stories do we find such sensational events. Doppo seeks to convey his poetic vision of the world and man's place in it. The simple, impressionistic scenes he sketches, the simple characters and

² 觀念小説

³ 深刻小説, 悲慘小説. For a discussion of these genres and a summary of their critical reception, see Yoshida Seiichi, *Shizenshugi no*

Kenkyū (Tōkyōdō Shuppan, Tokyo, 1955), 1, pp. 54–7. E. Seidensticker uses the term 'distressing novel' when he discusses Ryūrō in *Kafū the Scribbler* (Stanford, 1965).

images he abstracts from his experience, need no more than a few pages to realize their expressive potential. Where the writers of 'idea fiction' had to pare down complicated melodramas, to discipline themselves, Doppo could be direct and lyrical. Nor was Doppo an unbridled romantic. The clarity of his mind kept his stories tightly organized around a central theme and gave them organic integrity. His earliest story, *Takibi* (The Bonfire, 1896),⁴ was a poem recast in prose, yet in it can be seen certain images and essentially the same ideas expressed in the best of his later, more dramatic, writing.

Writers like Bizan changed styles drastically from one story to the next and conveyed nothing of a consistent personal vision. Doppo, on the other hand, had a lyricism with Japanese roots, given form by the example of Turgenev. He responded to the lyrical narrator of 'The Rendezvous', translated by Futabatei Shimei in 1888 as *Aibiki*, and used the same personal voice, often dramatizing the narrator as an observer or interlocutor, in most of his stories. Where other young writers seem to have been fascinated by 'The Rendezvous', 'Three Meetings', and 'Assya' for their love themes (whatever more literary views they may have recorded in retrospect), Doppo found in Turgenev's narrator the perfect vehicle to express in prose the view of the world he had culled from his reading in English literature.⁵ More than anything else, what distinguishes Doppo from his contemporaries is that he had a personal view of the world and felt that fiction was the proper place to convey it.⁶ Many of his ideas come from Wordsworth, but they can often be traced as well to Japanese experience and Doppo's own response to the modern world.

For Doppo, nature *per se* is indifferent (if not hostile) to man, its vast forces a frightening reminder of his helplessness and his individual mortality. The untamed wilderness of Hokkaido is a symbol of this view of nature in *Sorachigawa no Kishibe* (On the Banks of the Sorachi River, 1902) and other stories. But when it is softened by the human imprint nature can be a moving reminder of man's spiritual immortality.

⁴ For a translation see *Monumenta Nipponica*, xxv (1970), pp. 197-202.

⁵ For a more general discussion of *Aibiki*, see M. G. Ryan, *Japan's First Modern Novel*, Columbia, New York, 1967, pp. 115-24. Kimura Ki wrote of *Aibiki*: 'It may well be the only instance in world literature that the translation of such a brief short story has called forth such a great response.' See *Meiji Bungaku o Kataru*, Rakurō Shoin, Tokyo, 1934, pp. 193-4.

⁶ Tokutomi Roka (1868-1927), Doppo's Min'yūsha colleague, wrote *Shizen to Jinsei* (Nature and Man, 1900), an extremely popular series of lyrical essays often paired with Doppo's *Musashino*. It consists primarily of overwritten literary landscapes with a veneer of maudlin noble sentiments ('Ah, a bamboo leaf comes floating. Alexander and Napoleon were just like this leaf. O where are they now?'). See Arthur Lloyd's translation (Kogakukwan, Tokyo, 1913), p. 64.

Doppo's famous lyrical essay, *Musashino* (Musashi Plain, 1898), sketches the gentle landscape in loving detail, a sea of rolling hills dotted with farmhouses and cultivated fields, and covered with a network of dirt paths. One rarely encounters individuals along these roads, the narrator tells us, yet they must keep coming, generation after generation, or else the roads would not be there. In *Musashino* Doppo describes a typical village on the edge of the plain, neither part of the city nor wholly submerged in nature. These little places which blend nature and human activity have a peculiar power to move us, he says, for they are like microcosms where all of life is played out before us. They show us that man registers small against nature's vastness, his presence is a subtle thing. In *Kōgai* (The Suburbs, 1900), a long sketch, Doppo takes a leisurely and lighthearted view of such a microcosm. The only such rambling 'slice of life' that he ever wrote, *Kōgai* views life and death without the serious Meiji writer's obligatory ponderousness.

In *Takibi* and *Gen Oji* (Old Gen, 1897) we see humans crushed into oblivion by nature. They may achieve a brief moment of happiness in life, but nature wrests it from them. A group of boys and an old man indirectly share the joy and warmth of a bonfire in *Takibi*. But they know nothing of each other and never will. Before long the tide rises and all signs of their existence are erased from the beach by 'the eternal waves'. The teacher in *Gen Oji* is ironically unaware of the old man's death, his destruction at the hands of inhuman forces embodied in the idiot boy Kishū and in the storm that destroys Gen's boat.⁷ Yet Gen does have his moment of triumph. In the boat he reasserts his determination to end his exile from his fellow man by making Kishū his son.⁸ 'Planting his foot against the side of the boat, he pulled strongly on the oar, and in the next moment Gen had burst into song.' Gen dies in the end, and his love for Kishū is based on self deception ('I can see what is in his heart'), but through it he reassumes his part in the ongoing 'still, sad music of humanity'. Gen is one of many characters in Doppo whose music suggests a positive spirituality that is unaffected by personal oblivion. Nature's victory over man is by no means complete.

Whatever the fate of the individual, for Doppo man as a community is at least as immortal as nature. Without the continued existence of the human mind, all creation ceases to exist. In 'The Recluse', a poem Doppo knew well, Wordsworth speaks of creation as that which the mind

^{7,8} This aspect of the story is nearly lost in | Donald Keene's *Modern Japanese Literature*, the abridged translation of *Gen Oji* found in | Grove Press, New York, 1956, pp. 111-21.

and the external world 'with blended might/Accomplish'.⁹ Between the human community and nature there is a 'deep understanding' (*fukai yakusoku*): nature gives man life, while man gives nature its very existence. Nature without man is meaningless. Man's role in creation is essentially ethical, not simply biological.¹⁰

Insofar as he is an individual, isolated from others, turned in upon himself, a man takes no part in the 'deep understanding'. Reduced by force of habit to thinking only of his personal needs, conscious only of himself, man is a finite being without meaning. In *Akuma* (The Devil, 1903) Doppo goes so far as to suggest that consciousness of self is the devil that stands between man and the infinite. The child, as yet free of the weight of custom, still uncursed with the burden of conscious selfhood, has an intuitive sense of man's compact with nature. Age and social demands gradually crush his intuitive openness. As an ordinary adult he may have lost contact with the 'intimations of immortality' forever. Stories like *Mukyū* (Infinity, 1899) and *E no Kanashimi* (Sorrow in Pastel, 1902) present children and lost childhood as Doppo had learned to see them from Wordsworth.

The more sensitive individual, in the presence of a suitable reminder, a natural panorama with tiny humans who seem an indispensable part of it, may experience intuitive moments of oneness with nature and know that his life, as part of something larger, does have meaning.

Any intuited sense of meaning—in the pangs of conscience, for example—may be painful to an individual who has argued away the existence of ethical values in life in order to justify his own immoral behavior. Excusing his actions by appeal to 'fate' or 'heredity', he cannot but suffer when his intuition tells him that he is not simply a passive toy of mechanical forces. A man like Sawamura of *Shōjikimono* (An Honest Man, 1903) wants there to be no meaning to life, but he cannot help knowing that he is it. Nor is the protagonist of *Shuchū Nikki* (A Drinker's Diary, 1902) able to obliterate his sense of guilt.

Doppo's later stories, such as *Shōjikimono* and *Take no Kido* (The Bamboo Gate, 1908), tend to be dramatizations of themes that his early stories treat lyrically. *Take no Kido* is Doppo's most successful attempt at dramatic fiction. In it he abandons the restricted point of view seen in most of his stories after *Wasureenu Hitobito* (Unforgettable People, 1898)

⁹ See lines 816–24.

¹⁰ See *Kunikida Doppo Zenshū* (10 vols.; Gakushū Kenkyūsha, Tokyo, 1964–7) vi, pp. 314 & 408 for entries in Doppo's *Azamukazaru*

no Ki which evidence the influence of Wordsworth. The term '*fukai yakusoku*' appears in *Wasureenu Hitobito* and *Akuma*.

and brought to its highest development in the unreliable narrator Sawamura. Told by an omniscient narrator, *Take no Kido* is the story of *Shōjikimono* seen primarily through the experience of Sawamura's victim. Both Oshin of *Shōjikimono* and Ogen of *Take no Kido* are destroyed by the indifference of mysteriously introverted men towards whose moodiness they have found themselves attracted. Isokichi is an enigmatic figure, perhaps too vaguely defined to be truly effective, and Doppo's arbitrary handling of him vitiates much of *Take no Kido's* dramatic impact. We feel at the end that Ogen's death is a reasonable outcome of their relationship, but not dramatically correct. But Isokichi's symbolic meaning is clear. After his wife's death, Isokichi goes on as before. The life of Ogen, like that of Old Gen (源, 'essential' man) has left no more mark on the world than the boys or the wanderer of *Takibi* when their fire and footprints are washed away. The beach (磯 iso/Isokichi) is never changed any longer than the rhythm of the tides will allow. Like Kishū, Isokichi symbolizes the cosmic indifference in which the individual lives.

Doppo created yet another type of protagonist that he handled with varying degrees of success. These were the philosophical or poetic individuals like the teachers in *Gen Oji* and *Haru no Tori* (Birds of Spring, 1904),¹¹ Ōtsu Benjirō of *Wasureenu Hitobito*, Asami Kensuke of *Akuma*, and the ludicrously intense Okamoto of *Gyūniku to Jagaimo* (Meat and Potatoes, 1901)¹² and *Okamoto no Techō* (Okamoto's Notebooks, 1906). Convinced by his rationality that death makes life meaningless, a man like Ōtsu Benjirō welcomes the 'intimations of immortality'. As he describes himself, 'I am not a happy man. Always I am tortured by life's great questions and by my own overwhelming ambitions.' But in moments of profound loneliness, 'my inflexible egoism seems to shatter, and the thought of others touches me deeply.' He thinks of certain people who have left deep, lasting impressions on him. 'No, I see not the people themselves. I see them as figures in the background of a much larger scene. They are part of their surroundings, part of a moment.' Like the tiny human shapes in Oriental landscape painting they are all but faceless. They are important not for their individual traits but their sheer humanness. They and their dwellings amidst the soaring hills and grassy fields give the land its softness and its meaning. For Ōtsu Benjirō, all too aware of the isolation in which men live, this Eastern

¹¹ For a translation, see *Pacific Spectator*, viii (1954), pp. 249-55, or *Monumenta Nipponica*, xxvi (1971), pp. 195-203.

¹² For a translation see R. N. McKinnon, ed., *The Heart is Alone*, Tokyo, 1957, pp. 49-73.

vision of unity brings salvation. 'Only at these times do I feel such peace, such liberation, such sympathy towards all things.'

Wasureenu Hitobito explicitly denies the individual his immortality. But it entertains the possibility of moments when, egoism overcome, one can feel a part of an ongoing whole. By setting the story's three impressionistic moments in an intellectualized framework Doppo defines his view of the human condition and takes his place among the modern heirs to the Japanese tradition.

* * *

Gen Oji
Old Gen

1

To the little town of Saiki in Kyushu came a young teacher from the capital. He dwelt in Saiki for nearly a year, teaching English to the children there. He arrived in mid-autumn and left in mid-summer.

Early in summer he felt weary of town life and found a new dwelling place some distance away on the shore of Katsura Harbor. For a month the teacher lived by the seaside, where he knew very few people and spoke with almost no one. On occasion he would converse with the keeper of the inn where he was living.

Once, at twilight, the wind rose, bringing with it rain, and the surf rushed against the beach more roughly than usual. It stirred a sense of loneliness even in the reticent young man who so prized his solitude. He came down from his room to the veranda, where he found the innkeeper and his wife relaxing in the cool evening air. They had not troubled to light the lamp but sat in the deepening dusk, fanning away mosquitoes as they talked. They seemed pleased at the teacher's unexpected appearance and cordially beckoned him to join them. The three talked of many things, refreshed as the evening breeze lightly swept their faces with droplets of rain.

The teacher went home to the capital and many years went by. One winter's night he sat before his writing stand composing a letter. The hour was past one. The letter was for an old friend in his native village. Tonight his pale, thoughtful face wore an unaccustomed flush. Often he stared away into the distance, as though trying to see something shrouded in mist.

In the mist an old man stood.

The teacher set his pen aside and read what he had written. He read the letter, then closed his eyes. He turned his gaze within and again saw the old man. In the letter he had written: 'The innkeeper in Saiki told me about this old man quite casually. There is nothing remarkable about him. One finds many like him living in all parts of the country, in the mountains or by the sea. Yet still I cannot forget him. He seems to me like a box that no one can open, with some secret hidden inside. Perhaps I am simply imagining things. It does not matter. Whenever I think of this old man an emotion stirs within me like that of a traveler hearing a

distant flute and longing for home. Or yet again, I feel as one does gazing at the limitless sky after reading a poem of lofty content.'

And yet the teacher really knew very little about the old man. The innkeeper had told him only the beginnings. Unable to fathom his young guest's curiosity, he merely answered as he was asked.

'The harbor is very well suited to the town. As you see, there are not many houses. Fewer than twenty people live here. It is always just as desolate as it is tonight. But imagine how very deserted it was when old Gen's was the only house on the beach. The pine tree by his house offers its cool shade now to summer travelers on the broad new road. But long ago, ten years ago or more, the waves sometimes used to lap at its roots. A great boulder used to jut out into the sea, and always the people waiting for Gen's boat would sit on it. The cliff was dangerous, though, and they blasted it away.

'No, he did not always live alone.

'His wife was very beautiful. Her name was Yuri—'lily'. She was born on the island. Half of what people said about Gen and Yuri was false, but this I know is true, because I heard it from Gen himself once when he was drunk: one spring night, very late, when even the lamps of the Myōken Shrine had been extinguished, there was a knock on his door. (Gen was twenty-nine then.) It was a woman. She wanted him to take her to the island. In the waning moonlight he could see that it was Yuri, a girl from the island.

'In those days there were many men operating ferry boats to points along the coast, but everyone knew about Gen. He was a strapping young fellow, and just as kind and honest as he was bold. But that was not all; there was a deeper reason why he was known so far and wide. I wish you could have heard Gen's singing voice then! People used to take Gen's boat just to hear him sing as he rowed. Then as now, however, he rarely spoke.

'Only Myōken-sama, looking down from his shrine on the hill above them, could know what was in Yuri's heart when she took Gen's boat late at night. I asked him if they stopped and talked on the way, but not even liquor could loosen Gen's tongue. He only smiled and two deep wrinkles crossed his forehead. There was something terribly sad in his smile.

'After that Gen's voice took on a new serenity. The young couple's married life passed by like a joyful dream. When their only son Kōsuke was seven, Yuri died in her second childbirth. A merchant from the town offered to adopt Kōsuke and raise him to carry on the family business,

but Gen refused. He had lost his darling wife; he could not bear to be parted from his only child. Always reticent, Gen now spoke to people less and less. He almost never laughed, and would sing as he rowed only if he had had some drink. His rich voice might resound amidst the loveliest moonlit scene, yet even then it would carry a trace of sadness. Nor was this simply in the minds of those who knew his story. When he lost Yuri it nearly broke his spirit.

‘On gray, misty days, Gen hated to leave Kōsuke behind in their lonely house. He would take him on the boat with the other passengers. People felt sorry for the boy. Often a mother who had bought some sweets in town for her own child would open the bag and share them with the orphaned Kōsuke. Gen, pretending not to notice, never expressed thanks. People attributed this to his grief and did not resent him for it.

‘Two years went by. Construction of the harbor was half finished and my wife and I moved here from the island. We built this house and began to take in guests. The foot of the hill was blasted away for a road, and the highway that passes by Gen’s house was built. Morning and evening the harbor would echo with the whistle of a steam ferry. And suddenly the barren shore which had never known so much as a drying fish net became as you see it today.

‘Gen, however, went on as before, rowing back and forth between the island and the town, from the town to the coastal villages. Once the harbor was opened and the road completed, people began to pass through here in great numbers. Compared to the old days, this place too had become just another part of the fleeting, changing world, but Gen seemed unmoved by this—neither happy nor sad.

‘Three more years went by. Kōsuke was twelve. One day as he was swimming with his friends there was an accident and Kōsuke drowned. Frightened, the other boys ran home and told no one what had happened. When Kōsuke did not appear by sunset we all became alarmed and started to search for him. By then of course it was too late. Oddly enough we found his poor little body lying on the harbor bottom under old Gen’s boat.

‘After that Gen stopped singing entirely. He even avoided speaking to the people he knew best. The years went by and old Gen never spoke, never sang, never smiled. The world soon forgets such people. He rowed his boat as he always had done, but the passengers riding with him seemed to forget his very existence. And I too sometimes, when I would see old Gen returning from the landing with his oar on

his shoulder, his round eyes half closed, would find myself thinking—oh yes, Gen is still alive. You are the first one who has ever asked about him.

‘Yes, of course, if you were to invite him for a drink he might sing for us. But I doubt that we could understand the words. No, he does not whine or complain, but now and then he heaves a mournful sigh. He is a pitiful soul. . . .’

This was all the teacher learned from the innkeeper. Even after he had gone back to the capital he did not forget about old Gen. Often at night when he sat beneath the lamp, listening to the rain, his thoughts would fly to the old man. He wondered what Gen might be doing: was he sitting alone by the fire, his round eyes shut tight; was he thinking about that spring night with Yuri long ago as he listened to the sound of the waves? Or was he absorbed in memories of Kōsuke? The teacher did not know that during the years he had been thinking about Gen, many winter nights had seen sleet showering down upon the old boatman’s grave.

While the young teacher went on turning the pages of his memory as though reading a book of poems, things sadder yet had befallen the old man and he was no longer of this world. The teacher’s poem thus lacked a final stanza.

2

It was summer when the children of Saiki parted with their teacher on the Katsura Harbor pier. The months went by, a new year came. Early one day at the end of January old Gen had business in the town.

The sky was overcast. Soon it would snow—a rare occurrence in Kyushu except on the coldest days. Ordinarily the river that runs through the town would be lined with boats. People from villages up and down the coast would be landing or departing, there would be singing and cursing. But that day the normally bustling river banks were desolate. Ripples moved across the water. The clouds covered everything in gray shadows. The streets of the town were deserted. The

In a broad intersection where, on festival days, a stage might be erected, some poor men's children played, their colorless faces exposed to the wind. A few stood watching with hands in their pockets. One boy called out to a beggar who came upon the scene, 'Kishū!' But he paid the boy no heed. The beggar looked perhaps fifteen years old. His unkempt hair covered his neck. He had a long face with sunken cheeks and a pointed chin. He stared dully before him, his clouded gaze shifting listlessly as he walked. The wet and tattered skirts of the lined kimono he wore barely covered his shins. An elbow like the joint of a grasshopper's leg protruded from his sleeve, trembling as he moved along. Just then, from the opposite direction came old Gen. The two came together in the middle of the intersection. Gen stared at the beggar, his eyes open wide. 'Kishū,' he called. His voice was soft but deep.

The young beggar raised his head to bring his gaze upon the old boatman. He looked at Gen's eyes as he might a stone. They stood still, looking at each other.

Gen reached inside the sleeve of his kimono and drew out a small package of brown bamboo-sheath. From it he took a rice snack and held it out to Kishū, who received it in his beggar's bowl. Neither he who gave nor he who took said a word. Neither showed joy or grief. Kishū walked on without looking back. Old Gen watched him go until he disappeared around a corner, then looked up at the sky to see the first few flakes of snow. Once again he glanced after Kishū and heaved a sigh. Old Gen did not notice the boys who were watching him, elbowing each other and fighting back their laughter.

It was dusk when old Gen reached home. The front window of his one-room cottage faced the road but he never opened the shutters. Dark as it was inside, he did not light the lamp. He sat before the hearth, put his stubby hands to his face, hung his head and sighed. He put a handful of dry twigs into the fireplace. A fragile flame no bigger than a candle's jumped from one branch to the next, catching and dying. Whenever it flared up the room brightened for a moment. The old man's black shadow danced against the wall. On the sooty wall a color print emerged from the darkness. It had been hanging in the same place for more than ten years. Yuri had brought it for Kōsuke from her parents' home when he was five or six. Now it seemed to be covered with a layer of soot.

There was no wind that night, no sound of waves upon the shore. Gen listened to the desolate whispering of sleet all around the house. He sighed and looked about the room.

Lighting a kerosene lamp, Gen stepped outside. He felt the cold pierce him to the marrow, accustomed though he was to rowing on winter nights. The mountains were black. The sea was dark. Wherever the glow of his lamp reached, Gen saw a veil of glittering snowflakes. The ground was frozen hard. Two young men came walking from the town, engaged in conversation. As they caught sight of the old man standing at the gate with his lamp, they called out a friendly greeting and remarked on the cold. Yes, it is cold, old Gen agreed, and he turned away to gaze in the direction of the town.

Continuing on, one young man whispered to his companion that Gen seemed even stranger than usual tonight; a young girl seeing him would surely faint. Yes, his friend said, who knows—tomorrow morning we might find the old man dangling in that pine tree. The two shuddered and looked around to find the light gone from the old boatman's gate.

The night wore on. Snow, then sleet, then snow again fell in fitful starts. From Mt Nadayama the moon rose, its light enveloped in the sea of clouds. The castle town below seemed like a vast, withered graveyard. There were villages nestled among the hills and in each village a cemetery. The graves now were awake. The villagers, asleep, met the dead in a dreamworld, they laughed with them and cried. Now a shadowy figure crossed the broad intersection and stepped onto a footbridge. A dog sleeping beneath the bridge raised its head and silently watched him pass. He was a ghost escaped from the grave, wandering perhaps in search of someone, someone with whom he could speak. He was Kishū.

In the autumn of the year Gen's son Kōsuke drowned, a beggar woman from Hyūga wandered into Saiki. She brought with her a boy of eight. She begged from house to house with the child by her side, receiving many gifts. The people here were generous, she found, more generous than elsewhere. It would be a good place for the child to grow up, and for his sake, when spring came, she left him behind in Saiki. No one ever saw her again, but a pilgrim to Dazaifu told of seeing a beggar woman there who looked like her. Dressed in rags, she and a wrestler were begging near the shrine gate. Everyone was certain it was the mother of Kishū. They despised her for her heartlessness and pitied the child more than ever. And so it seemed the mother's plan had worked.

But this was not to be. The villages had their share of religious trappings, but there was a limit to people's charity. All agreed Kishū was to be pitied, but none would take him in. Now and then someone

would use him to clean the garden and treated him humanely, but not for long.

At first the boy cried for his mother. People comforted him with gifts. Their charity only served to make him forget his mother, but no one took her place in his affections. The townspeople found many pretexts for their treatment of him: he forgets things, they said, he is an idiot, he is unclean, he steals. They succeeded only in reducing him to permanent beggarhood and sealing him off from the world of human emotions.

Once, as a game, someone taught Kishū the alphabet. He learned it perfectly well. Someone else taught him to read. He memorized a passage or two. He could sing the children's songs. He laughed and talked and played like any other child. At least he seemed no different. He told people that he was born in the province of Kishū and soon he was known to all as Kishū. He came to be treated as a possession of Saiki, and the children playing on the streets knew they would always find him there. In this way, Kishū's heart withered within him before anyone realized it. They believed that he and they were living in the same world, where the morning sun shines and the smoke of the hearth fire lingers and people have fathers, brothers, wives and friends. But quietly, imperceptibly, he had moved his nest to a desert island and there he had buried his heart.

He stopped thanking people for what they gave him. He stopped smiling. No one ever saw him become angry or cry. He knew neither joy nor resentment. He was merely alive: he walked, he ate. If someone should ask him how he liked what he was eating, Kishū would answer dully that he liked it. If in jest someone should wave a stick at him, he would smile faintly and move away like a dog with its tail between its legs. Unlike a dog, however, he would never fawn over anyone. One could not pity him in the way one pitied ordinary beggars. It was impossible to see him as another man drifting through life until he drowned in its waves. He was beneath the waves, a creature crawling the ocean bottom.

Moments after Kishū crossed the footbridge heading away from the center of town, someone entered the broad intersection, peering around in all directions. He was holding a small boat lamp. Each time he turned its shining lens, a fan-shaped beam of light darted along the surface of the thinly piled snow. The circle of light flew to the houses that enclosed the intersection, illuminating the shadows of the eaves. Suddenly a policeman appeared from the main thoroughfare. He strode swiftly towards the man and demanded his name. The policeman raised

his lantern. Its light fell on the round eyes, the deep wrinkles, the broad nose of the powerful old boatman.

‘Old Gen?’ The policeman seemed surprised.

‘Yes,’ he replied hoarsely.

‘Who could you be looking for so late?’

‘Have you seen Kishū?’

‘What do you want with him?’

‘It is so cold tonight. I thought I would take him home.’

‘Not even the dogs know where Kishū sleeps. Be careful you don’t catch cold yourself.’

After this friendly warning the policeman walked away.

Old Gen walked along, sighing, until he came to the bridge. The lantern showed him footprints. They seemed fresh. It must be Kishū. No one else would walk barefoot in the snow. The old man hurried along in the direction of the footprints.

3

When people heard that Gen had taken Kishū in, they refused to believe it at first. Disbelief gave way to amazement, and laughter always followed. ‘Imagine the two of them facing each other over dinner,’ mocked one who heard the news. Once again people were talking about the old boatman whose very existence had nearly been forgotten.

A week or more had gone by since that snowy night. In the brilliant light of the setting sun, the distant island of Shikoku seemed to be floating on the waves. White sails bobbed off Tsurumi Cape. Plovers were flying near the shallows of the river mouth.

With five passengers aboard, old Gen was about to cast off. Two young men suddenly galloped down the pier and got into the boat. Now it was full. Two girls, apparently sisters, were returning to the island. They both wore kerchiefs on their heads and carried small bundles. The others in the boat were from a village down the coast. In addition to the two young men there was an old couple and their grandchild. Everyone talked about events in the town. One young man mentioned the theatre. The elder girl remarked that the costumes were supposedly very beautiful this year. Few people on the island had seen the play, she said, but the reports were favorable. The old woman spoke less well of the play but agreed that it was superior to last year’s. The young man asked if it was true that all the island girls were so eager to see Kumegorō, a handsome member of the cast. The sisters blushed and the old woman laughed aloud. Gen went on rowing, his gaze fixed on

some distant point. Here, too, the laughter of the fleeting world of men resounded, but old Gen pretended not to hear. He said nothing.

‘I hear you have taken Kishū in to live with you,’ said one young man, remembering. ‘Is it true?’

‘It is,’ the old boatman replied, looking straight ahead.

‘Everyone is wondering why you brought a beggar into your house. Were you really so lonely?’

‘Yes.’

‘But surely you could have found someone other than Kishū to live with you, a child of the island or the town, a good child.’

‘Yes, you could have,’ the old woman said, looking up at Gen. He wore a thoughtful expression. For a while he said nothing. He seemed to be staring at the shimmering blue ribbons of smoke that rose straight out of the hills to the west, illuminated by the setting sun.

‘Kishū is a child without parents, brothers, or home. I am an old man with neither wife nor children. If I become his father, then he will be my son. Perhaps we can be happy together.’ Gen spoke as if to himself. The others listened in amazement. Never had they heard old Gen speak with such ease.

‘How the years go by, Gen,’ the old woman sighed. ‘It seems like yesterday I saw Yuri standing on the beach with her baby. How old would Kōsuke be if he had lived?’

‘One or two years older than Kishū,’ Gen answered calmly.

‘How can you tell Kishū’s age? It is buried in his filth. He could be ten, or he could be eighteen.’

Everyone laughed heartily.

‘I don’t know how old he is,’ Gen said. ‘Someone told me he was almost seventeen. I suppose no one but his mother can know for certain, poor child.’ As he spoke, Gen looked around at the old couple’s grandchild, a boy of six or seven. Hearing the tremor in his voice, the others halted their laughter.

The old man answered Gen, perhaps to dispel the awkward moment but not without sincerity, ‘The future should be happy for you, if you and the boy grow close. To see Kishū as someone’s child, to see him waiting for you at the gate when you are overdue from the island, would bring tears to the eyes of all of us.’

‘How splendid that will be,’ Gen answered with feeling.

‘Wouldn’t you like to take Kishū to the play?’ one of the young men said, more to amuse the girls than to make fun of old Gen. The sisters, concerned for the old boatman, smiled faintly.

'That would be fun to see,' the old woman laughed and pounded the boat.

Gen answered solemnly, 'Why should I take my son to a play like that and have him cry?'

'Who is "my son"?' the old woman asked with mock innocence. 'I thought Kōsuke drowned right over there.' She turned and pointed towards the shadow cast by Mt Myōken. The others looked in that direction.

'My son is Kishū,' Gen declared, reddening. He stopped rowing for a moment and gazed in the direction of Hikodake Peak. An emotion welled up within him, an indefinable mixture of anger, sorrow, shame and joy. Planting his foot against the side of the boat, he pulled strongly on the oar, and in the next moment Gen had burst into song.

The sea, the mountains had not heard this voice for a long, long time. Long, too, since the boatman himself had heard it. His voice seemed to spread in gently pulsating ripples across the face of the calm evening sea, dissolving into the distance. The ripples struck the shore and echoed faintly, an echo from the past. It seemed as though the Gen of thirty years ago had wakened from a lengthy slumber and called now from the mountains to the Gen alive today.

The old couple declared that Gen's singing was as fine as ever. The young people listened, spellbound, to the voice they had known only in legend. Old Gen forgot the presence of the seven passengers in his boat.

When the sisters had gotten off at the island, the two young men lay down in the boat, bundled up in a blanket. The old couple talked quietly of family matters and gave their grandchild some sweets. Gen's boat turned into the creek that led to their village. Smoke from kitchen fires hung upon the village and mingled with the stream's evening mist.

Gen had no passengers on the way back to Saiki. When his boat emerged once again into the open sea, he felt the chilling wind from Hikodake. He turned to see the light of Venus scatter in his wake. The evening fires began to flicker on the island as he passed. He rowed along gently, and his black shadow fell across the water. The prow of the boat slapped lightly against the waves. Gen half listened to the lulling, melancholy whisper and enjoyed his happy thoughts. Whenever anything sad or worrisome came to mind he would grip the oar tightly and shake his head to drive it away.

Someone waits for me at home, Gen said to himself. Perhaps he is dozing by the fire. Perhaps he is staring placidly at the lamp, his heart softened by the warmth and happiness of my home, changed from when

he was a beggar. Has he eaten supper without me? He nodded happily when I said I would teach him to row. His reticence and brooding are only habits he has had until now; he will grow out of them. As the months go by he will grow robust and rosy-cheeked. But. . . .

Gen shook his head. No, he is someone's child now, he is my child. I long for the day when he will sing as well as I. And if some moonlit night he should row out alone with a girl. . . . he is like any man's son. . . . he surely will want to see her again. I can see what is in his heart. Of that there can be no mistake.

When he pulled into the landing, old Gen, with the eyes of a dreamer, watched the long, liquid glow of the shore lights on the water. Securing the boat, he rolled up his seat mat, tucked it under one arm, hoisted the oar to his shoulder, and stepped onto the shore.

The three dockside warehouses had closed their doors shortly after sunset. No one could be seen. There were no voices. Old Gen walked along with his eyes shut. He opened them wide and looked around when he reached the front gate.

'My boy, I am home,' he called. Setting the oar in its customary place he went inside. The house was dark.

'What is this? Here I am, my son. Quickly, light the lamp.' There was no answer. All was silent.

A cricket called mockingly, 'Kishū! Kishū!'

Old Gen struck a match and the room brightened for an instant. He saw no one. Again the room was dark. A sense of foreboding seemed to rise like musty vapors from beneath the floor and fill the old man's breast. He lit the lamp and gazed about him dully. He strained to catch some sound. 'My son,' he called out hoarsely. He felt his breathing quicken.

The fireplace contained only cold, white ashes, no sign that Kishū had cooked and eaten. Gen turned slowly, peering into the corners of the soot-smearred room. The lantern light could not penetrate the shadows where, wanting to see Kishū, old Gen thought for brief instants he could. He buried his face in his arms and sighed profoundly. The thought struck him then that Kishū might have run off. He started up, not pausing to wipe the tears running down his cheeks. He lighted the boat lamp hanging on the post and dashed out, heading for the town.

Gen stopped at the blacksmith's, where sparks were flying through the darkness. He asked if Kishū had passed by. A young man wielding a hammer looked up questioningly and said he had not noticed. Afraid he was interrupting the smith's work, Gen smiled politely and hurried on. The road he took was very straight. A field lay to the right and a row

of ancient pine trees stood atop the embankment on the left. A short way down the road, Gen caught sight of someone walking ahead of him. He ran forward, holding the lantern high. The light revealed that it was indeed Kishū. He was walking hunched over, with his arms folded across his chest.

‘Kishū?’ Gen laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘Where are you going all alone?’ His question seemed to cloak sorrow and joy, anger and endless despair. Kishū showed no surprise on seeing Gen. He looked at the old man as one might stare at passersby from the front gate. Startled, Gen could not speak at first.

‘You must be cold. Come home with me, son.’ He took hold of Kishū’s hand and led him home. As they walked, Gen questioned Kishū: had he felt lonely when Gen did not come home on time? Why had he not eaten the supper on the shelf? Kishū said nothing. Gen sighed bitterly.

At home Gen built a blazing fire and seated Kishū next to it. He placed a low table before the boy and prepared supper for him. Gen himself did not eat. Kishū ate everything he was given, including the old man’s portion. Now and then the old man would look at the boy, close his eyes and sigh. When he finished, Gen said, he should warm himself by the fire. How did he like his supper? Kishū looked at Gen sleepily and nodded. If he was sleepy, Gen said gently, he should go to bed. Gen spread out the bedding himself and covered the boy. Once Kishū was asleep, Gen sat alone by the fire, eyes closed, unmoving. The fire began to die, but he made no move to replenish it. The red glow of the flames flickered uncertainly across his face, a face exposed for fifty long years to the ocean winds. A tear ran down his leathery cheek, sparkling in the firelight. The wind swept past the house, howling in the branches of the pine tree at the gate.

Early the next morning Gen prepared breakfast for Kishū, but took only water himself. His head ached and his throat was dry. Feel how hot I am, he said, and brought Kishū’s hand to his forehead; I have a cold, it seems. Eventually he lay down. Illness rarely brought old Gen to bed.

‘I will be better tomorrow. Come here, I will tell you a story.’ Gen forced himself to smile. He had Kishū sit by his pillow and, sighing often, told him many things. He spoke as one might to a boy of seven or eight: ‘You have never seen a shark, I am sure. Sharks are big, dangerous fish. . . .’ And so the time went by.

‘Do you ever miss your mother?’ Gen asked, peering at the boy. Kishū seemed not to understand.

‘Stay always in my home. Think of me as your father—’ He gasped for breath and went on, ‘In two nights I will take you to see a play. They tell me it is called Awa no Jūrobē. I am certain when you see it you will long for your father and mother. I want you then to think of me as your father. I *am* your father.’

Old Gen told Kishū the story of the play, which he had seen long ago, and sang for him quietly the Pilgrim’s Song. How sad it is, Gen said tearfully. Kishū seemed to understand none of this.¹

‘No matter, no matter. You cannot understand my words, but when you see it with your own eyes, you too will weep.’

Speaking made him short of breath. When he was through, Gen heaved a long sigh of relief. Exhausted from talking, he dozed off for a while. When he awoke, Kishū was gone. As he ran along shouting, ‘Kishū! My son!’ a beggar woman appeared from nowhere, half her face painted red. Kishū is my child, she said, but she changed before Gen’s eyes into a young girl. Yuri! What have you done with Kōsuke? You let him run away somewhere while I was sleeping. Come, help me find him. Look, there he is, digging pieces of radish out of a garbage heap! Gen started to cry, when he heard behind him a voice calling, My child! It was his mother. She pointed: look at the stage. The stage was ablaze with candle light. He wondered why his mother’s eyes were red from crying, but all he did was eat his candy. At last he lay his little head on his mother’s lap and fell asleep. She began to shake him, and his dream was shattered.

Old Gen raised his head. ‘My boy, what a frightening dream I have had.’ He looked about. Kishū was gone.

‘My son!’ he called hoarsely. There was no answer. The shutters rattled in the wind. He could not be certain if he was awake or sleeping. He thrust aside the quilt and started up, calling to Kishū. Overcome with dizziness, he fell back onto the bedding. He felt as though he was sinking in a bottomless sea, with the waves crashing over his head.

That day old Gen stayed in bed under the covers, eating nothing. The wind that had risen in the morning grew gradually more turbulent. The waves pounded the shore mercilessly. No one came to hire Gen’s boat. As night fell the waves became increasingly violent, and it sounded at one point as though the landing had been destroyed.

¹ The play referred to here is properly called *Keisei Awa no Naruto*, by Chikamatsu Hanji (1725–83). First performed in 1768, it concerns a father’s unwitting murder of his long-lost child. The Pilgrim’s Song was a popular scene, often performed independently.

Before dawn, when the eastern sky was just beginning to lighten, the people of Saiki left their houses. Wearing raincoats and carrying lanterns, they gathered at the landing. The pier itself was unharmed. The wind had abated, but the ocean still roared like thunder and the spray from the crashing waves fell like rain. The people searched for damage from the storm and found a small boat that had been tossed onto the rocks and broken in half.

‘Whose boat is that?’ one man asked.

‘I am certain it is old Gen’s boat,’ a young man said. People looked at each other in silence.

‘Someone ought to go get him.’

‘I will.’ The young man set his lantern down and ran off. When he came within ten paces of it he could see some strange object dangling from the pine tree by the road. He strode boldly up to it and saw what it was. Old Gen had hanged himself.

Not far from Katsura Harbor there is a small graveyard nestled in the hills on an eastward slope. The graves of old Gen’s wife, Yuri, and their son, Kōsuke, are there. Another marker has been erected, with the inscription, ‘Here Lies Ikeda Gentarō.’ The three graves lie in a row with Kōsuke’s in the middle. Often on winter nights the sleet showers down upon them, but the young teacher in the capital does not know this. He thinks with pity of old Gen, living alone here on the beach and weeping for his wife and child.

Kishū is the same as he always was. The people of Saiki still think of him as a possession of the town. And still he wanders at night like a spirit from the grave. Once someone tried to tell him that old Gen had hanged himself, but all he did was stare back in silence.

* * *

Wasureenu Hitobito
Unforgettable People

Just beyond Futago, where the road from Tokyo crosses the Tama River, was an old post town called Mizonokuchi. Midway through the town, there was an inn, the Kameya.

It was the beginning of March. The sky was overcast and a strong wind blew from the north. The town, always bleak, seemed more cold and desolate than usual. A blanket of snow remained from the day before. From the southern edges of the unevenly thatched roofs, droplets of melting snow fell and were scattered by the wind. Even the muddy water-filled sandal tracks seemed to shiver as the wind set tiny ripples in motion. The sun went down and soon most of the shops closed up for the night. The town lay silent, huddled along the dark road. The inn, of course, was still open. A light shone brightly against the paper windows of the Kameya. But inside nothing stirred. Few travelers had stopped to spend the night, it seemed. Now and then the tap of a heavy metal pipe bowl against a charcoal brazier broke the silence.

Without warning the sliding door shot back and a rather large man eased himself across the threshold. Before the innkeeper could shake off his reverie and look up from the brazier, the man had taken three long strides across the dirt-floored entranceway and stood full before him. The newcomer seemed somewhat less than thirty years of age. He wore a European-style suit and cloth cap, but his thong sandals and gaiters exposed his bare feet. He carried an umbrella in his right hand and with his left he hugged a small satchel.

‘I want a room for the night.’

Still absorbed in examining his guest’s outfit, the innkeeper said nothing. Just then a handclap sounded from the back.

‘Take care of number six!’ the innkeeper bellowed. Then, still leaning against the brazier, he asked, ‘And you, sir, are . . .?’

The man’s shoulders stiffened and a scowl crossed his face. But then, smiling slightly, he answered, ‘I am. . . . from Tokyo.’

‘And you are on the way to . . .?’

‘Hachiōji.’

The traveler sat down on the raised wooden floor and began to untie his gaiters.

‘This is an odd way to be going to Hachiōji from Tokyo.’ The

innkeeper looked at the man as though with newly aroused suspicions and seemed about to speak. Sensing this, the traveler broke the silence.

‘I live in Tokyo but today I’m on the way back from Kawasaki. I started out late and now it’s dark already. Let me have some hot water, please.’

‘Bring some hot water right away,’ the innkeeper shouted. ‘It must have been cold on the road today. Hachiōji is still pretty cold.’ His comments were friendly enough, but his manner evidenced little warmth. He was about sixty years old. He wore a heavily-quilted jacket over his stout frame. It made his broad head jut out as though attached directly to his shoulders. His eyes, set into a wide, genial face, drooped at the corners. There was something tough and inflexible about him, but he impressed the traveler at once as a straightforward old fellow.

The traveler washed his feet and was still wiping them when the innkeeper shouted, ‘Show the gentleman to number seven!’

To the gentleman himself he had nothing more to say. Nor did he glance at him again as he retired to his room. A black cat appeared from the kitchen, crept onto the master’s lap, and curled up. The old man seemed to be unaware of this. His eyes were shut tight. A moment later his right hand edged towards the tobacco holder. Stubby fingers began to roll some tobacco into a little ball.

‘When number six is through with the tub take care of number seven!’

The cat was startled and leaped down.

‘Not you, stupid!’

The frightened cat disappeared into the kitchen. A large clock struck off eight slow gongs.

‘Grandma, Kichizō must be tired. Put the warmer in his bed and let him go to sleep, poor fellow.’ The old man himself sounded sleepy.

‘He’s in here,’ came the voice of an old woman from the kitchen. ‘But he’s still studying.’

‘He is? Go to bed now, Kichizō. You can get up early tomorrow and do that. Put the warmer in his bed now, Grandma.’

‘Yes, right away.’

In the kitchen, the old woman and a maid looked at each other and tittered. There was a loud yawn out front.

‘He’s the tired one,’ the old woman muttered as she put some coals into the sooty bedwarmer. She was a small woman, perhaps in her late fifties.

Out front the paper door rattled in the wind and a sprinkling of rain swept lightly past.

'Better close the shutters for the night,' the old man shouted. Then he muttered to himself, 'Rain again, damn it.'

Indeed, the wind had grown quite strong and it was beginning to rain. It was early spring, but a freezing cold wind, bearing rain and sleet, tore across the broad Musashi Plain. All night long it raged over the dark little town of Mizonokuchi.

Midnight had come and gone but the lamp in room seven burned brightly. Everyone in the Kameya was asleep except the two guests who sat facing each other in the middle of the room. Outside, the storm raged on. The shutters rattled constantly.

'If this keeps up you won't be able to leave tomorrow,' said the man from room six.

'I wouldn't mind spending a day here. I'm in no special hurry.'

Both men were flushed, their noses bright red. Three freshly warmed bottles of *sake* stood on the low table next to them, and *sake* still remained in their cups. They sat in comfortable positions on the mat floor, with the brazier between them as a warmer and ashtray. The visitor would puff on his cigarette now and then and reach out, baring his arm to the elbow, to shake off the ashes. They spoke without reserve, but it was clear the two had met that night. Perhaps something had led to a remark or two through the sliding door between their rooms. The man in number six, feeling lonely, would then have taken the first move, followed by an exchange of name cards. An order of *sake*, some frank conversation, and soon politeness had given way to the easy speech of friends.

'Ôtsu Benjirô', read the card of the man in room seven. The other's was inscribed, 'Akiyama Matsunosuke'. No further information accompanied either name.

Ôtsu was the man in the European-style suit who had arrived after sunset. His tall, thin frame and pale face were quite the opposite of his companion's appearance. Akiyama, in his mid-twenties, had a fleshy, reddish face. The amiable expression in his eyes made him appear to be smiling constantly. Ôtsu was an unknown writer. Akiyama was a painter, also unknown. By some odd chance these two young men of similar inclination had come together in this rural inn.

'We ought to get to bed, I think. There is no one left for us to tear apart.'

From art to literature to religion their conversation had ranged. Absorbed in their scathing criticism of the day's noted artists and writers, they had not heard the clock strike eleven.

'It's still early,' said Akiyama, smiling. 'You can't leave tomorrow, anyway. What does it matter if we stay up talking all night?'

'What time is it?' Ōtsu picked up his watch. 'It's past eleven!'

'We might as well stay up all night.' Akiyama was unperturbed. Eyes fixed on his *sake* cup, he added, 'But if you're sleepy, go ahead. . . .'

'No, not at all. I thought you were sleepy. I left Kawasaki late today. I walked less than ten miles so I feel fine.'

'I'm not ready for bed either. But I thought I'd just borrow this if you were.'

Akiyama picked up what looked like a manuscript of some ten pages. On the cover was the title, 'Unforgettable People'.

'It's no good,' said Ōtsu. 'It's like the pencil sketches you artists do, nothing anyone else can appreciate.' But he made no attempt to retrieve the document. Akiyama glanced at a few pages.

'Sketches have their own special interest, I think. I'd like to read it.'

'Let me see it a minute, will you?' Ōtsu took the sheets and leafed through them. Both men were silent. Only then did they seem to take notice of the storm. Ōtsu listened, rapt, as he stared at his manuscript.

'This is a writer's sort of night, don't you think?' Akiyama said. Ōtsu, silent, seemed unaware that he had spoken. Akiyama could not tell whether Ōtsu was listening to the storm or reading his manuscript—or whether, indeed, his thoughts had flown to someone far away. But he felt that Ōtsu's expression, his eyes, were just what an artist looks for.

Ōtsu turned to Akiyama with the eyes of one who has just awakened from a dream. 'Rather than have you read this,' he said, 'it would make more sense for me to talk about what I have written. Shall I do that? This is nothing more than an outline. You wouldn't understand it.'

'That would be even better—to hear all the details from you.' Akiyama noticed that Ōtsu's eyes were moist and gave off a strange gleam.

'I will tell you all I can remember. If you find it dull, though, don't hesitate to tell me. On the other hand I won't hesitate to go on talking. It's odd, but suddenly I feel that I would like to have you hear this.'

Akiyama added charcoal to the fire and placed the bottles of *sake*, cool by now, into the warmer.

'"The unforgettable man is not of necessity one whom we dare not forget." Look, this is the first sentence I have written here.' Ōtsu showed him the manuscript. 'First let me explain what I mean by it. That way you can understand the overall theme. Actually, I am quite sure you understand it already.'

‘No, never mind that. Just go ahead. I will listen as though I were an ordinary reader. Pardon me if I lie down. . . .’

With a cigarette between his lips, Akiyama stretched out on the floor. Resting his head on his right hand he looked at Ōtsu with the trace of a smile in his eyes.

‘We cannot simply refer to parents and children or to friends or to the teachers and others to whom we are obligated, as unforgettable people. These are people “whom we dare not forget”. But then there are others—complete strangers—to whom we have made no pledge of love, to whom we are not duty bound. To forget them would imply neither neglect of duty nor want of compassion. Yet these are the very ones whom we cannot forget. I would not say that for everyone there are such unforgettable people, but for me there certainly are. Perhaps for you, too.’

Akiyama simply nodded.

‘It was the middle of spring, I remember, when I was nineteen years old. I had not been feeling well, and had decided to leave Tokyo, where I was at school, and go home for a rest. I took the regular Inland Sea steamer from Osaka. There was no wind on that spring day, and the sea was calm. But all of this happened so long ago. I can remember nothing about the other passengers, or the captain, or the boy who served refreshments. No doubt there was some fellow-passenger kind enough to pour my tea, and others with whom I passed the time on deck, but none of this is left in my memory.

‘Because of the state of my health, I must surely have been depressed. I remember, at least, that I daydreamed about the future while I roamed the deck, and thought of the fate of men in this life. I suppose this is the sort of thing all young men do at such times. I heard the pleasant sound of the ship’s hull cutting through the water, and watched the soft glow of the spring day melt into the sea’s oil-smooth, unrippled surface. As the ship advanced, one small island after another would rise out of the mist on either side of us, then disappear. The islands, each draped in a thick brocade of yellow flowers and green barley leaves, seemed to be floating deep within the surrounding mist. Before long the ship passed not fifteen hundred yards from the beach of a small island off to the right, and I stepped to the rail, gazing absentmindedly at the island. There seemed to be no fields or houses, only groves of small, low pine scattered over the hillside. It was low tide. The damp surface of the hushed and deserted beach glistened in the sun, and now and then a long streak—perhaps the playing of little waves at the water’s edge—shone like a naked

sword, then dissolved. From the faint call of a lark high in the air over the hill, one could tell that the island was inhabited. I remembered my father's poem, "The soaring lark betrays a farm behind the island's face," and I thought there must certainly be houses on the other side. And as I watched I caught sight of a lone figure on the sunlit beach. I could tell it was a man, and not a woman or a child. He seemed to be picking things up repeatedly and putting them into a basket or pail. He would take two or three steps, squat down, and pick something up. I watched carefully as he wandered along the deserted little beach beneath the hill. As the ship drew further away, the man's form became a black dot, and soon the beach, the hills, and the island all faded into the mist. Almost ten years have passed, and I have thought many times of this man at the edge of the island, the man whose face I never saw. He is one of those I cannot forget.

'The next one I will tell you about I saw five years ago. I had spent New Year's Day with my parents and set out the following day for Kyushu. I crossed the island, from Kumamoto to Ōita, on foot.

'I had promised to take my brother along. The two of us left Kumamoto early in the morning, prepared for our trek with sandals and gaiters—and high spirits. That day we walked as far as Tateno, arriving well before sunset. There we stayed the night. We left before sunrise and soon, as we had hoped, the white volcanic smoke of Mount Aso was there in the distance to guide us. Trudging along the frosty ground, crossing bridges suspended among the rocks, losing our way now and then, we made the lower peaks of Aso by noon. It must have been one o'clock by the time we reached the crater. The whole Kumamoto area is warm, of course, and that day it was clear and windless. Even near the top of the mountain, 5,000 feet high and in mid-winter, we felt quite comfortable. Steam poured out of the crater and drifted up to the highest peak, Takadake, where it froze, gleaming white. There was scarcely a patch of snow anywhere else on the mountain. Dead grass, faint white stirrings in the breeze. Sharp cliffs of earth burnt red and black, remnants of the vast ancient crater that once gaped fifteen miles across. I could never capture this on paper, the desolation. Only a painter could convey the scene, I think.

'We climbed to the edge of the crater and for a while stood looking into the terrible pit and enjoying the panorama all around us. Up there, of course, the wind was unbearably cold. Soon we retreated to the little stand next to Aso Shrine, below the crater rim. Invigorated with a little tea and rice, we climbed again to the crater.

‘The sun by that time was near the horizon, and the plains to the west were blanketed in a haze that caught its flaming red. The mist was the color of the charred cliff that formed the western edge of the old crater. The cone of Mount Kujū soared high above the flock of hills to the north. The plateau at its base, a carpet of withered grass that stretched for miles, caught the glow of the setting sun. The air there was so clear one might have seen a horseman at that great distance. The earth and sky seemed like a single vast enclosure. The ground shook beneath us and a thick column of white smoke shot straight up, angled off sharply, grazing Takadake, and dissolved into the distance. What could one call such a spectacle? Magnificent? Beautiful? Awesome? We stood, silent as stone figures. These are the moments when one cannot help but sense the vastness of the universe and the mystery of man’s existence.

‘What most enthralled us was the great basin that lay between distant Mount Kujū and Mount Aso where we stood. I had often heard that this was the remains of the world’s largest volcanic crater. Now with my own eyes I could see how the plateau beneath Kujū dropped suddenly away to form the sheer cliff wall that continued for miles along the northern and western rim of the basin. Unlike the Nantai crater in Nikkō, which had changed into the beautiful, secluded Lake Chūzenji, this enormous crater had, through the ages, become a vast garden of grain. The villages, the forests and wheatfields in the basin now caught the slanting rays of the setting sun. Down there, too, was the little post town of Miyaji and the promise it held out to us of a night of restful, untroubled sleep.

‘We thought for a while of sleeping that night on the mountain to see the glowing crater in the dark. But I was due in Ōita. We started the descent to Miyaji. The downward slope was much gentler than the climb had been. We hurried along a path that snaked its way through the dry grass of the foothills and ravines. As we neared the villages we passed more and more horses loaded down with bales of hay. All around us on the paths leading down the mountain were men leading horses. Everything was bathed in the light of the setting sun. The air was filled with the tinkling of harness bells. To every horse was strapped a load of hay. Near as the foot of the mountain had appeared from above, we seemed to be making no headway towards the villages. The sun was almost gone. We walked faster and faster, and finally broke into a run.

‘When we entered the nearest village the sun was down and the twilight was fading. The day’s end activity there was remarkable. The

grownups were hurrying about, finishing up the day's work. The children, laughing and singing and crying, had gathered in the dark corners of the fences, or beneath the eaves where they could see the kitchen fires. It was the same here as in any country town at dusk, but I had never been so struck with such a scene, having raced down from Aso's desolation into the midst of this humanity. We two dragged ourselves along, knowing how long the road was that lay before us in the dark, but feeling, too, a sense of homecoming as we headed for our night's lodging in Miyaji.

'We had not gone far into the woods and fields beyond the village, when the twilight turned to dark. Our shadows stood out clearly on the ground. Behind us, the new moon had risen above a peak of Aso. Almost benevolently it seemed to cast its clear, pale rays upon the villages in the basin. Directly overhead, the volcanic smoke that in the daylight had risen in white billows shone silvery gray in the light of the moon. It seemed to strike against the opaque blue-green sky, an awesome and beautiful sight. We came to a short bridge—it was broader than it was long—and, glad of the chance to rest our feet, leaned for a while against the rail, watching the changing shape of the smoke in the sky and half listening to the far-off voices of the village people. Just then the sound of an empty cart came echoing from the woods through which we had passed a few moments before. It drew closer, resounding in the stillness, until it seemed close enough to touch.

'Soon we could hear drawing nearer, along with the rattle of the empty cart, the clear, ringing tone of a teamster's song. Still gazing at the stream of smoke, I listened for the song and waited half consciously for its singer to reach us.

'A man appeared out of the darkness. He sang, drawing out each note of the tune, "Miyaji's a fine old place, under the mountain," until he reached the bridge where we stood. I felt deeply moved by the tune and the man's sad yet stirring voice. A sturdy young man in his mid-twenties passed by, leading his horse, without so much as a glance in our direction. I looked steadily at him as he walked along. With the moon at his back, even his profile was obscured. But I can see even now the black silhouette of his powerful body.

'I watched him until he disappeared into the darkness, then looked up once again at the smoke of Mount Aso. The young man is one of those I cannot forget.

'This next one I saw in Mitsugahama in Shikoku when I was waiting for a ship. It was the beginning of summer, I remember. I left the inn first thing in the morning, and when I heard that the ship would be arriv-

ing in the afternoon, I decided to take a stroll along the beach and then through the town. Since Mitsugahama is not far from the city of Matsuyama in the interior, it is a thriving harbor town. The fish market, which operates in the morning, was especially crowded. The sky was bright and cloudless. The morning sun shone gloriously. Everything sparkled in its light. Colors seemed more vibrant and the bustling scene took on added gaiety. There was shouting and laughter, curses and cheers. Buyers and sellers, young and old, men and women, all hurried back and forth. All seemed absorbed and happy in their work. A line of food stalls waited for customers who would eat standing up. The food they offered hardly bears description. It was what you would expect for the sailors and drifters who ate there. Scattered all around the market area were seabream and flounder, eels and octopus. The harsh odor of raw fish stirred and shifted with each rush of the boisterous crowd.

‘I was a total stranger in the town. There was not a face in the crowd that I knew, not a bald spot that looked familiar. My anonymity in the midst of this scene aroused a strange emotion in me, and I felt as though I was seeing everything with a new clarity. Not caring where I went, I strolled along as part of the crowd and came to the end of a rather quiet street.

‘Suddenly I heard music. There, in front of a shop, an itinerant monk stood, playing a lute. He seemed to be in his mid-forties, a short, heavy man with a broad, square face. The expression on his face, the look in his eyes, matched perfectly the mournful sound of the lute. His low, heavy voice followed sluggishly behind the muffled wail of the strings. Not a person on the street took notice of the monk, and no one came out from any of the houses to listen. The morning sun shone. The world went about its business.

‘But I watched the monk and listened to his playing. The narrow yet busy street with its ramshackle houses had little in common with the monk and the lute, but somewhere, I could feel, there was a deep understanding between them. The lute’s sobbing tones drifted between the rows of houses on either side of the street, mingling with the bold cries of peddlers and the sound of hammering from somewhere nearby. And when I heard the music, flowing like a current of pure spring water through some muddy pond, I felt that every one of these people on the street with their gay, busy-looking faces was part of the tune. This monk, then, with his lute, is one of those I cannot forget.’

At this point Ōtsu broke off his narrative. He set the manuscript down

gently. For a while he seemed lost in thought. Outside, the storm roared on as before. Akiyama sat up.

‘And then . . .?’

‘I think I’ll make that the last one. It’s getting too late. There are so many left—a miner in Hokkaido, a young fisherman I saw in China, a river boatman with a wen in Kyushu—I could talk until morning and not get to them all. But more important is why I can never forget them, why they appear, again and again, as images in my mind. It is this that I want to make clear to you.

‘I am not a happy man. Always I am tortured by life’s great questions and by my own overwhelming ambitions.

‘In the deepening hours of a night such as this, alone, staring into the lamp, I feel the isolation in which men live, and I experience unbearable sorrow. At these times my inflexible egoism seems to shatter, and the thought of others touches me deeply. I think of my friends and of days long past. But more than anything else, images of these people I have described to you come streaming into my mind. No, I see not the people themselves. I see them as figures in the background of a much larger scene. They are part of their surroundings, part of a moment. I remember these people and from deep within me the thought wells up: How am I different from anyone else? Part of the life we share is from heaven, and part of it is from earth. All of us are returning hand in hand, along the same eternal track, to that infinite heaven. And when this realization comes to me, I find myself in tears, for there is then in truth no Self, no Others. I am touched by memories of each and every one.

‘Only at these times do I feel such peace, such liberation, such sympathy towards all things. Only then do worldly thoughts of fame and the struggle for fortune disappear so utterly.

‘I want very much to write on this theme and express exactly what I have in mind. I believe that somewhere in this world there must be men who feel as I do.’

Two years passed.

Circumstances had brought Ōtsu to make his home in Tōhoku. His acquaintance with the man Akiyama, whom he had met at the inn in Mizonokuchi, had long since ended. The time of year was what it had been then in Mizonokuchi. It was a rainy night. Ōtsu sat alone at his desk, lost in thought. On the desk was the manuscript of ‘Unforgettable People’ that he had shown to Akiyama two years before. A new chapter

had been added, 'The Innkeeper of the Kameya'.
There was no chapter called 'Akiyama'.

* * *

Kōgai
The Suburbs

1

TOKITA Sensei—Professor Tokita—everyone called him. He was the principal of the grammar school in this little village on the outskirts of Tokyo. Short and stocky, with a square jaw, bushy eyebrows, and a large mouth, he was none too popular with the girls. His students, however, liked him very much. So did their parents and the village officials. He had an ineffable gentleness about him. He never said much, but one knew at a glance that he could never tell a lie. It was the way his eyes seemed always to be smiling.

The mayor of the village—and he was not alone—had often urged Tokita Sensei to marry. He had never taken these suggestions seriously. Now he was thirty-one and still living in a rented room, but this no longer seemed to bother anyone.

Tokita Sensei lived upstairs in a cottage on the property of Ume's family. Downstairs was a storage space. A ladder-like stairway led from the dirt-floored entrance to the Sensei's single large room. The family had offered to serve him his meals there, but he declined and went always to the main house. He ate with the others and paid little attention to what was served.

Ume had been a pupil of the Sensei's from the age of ten, but she left school without graduating and he did nothing to stop her. Now her brother, Toki, was in the Sensei's second-grade class. He seemed quite in awe of his teacher at school, but at home he could—and did—do just as he pleased.

There was a mill in town. From Tokita's room one could see only part of the roof, but the sound of the water wheel could be heard quite clearly. A young man named Kōkichi was the son of the proprietor. He, too, had been a pupil of Tokita's, and after graduating he continued to come for evening lessons in feudal history. Lately, however, he had been spending most of his time at the mill. The mill was not, of course, the little shed with a water wheel that one sees in the mountains. It had several millstones, each of which produced some fifteen yen worth of hulled rice a month, and a stable of half a dozen horses to pull their wagons. Ume's mother and the other villagers could never quite suppress their envy.

'Well then, why don't you set up a mill of your own?' Tokita said one day quite seriously. It was not like him to speak of such matters.

'You mean like Kōkichi's? That's a regular company with stocks and everything. If you could set up a mill whenever you felt like it, everyone would do it.' Ume's mother laughed a little sadly.

'That's true, I suppose,' Tokita said, impressed with her logic. 'You really don't have anyplace to put one.' That exhausted the subject of rice mills. Kōkichi himself was next.

Ume's mother declared her very high opinion of Kōkichi, which was how their conversations about him always began, and this time she added her observation that his stepmother seemed to be an awful woman and doubtless treated Kōkichi terribly.

'This is the old man's third wife. I feel sorry for the children.'

'The third!' Tokita Sensei had been so sure she was the second.

'Kōkichi's mother is dead, of course.'

Just then a slightly built man came ambling into the entranceway without knocking on the door. He was in his middle twenties, with a rather dark complexion, and a gentle expression in his eyes.

'Oh, Kō-chan, we were just talking about you!' She had actually been caught off guard and was somewhat flustered.

'Sensei, how are you?'

'Where have you been the past few days?'

'Busy as usual.'

'Come in, come in. Where did you go today?' said Ume's mother, noticing Kōkichi's suit.

'I was over at my uncle's in Kanda. Sensei, are you going to be home tonight?' Kōkichi seemed dispirited.

'Yes, of course. Is there something you want to see me about?'

'No, nothing special, nothing much. . . .'

'We are going to be singing Naniwabushi tonight,' Ume's mother interjected. 'Why don't you join us? You remember the singer Bairyū. . . .'

'Oh good. I'll be here. See you tonight, then.' Kōkichi left.

'There is something bothering him today,' she said. Tokita offered no reply but sat there hugging his knees and watching her hands. She was mending a tear in one of his shirts.

When dinner was through, the main house echoed with the clatter of preparations for the musical gathering. Soon that was replaced by the clamor of voices as the tenement dwellers and others from the neighborhood began to arrive. The sun was down and the moon had not yet risen.

Tokita sat leaning against a pillar, one leg thrown across the threshold of his darkened room, staring out into the night.

'Sensei!' It sounded like Ume calling him. He did not answer. 'He's not here,' she muttered and left. Perhaps five minutes went by. He gazed steadily at the woods to the east. When he saw the light of the moon come filtering through the branches, he rose deliberately and straightened the front of his kimono. Snatching up his cloth cap, he hurried down the stairway.

Tokita rounded the hedge and practically ran into Ume, who was shouting shrilly, 'Don't ask me! What difference does it make? I can gossip all I want and you've got nothing to say about it! Isn't that right, Sensei?'

Startled, Tokita caught sight of a man standing in the shadow of the trees. The figure quickly disappeared behind the tenement house.

'Who was that?' he asked.

'That awful boy Genkō. He's gotten really fresh these days. Are you going for a walk, Sensei?' She moved nearer to Tokita and peered at him.

'If Kōkichi shows up, tell him I've gone for a walk and will be back soon, will you?' Tokita went out through the gate. Ume followed him.

'Don't stay out too long, Sensei. Bairyū is here. Oh, look at the moon!' Ume stopped short. Tokita crossed the bridge and went off towards the fields.

Perhaps two hours had elapsed before he came back. In the moonlight he could dimly make out Ume standing on the bridge.

'Sensei, where have you been? Kōkichi has been waiting for you.'

'What are you doing here, Ume?'

'Waiting for you. What does Kōkichi want to see you about?'

'I have no idea. What does it matter to you?'

'He seems a little depressed. I thought maybe. . . .'

'It's getting cold.'

The two walked as far as Tokita's cottage. At the main house the second part of the Naniwabushi seemed to be ending. It was very quiet here, except for the voice of the lead singer, to whom the others must have been listening.

'Tell Kōkichi I am back, will you please?' Tokita went in through the garden gate. Ume ran over to the entrance of the main house. Kōkichi was standing there.

'Is he back?' Kōkichi whispered.

'Yes. When you are through talking with him come back here, all right?'

'Thanks.' Kōkichi hurried away without looking up. Ume knelt down in a dark corner of the room and listened to the singing. She did not laugh, however, when the others did. The singing ended and suddenly everything became noisy, with people running off to smoke or go to the toilet.

'Ume!' her mother called out, peering around the room.

'What do you want?' she shouted.

'Where have you been?'

'Right here. I was listening to the music, but then I got a headache.' She wrinkled her nose and lightly tapped her forehead.

'Why don't you go to bed, then? You can still hear the singing.' Her mother sounded worried. Ume said nothing and stayed where she was, kneeling on the mat floor. She listened for a while once the third song had started, but soon headed for the door.

'Go to bed, will you?' her mother said, all but scolding her. Ume looked ready to burst into tears. She shook her head and ran out. The moon was shining with such clarity it made this seem like an autumn night. The shadows of the trees were sharply etched against the ground. She tiptoed to the hedge in front of Tokita's cottage and peered over it. The upstairs room was silent. Just then a loud laugh echoed from the main house. Ume stepped into the road, grumbling to herself—how long were they going to keep that up? She heard voices on the bridge. She found Tokita Sensei there, leaning on the railing and looking up at the sky.

'Are you alone?'

Tokita grunted in affirmation.

'Did Kōkichi go home?' Ume, too, leaned against the railing and peered at Tokita.

'Just now.' He yawned. 'Why aren't you listening to the singing? I think I'll go over.'

'Oh, forget it. It's so stupid. I got a headache and ran away.'

For a while they both were silent. A short distance downstream from the bridge there was a sluiceway that diverted water to the mill. The water that was backed up in it formed a kind of long, narrow pond. A thick growth of bushes lined its banks. Their overhanging branches cast dark shadows on the water. The surface shone like a mirror wherever the moonlight fell upon it. Insects must have been flitting over the water. Now and then little ripples would form and disappear. Ume was looking steadily at the river, but finally broke the silence.

'What did Kōkichi want?'

‘He wants to go live with his uncle in Kanda for a while. He asked me what I thought of it.’

‘What did you tell him?’ She looked at him as she spoke, her voice a bit unsteady. Tokita seemed not to notice. He answered almost casually.

‘I thought he’d better stay here. Otherwise things would probably get even worse with his stepmother. I told him not to go. Poor fellow, he was crying.’

‘Crying? That’s terrible.’ Ume herself was about to cry. Of this, too, Tokita was unaware.

‘I didn’t get all the details, but it seems that his stepmother has a daughter somewhere. I guess she is a maid in the house of some rear admiral. The mother wants Kōkichi to marry her, but he wants nothing to do with the girl. His stepmother apparently senses this and treats him very badly. Imagine how he must feel.’

‘I know, it’s awful. I heard something about it. To force him like that . . .’ Before she could finish, she was interrupted by a young man who passed them on the bridge, staring at her.

‘Oh it’s you, Ume. How *are* you?’ he said, with implied significance. Reaching the end of the bridge he turned around. ‘I almost forgot. Say hello to Kōkichi for me.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Better hurry, Okiku is waiting.’

He burst out laughing. ‘Thanks a lot,’ he said, and disappeared.

‘Okiku is the grocer’s daughter, isn’t she? The one by the train crossing,’ Tokita asked. Ume simply nodded.

2

That day the weather was unusually fine, but next morning the sky had the ominous look it takes on just before the spring rainy season. After noon the muggy weather turned to rain. Most people would spend such a day grumbling about their ruined Sunday, but it bothered Tokita Sensei not at all. He sat on his heels at his low desk, grading students’ papers, looking over their compositions, checking the attendance charts. Whenever he grew tired he would stretch out on the matted floor and stare at the ceiling.

At two o’clock a visitor came past. He climbed part way up the stairs, poking just his head into Tokita’s room to announce his arrival. This was Etō, a painter some four or five years younger than Tokita and something of an eccentric too, to judge from his expression. Both were the sons of

former retainers of the Aoyama family, their fathers were close friends, and they had been companions since childhood. Etō's speech and manner, however, were more lively than his friend's.

Tokita threw down his grading pencil. Sprawling out on his back, he asked, 'Did you bring it with you?'

Etō sat down by the brazier and poured himself a cup of tea. With a blank expression he answered, 'Now let me see, what was it you wanted . . .?'

'The copy book, the copy book.'

'Oh, I forgot all about it. I'm awfully sorry. Anyhow, there is something more important than that I want to show you.' He undid the knot on a cloth-wrapped bundle and peeled off the layer of newspaper underneath. It was a painting. He handed this to Tokita, who simply stared at it without a word.

'I have seen this place before,' he said finally. 'You did a good job on it.'

'It's that spot in the woods—looking across from the place on the Imperial Estate where you can see the fields and the forest.'

'Yes, that's it,' Tokita said while comparing the painting with a small watercolor on his wall.

'This one is not as good, of course. I brought it to show you because there is an interesting story attached to it. Once you have seen it I have to take it someplace else.'

Tokita grunted noncommittally as he came over to the brazier where Etō was sitting. The artist was quite accustomed to his friend's manner of replying and thought nothing of it.

'It was such a beautiful day yesterday I went to the woods as usual. I had never painted this scene before. I knew nothing much would come of it but I thought I would give it a try. I walked along that path we always take, dreaming my usual daydreams. Actually—I might as well confess it—I've been having doubts about myself lately. I mean, do I really have the talent to be an artist? Could I really be a success at it? Rather like taking my own pulse. I once considered forgetting the whole thing, but then I thought of you. Here you are, the principal of this little grammar school, and not even that at first. You started as an ordinary teacher and for over ten years now you have gone on just doing your job. One of your friends is an army captain, another became a lawyer and then a judge, but you have never thought twice about them. You just did your job. Of course your personality has a lot to do with it. But that's beside the point. I believe the reason you are a success today is that you

have worked with utter singlemindedness and devotion. Yes, I mean it, you are a success! For a teacher there is no greater success than this. You have the complete trust and respect of those children's parents. Whenever they have the least bit of difficulty they come to you for advice and they accept your judgement. I doubt that there are many teachers today who measure up to that. And so it occurred to me that all these worries of mine—do I have the talent or don't I, will I succeed or won't I?—are just not worth thinking about. All you have to do is work with your whole heart. Once I realized that, I felt a great sense of relief.

'It was this sort of thing I was thinking about yesterday as I walked along. It did not matter if I ended up painting signs or even shrine plaques. I resolved to do whatever I could. I would go straight ahead and never look back. My head was full of such ideas when I reached the woods.

'I looked for a scene to paint. The woods themselves would not make a very good picture, of course. I thought I might try an angled view, stretching from the edge of the woods on the northwest horizon to the thick groves of oak in the low area to the west.

'The road had been terribly hot. It was a great relief to rest at the edge of the woods and feel the cool breeze blowing from their gloomy depths. I stretched out on the grass where the sunlight filtered through the leaves and took a long look at the scene. It was beautifully calm. For a while I forgot everything but the tranquil view.

'And this is what I painted. I admit it's terrible. But I reached an agreement with myself before I started it: I would come back and paint it again and again if I had to until I felt I had done the best I could. And then something strange happened that led me to produce this awful thing.

'As I worked it seemed to me that the scene was so very beautiful and my technique so very clumsy that I became more and more agitated. Could this thing be called a picture, or was I just no good? I kept on painting, utterly fed up and telling myself again and again to quit. Then in the woods behind me I heard a strange rustling sound. I started to look around when I caught myself. This was it! I must not turn around! If I was no good, then all the more reason for me to struggle at my painting. What about my determination to do even shrine plaques? This was what was meant by singlemindedness: I had to be able to go on painting even with a wolf howling in my ear. How could I manage such concentration if I was going to be distracted by some little noise in the woods? However ineptly, I felt I must go on working. The rustling and cracking drew

nearer. The tension was unbearable. It was a disconcerting sound, as though something were closing in on me, taking advantage of the concentration with which I was working to sneak up and pounce on me from behind. Once that had occurred to me, the need to turn and look was overwhelming. But no, not for an instant would I look, and this determination turned into sheer doggedness. I would have been ashamed to turn around. Now my very identity as an artist was to be decided by whether or not I made that move.

‘And that was not all, I realized. Whether I looked or did not look was beside the point. I should not even hear that sound, let alone concern myself with it, let alone be frightened by it. If indeed I had put all my heart and soul into this painting and this natural scene, then I should be deaf even to the roar of a cannon. I tore into the painting with near ferocity. But it did no good. My senses were in the grip of the sound coming up from behind.

‘And then I thought it over. There is no point in making such an issue of this. If it bothered me, it bothered me. I should just take a peek, set my mind at ease and go on painting. What could it be?—a crow, a fox, a bandit, a monster, a snake? Maybe a one-eyed goblin or a giant? All right, just look and get it over with, I decided, and started to turn around. But it was too demoralizing. If you turn around, I said to myself, you’ve had it. As of today you are through as an artist. Is that clear? All right, then, turn around. Maybe it was that mad dog I had heard about. It was supposed to be in these woods somewhere. What of it? What if he charged from behind and latched onto my neck? Well then I’d die and to hell with it! This was dogged determination. If I could not carry it through, then I was no artist, I would accomplish nothing. Now I was fighting mad. Think you can get me to turn around, do you? I’ll show you who is going to turn! It seems ridiculous now, but I really stood there growling these things to myself and painting all the while.

‘The closer it got, the louder the noise. Now it was right behind me, the sound of something moving through the grass and underbrush. I felt a chill, as though a bucket of ice-cold water had been poured over me, and I could feel myself cringing. My armpits were streaming with sweat. It was sheer torture.

‘I went on painting as though in a trance. My eyes and hands moved like machines. All my attention was focused to the rear. Then whatever it was came up until it was practically touching me, and stopped. I could sense its breathing next to my ear. Is there anyone who wouldn’t have just shriveled up in my place? Of course I don’t know about sluggish types

like you—no, not really—but I felt I was suffocating and my eyes went out of focus. Had this gone on for thirty seconds I would have passed out. But just then, right next to my ear, someone shouted, “You’re pretty good, sonny!”

‘I spun around with a start. It was an old man in his sixties, leaning forward slightly to peer over my shoulder. I roared at him, “What do you think you’re doing, frightening me like that?” He was utterly unperturbed. He put down the big bundle of kindling he had strapped to his back and asked if I was an art teacher. I told him no, I was still a student, which drew a look of great admiration as he examined the picture.’

Etō broke off his narrative and looked steadily at Tokita Sensei. Then, as though he had just realized something, he slapped his knee. ‘That’s it, damn it! I should have done a picture of the old man.’ It was probably against the law for the local farmers to go into the Imperial Estate to gather firewood, but they did it quite openly. Both Tokita and Etō knew of the practice. If Etō had stopped to think about it for a moment he certainly should have realized that the rustling in the woods was just that.

‘Anyhow, I felt terribly ashamed of myself and went back to my painting with great gusto. When it was about finished I lit a cigarette. The old man had been watching quietly all the time. I don’t know what he had in mind, but suddenly he asked with a very serious look on his face if I would give him the painting. It was really something, the way he put it. He wanted to dedicate it to the Yoyogi Hachiman Shrine in honor of their recent renovation. While he went on and on about what a wonderful job they had done on the shrine, I thought about other things. This painting was going to be a truly memorable thing in my life, and the old farmer, too, was someone I should always remember. I could give the picture to him and let him offer it to the shrine. Then, if ever again I was plagued with doubts, I could go to see my painting at the shrine, think about what had happened that day, and renew my enthusiasm. I decided to give him the painting. He was overjoyed and said he would take it home immediately. I told him I could not let him have it right away. I had to keep it one more day to add the finishing touches. He insisted, then, that I go with him to his house, which was nearby, and he started off before I could say a word. It might be fun, I thought, and followed along. His house was larger than I had expected. There were piles of cut barley in the front yard, and an old woman and a young couple were busy with the harvest. Everyone gathered around to look at

the picture and have some tea. It turned into quite a commotion. Before I left I promised I would bring back the picture today. Look at the weather, too! But I suppose they expect me and I shouldn't disappoint them. I had better be going.'

Tokita had been listening all this time with hardly a comment. When Etō had finished he asked gravely, 'Was there a daughter in the family?'

'Oh, yes, yes there was,' Etō said simply. 'She was eight years old.'

'Ah, that's too bad. If only she had been some seventeen-year-old beauty who would pose for you. It would have been like a novel,' Tokita said with a snort. Every once in a while Tokita Sensei would come up with a remark most unlike him and follow it with just such a laugh.

'Things don't work out that way,' Etō laughed. 'Well then, I'll be going now. Thanks for putting up with all this nonsense.' As he stood up they could hear voices from the other side of the hedge.

'There was another one last night. Did you hear about it? Just some guy in his thirties. Now when it's a girl—seventeen or eighteen, say—you've got something to talk about. Sure, it's the weather. You know. It gets hot and the blood goes to your brain.' This was the grocer, the one known as 'the grocer at the crossing'. He seemed to be shouting to someone in the tenement.

'That's right,' came the answer. 'And that's not all. If you've got no padding in your wallet to keep your heart warm the same thing happens.¹ That's why they go crazy, I'll bet.'

'There's a clever fellow,' Etō muttered.

'I drink a big quart bottle of "medicine" every night. To keep the blood down where it belongs. Damned if I'm ever going to throw myself under a train,' the grocer said with a hearty laugh.

'Are you sure that's enough? Make your wife give you another glass or two tonight.'

'Good idea. That wallet of mine won't be keeping out the chill much longer.' He laughed oddly.

3

It was some time after eight that night. A soft drizzle was falling. 'The grocer at the crossing' had closed up for the night and the family was seated around the brazier. The master of the house sat cross-legged,

¹ There are no pockets in a kimono. Wallets and the like are often carried in the folds of the bodice. Hence the expression *futokoro ga atatakai*, 'the bosom is warm', i.e., 'to have a fat purse'.

pouring a drink now and then from his bottle of 'medicine'. His wife occupied herself with watching him. Next to her sat their daughter, Okiku, busy with needlework. Occasionally she would look up from her sewing and peer in the direction of the front door.

'He was right. A quart is not enough.'

'Who was right?' The grocer's wife sounded annoyed with him.

'That fellow I was talking to today. Says I'm not taking enough medicine.'

'What are you talking about?' She did not seem to understand.

'Okiku, go buy me another pint.'

'Don't be silly,' his wife scolded. 'You've had enough.' She checked the *sake* warmer. 'Besides, there is still some left.'

'So what? Get me another pint. I don't want to tell any lies tomorrow.'

'Lies? Who do you have to lie to?'

'What a clever fellow. I went to that shop, the Tsutaya, today and told them what happened last night. This fellow in the tenement says if you haven't got any padding in your wallet to keep your heart warm, all the blood rushes to your head. Clever, no? I told him I drink a quart of "medicine" every evening to guard against that and I'm not about to jump in front of any damned train. He tells me I'd better get you to buy me an extra pint tonight.'

'Just tell him to mind his own business,' said the grocer's wife, but she could not help smiling. Okiku smiled too.

'Anyhow, I want that pint.'

'Please, not tonight. You can't send Okiku out when the roads are so bad.'

'It's all right,' Okiku said, setting aside her work. 'I'll go.'

The grocer stared at his last cup of *sake*. His eyes were bleary and he held himself unsteadily.

'So all I get is a quart?'

For a while the three of them were silent. Outdoors it was very still. The drizzle fell almost soundlessly.

'The medicine has already taken effect, hasn't it?'

The grocer laughed heartily. 'Well, I suppose so. Anyhow, you won't catch me jumping under any trains, no matter how much blood goes to my brain. I'll get to heaven the easy way—while I'm asleep. Probably that one last night—his ghost is still wandering around the tracks.'

'Oh stop it! You're giving me the creeps. We ought to move away from here,' she protested feebly.

'What are you talking about? It's not our fault they kill themselves. We do a good business here. We're "the grocer at the crossing". We can't just move away. Where would we go? Let all the idiots who want to die do it right here at the crossing. It gets around and it's good for business.'

Having exhausted this outrageous topic, the grocer got up to go to the toilet. 'I'll pay them back with a little prayer from the bathroom window.'

'Oh, you're terrible,' said his wife, frowning. She and Okiku looked at one another. Okiku looked very serious. She said nothing.

The grocer opened the bathroom window. It was raining outside but the moon was up and he could make out vague shapes in the pale light. The tracks ran just under the window. A man with an umbrella had been standing by the tracks, but when the grocer opened the window he darted away, pressing up against the side of the house. The grocer caught a glimpse of him.

'No matter what happens, the main thing is to stay alive,' the grocer began talking to himself out loud. 'I suppose anybody who wants to die must have had a bad time of it. But once you go and kill yourself. . . . well. . . . you're dead.'

The grocer failed to notice the sound of a desperately strangled laugh.

'As long as you're alive you can always manage something. If your money is gone, you can work. If your woman leaves you, you can always find another. But if you're dead you've got nothing to start with.'

Okiku came to the bathroom door. 'What are you talking about?' She seemed somewhat unnerved by all this.

'The main thing is to stay alive. It's true, it's true. This is just the kind of night that Death likes to take possession of you. You've got to go home right away, calm down and think it over.'

'Father, what is it?'

'Make a fresh start. Or at least if you are going to kill yourself do it on a nice night, say, when the moon is big and bright. Do it with style.'

'He's in a funny mood tonight.' Okiku hurried back to the living room.

'A fresh start. A fresh start. That's what you need. Well, so long.' The grocer staggered back to the living room and sprawled out next to the brazier. Almost immediately he was snoring loudly.

'We really ought to move away from here. It gives me the creeps. Nothing good can come of staying in this place. Don't you think so, Okiku?' Okiku's mother had started on some sewing, but she was an early riser and it was not long before her eyes began to close.

'I guess you're right,' Okiku answered halfheartedly.

'Last night's was the third one this month. It looks like there is bad luck connected with this crossing.'

Okiku did not answer. The two continued their work in silence. Now and then her mother's hands would stop moving and she would nod asleep. Okiku watched her unobtrusively. After a while she slipped away to the front door. It was open a few inches. She moved it back noiselessly, just enough to lean out and look around. Then she darted outside. A young man was standing beneath the eaves. He was the one whom Ume had been teasing the night before with her 'Greetings to Okiku'.

'Iso? Why are you standing there? Come inside,' she whispered.

'I'd better not tonight. I got caught,' he said with a sly smile. 'Your father was telling me to make a fresh start.'

'Oh, it was you? I thought he was saying some pretty strange things. Anyhow, come on in. It's all right.'

'No, we'll have to "make a fresh start" some other time. If I hang around here someone else will think I'm waiting to kill myself.' He started to go.

'You think everyone else is so stupid—' but before she could finish, her mother yawned and spoke to her.

'I'm going to bed, Okiku. Lock the door, please.'

'It looks like the clouds are breaking up. The rain is going to stop,' Okiku lied.

'Oh. What are you doing out there? Hurry up and lock the door,' she snapped.

'I can see a few stars.' Okiku smiled at her young man.

'Go inside. Hurry up,' he said. He ran towards the crossing and quickly disappeared. Okiku peeked out from under the eaves and this time she really did look up at the sky. There were no signs of clearing. A few chilling drops of the misty rain went down the neck of her kimono. 'Stars!' she muttered to herself. She slammed the door shut and in a moment the house became utterly still.

* * *

Shōjikimono

An Honest Man

To look at me you would say I was an honest man. But more than that: you would think me unusual, even eccentric.

I am not, however, honest. I have spent half a lifetime succeeding in the most terrible transgressions, and simply because others are so certain of my honesty.

In the mirror I can see easily enough what it is about my looks. There is no hint of angularity in my face. No distinct coloration. My eyebrows are thick, my beard is heavy. I have a round nose and thick lips. There is something vacant in my expression. The corners of my eyes wrinkle deeply when I smile, lending to my countenance—and this is the most despicable thing—an ineffable charm. I am quite a large man. Kimono sleeves are never long enough for me. My bony wrists always protrude inelegantly, destroying any hint of sophistication in my appearance. Those of smaller build mince about officiously and are taken to be as insignificant inwardly as they seem outwardly. But men of large physique—be they fools or villains, it does not matter—are always taken seriously by others. And I am no exception.

Loquacity might yet have been a saving grace in me, but I have always been a reticent man. Not that I am incapable of voluble speech. At times I will match my eloquence with any man's. But most often I am content (due, perhaps, to an inborn trait) to listen quietly to others, responding with the wrinkles near my eyes. In that way I can understand everything that other men say. I can make my guesses and have my suspicions. I can know what they say and what they mean.

One encounters many men like me in the world. Each plays a part in the situation in which he finds himself—in his social class, for example. Rarely is such a man (and this includes me) able to escape from his situation. This very inability to escape lends him dignity, and he comes to play his part with increasing skill.

Owing to the lowness of my situation and to a certain inborn trait of mine, the drama in which I play my part has come to be a truly ugly, despicable thing. The trait of which I speak will come clear to you soon enough. I need not enlarge upon it here.

But I must say this to prevent any misunderstanding. I do not hold to the notion that all the world is a stage. As I explained earlier, those of us who possess my kind of character have a certain coldness. We are capable of observing, calmly and objectively, whatever intrudes upon us. And thus, while maintaining concerned and sincere exteriors, we are able to manage things quite skillfully to suit ourselves. That sounds rather theatre-like, I should think: we manage things skillfully.

Well now, let me tell you a few things about myself.

My father was an old-guard scholar of English. For years he taught in a middle school. While his classmates employed their newly acquired knowledge from the West to ascend to positions of social importance, my father became and remained a language teacher. In the end, there was nothing else he could do. He spent his life—until the spring of my twelfth year—as a purveyor of broken English.

My father's death made me an orphan. I had never known my mother. After she died my father kept a succession of mistresses at home. There must have been a good dozen of them, because I can still remember four myself. He never did remarry and set up a proper family.

I have no idea why my father lived so immorally. But it seems to me, judging from the character I inherited from him, that he kept women simply to satisfy his lust for flesh, that ideas like 'home' and 'family' never moved him.

There was not the slightest bit of affection in my father's treatment of others, and this includes the four mistresses. While I myself do a bit of drinking, my father never touched a drop; and as reticent as I am, my father was still less prone to speak. The house was always silent, even when he was home. If he was not staring vacantly into the brazier, smoking, he would be at his desk, turning the pages of some English book.

Each new mistress-maid would spend a month or two trying to engage my father or me in conversation, then she would learn to endure the silence.

I grew up in this chilling atmosphere, in this gloomy shadow, never finding it sad or trying. My father's character was mine. In effect, I was an orphan even while he was alive.

With no brothers or sisters, no relatives I could turn to when my father died, I was taken in by a friend of his, a teacher of Japanese at the same middle school. His name was Katō. He told me that my father had asked him to take care of me.

I cannot say that Katō treated me with remarkable kindness. Nor was

he unkind. I lived like any student houseboy, studying English at night school and Japanese directly from Katō when he had the time. I had no particular feelings one way or the other about Katō's treatment of me. I was used to solitude.

'Your father was a very good man,' Katō said to me any number of times. 'But he was so withdrawn. He never did anything, sad to say. He let his talents go to waste. But you must go out in the world and accomplish great things. The way the world is today, no amount of learning will do you any good unless you exert yourself.' His narrow eyes would flash as he spoke.

And there were indeed times when I felt that Katō was right, that I must do as he said. But heredity is not a thing to be fought against. The impact of words, the lever of ideals were not such things as could easily move my oppressive nature. I merely lived from day to day, making the best of each new change in my situation. This was my fate.

In the autumn of my nineteenth year Katō fell ill and in a few weeks passed away. He was sixty-seven. He had had a rather long life, I suppose. Just before his death he called me to his bedside.

'Your father gave me somewhat less than four hundred yen. Add to that the two hundred yen I got for his furniture and books, and the money I took charge of along with you comes to five hundred seventy yen. He asked me to care for you as long as the money lasted, using it to pay for your meals. In the eight years since you were twelve, the money has just about given out. One hundred yen is left, and this I will give back to you now. After I am dead you must take this money and seek your independence.'

I fully understood what Katō was trying to tell me. Once he was dead I must leave his house and use the money to make my way in the world alone. Seeing this all from my present vantage point, it seems odd to me that Katō should have given me the hundred yen. For indeed, had he ordered me to leave immediately, penniless, I would have obeyed him unquestioningly. Far from objecting, I would have thought it quite reasonable. When I received the money, then, I was actually very happy. A week after Katō died I left the house that I had grown accustomed to, without finding it especially sad.

I found a rooming house near the X Elementary School in Kōjimachi. With Katō's assistance I had become a teacher of English there. My salary was ten yen a month, and room and board came to seven yen. Financially, I was not hard pressed.

My face was rather fuller and more handsome in those days than it is

now. I was a quiet, likeable young man, thought very well of by the school principal and the other teachers, and treated exceptionally well by my landlady. The average man lets a situation like this go to his head—especially someone at that age when affectation is at its height. He allows himself petulant moods, abusing others and flushing with anger for no reason at all. Playfully, perhaps, he dangles his title in front of everyone. I was never like that. Morning and evening I came and went, my manner never changing. As soon as I removed my better clothing after work I folded it up and put it away. I must have seemed an admirable youth, and very steady.

My landlady was in her middle forties then. A widow, she lived with her maturing daughter and her fourteen-year-old son, renting rooms to support them. There were only four rooms in the house, and none of them very handsome. The daughter resembled her mother. She had a long, pale, rather sickly face, but her dark eyes were striking. They were the nicest thing about her, I might add. She had a habit of looking at you quite steadily, then smiling faintly. Her name was Oshin. We called her Shin-chan.

The landlady was not one to fawn over people, but she was kind to all of her boarders. She was especially nice to me. Not many months had gone by before she was treating me as she might her own son. But I, regrettably, had never experienced the love that passes between parent and child. I was glad enough of her kindness, but was not especially moved by it.

There is nothing quite as strange as the human heart. Unmoved by so much kindness, I maintained an attitude that differed in no way from that of the first day I arrived at the boarding house. This made a strong impression on the landlady, whose admiration for me increased daily and whose belief in my honesty, propriety and modesty was unshakable.

Oshin, like her mother, said nothing to indicate it but I could tell from her behavior that she believed in me just as strongly.

Thinking back on it now, the one who was truly honest, proper and modest was not me, certainly, but this young girl. I don't think of her as the perfect human, but even now I believe that there are few women who come up to her level. Her poor health had something to do with it, I am sure, but there was an ingenuous quality about her, a tenderness in everything—her movements, her speech and bearing, her very nature.

Oshin was two years younger than I—not much of a difference, but while I seemed older than my years, Oshin was rather childlike and

looked perhaps two years younger than she really was. I could see that she felt about me as her mother did, but caught a suggestion of playfulness in her manner.

Oshin often used to come to see me when I was alone in my room. We would talk, often late into the night. Our evening conversations went something like this:

‘What was your father like?’ Oshin once asked.

‘Well, I really don’t know how to describe him. He liked to smoke a lot.’

‘He must have been a very good person.’

‘Why?’

‘Well. . . . he was your father.’

Another time when, despite my protests, Oshin was folding my clothes:

‘You hardly ever say anything unless someone speaks to you first.’

‘Oh really? I don’t mean to be like that.’

‘Mother said so too.’

‘Well then, I’ll have to be more careful from now on.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean to criticize you.’

‘No, no. It really is quite wrong of me. My father was always like that. He hardly said a word to me until the day he died.’

‘I’m sure he was very kindhearted. Mother says he must have been very much like my father.’

‘What was he like?’

‘He never said much but he was always smiling. He almost never scolded mother or me.’

‘My father never smiled.’

‘Then he was very stern?’

‘No, not at all. He just kept quiet all the time. He never even bothered to scold me.’

‘And your mother?—Oh, I forgot. You never knew your mother.’

Oshin was silent for a moment. Then she asked, ‘What do you think of my mother?’

‘She is very nice. I think of her as my own mother.’

‘Oh my. That’s wonderful. She will be so happy to hear that.’

This was more or less the way we spoke. But Oshin, after all, was a mature girl. She could not go on simply being kind to me like her mother. As the months went by I could see her drawing closer to me, with feelings that went beyond kindness. Her mother suspected what was happening, certainly, but for some reason she seemed not at all concerned.

Indeed she joined Oshin in showering me with affection. And what were my feelings for Oshin, you are wondering. My passion did not come up to a tenth of hers. You must think I treated her very coldly, then, but that is not the case. I simply let her think what she wanted to think and do what she wanted to do.

And what did this come to in the end? It was the night of February 15, an unforgettable night. The hour was past twelve. The lodgers were asleep, of course, and so were Oshin's mother and brother. The house was utterly still. Outside, the snow was falling heavily. At times the wind would rise and sweep the snow past the shutters. Oshin had been in my room since nine. A few minutes after the clock struck twelve she got up to leave.

'All right? You *will* ask mother in the next few days, won't you? I know she'll agree right away. Please be sure to ask her,' she begged me repeatedly. I can still remember the look on her face.

That night marked the beginning of a relationship between Oshin and me that we had to conceal not only from the boarders but from her mother now as well. Oshin evidenced satisfaction at hopes realized, but I could see in her, too, both strong determination and a vague, inexpressible fear. She might be laughing like a child one moment and sighing the next, her face deadly pale. For my own part, I changed not at all. The desire that I had been harboring, the desire that flared up with ever-increasing intensity each time Oshin's body drew close to mine, the desire I had been intent on fulfilling as soon as the chance arose—the great satisfaction of having attained this desire was mine. But my heart was, as ever, untouched. Of course there was no change in my expression or my behavior.

Oshin gave herself to me body and soul. She loved me. She trusted me. She never doubted me for an instant. She would plead with me to speak with her mother soon and ask for permission to marry, but was satisfied with my assurances that I would take care of everything.

When I said earlier that I have a certain inborn trait, I was speaking of lust. A man like me with no strong inclinations, who could proceed coolly, unmindful of the passing scene, was yet unable, when it came to matters of sex, to maintain his equanimity. Once I had taken Oshin's virginity I continued to satisfy my desire, indifferent to whether it pleased her or not, restrained only by the need for secrecy. Oshin felt this was due to the violence of my love.

You will assume that I had no intention of marrying Oshin, but this was not the case. There were times when I thought I might go through

with it, but the resolve to approach Oshin's mother never came. I knew very well that she would give her consent most gladly, but I hesitated. Two months went by.

Then, at the end of April, something happened. It was a Sunday and I had been visiting with another teacher. By the time I got back to the rooming house it was eight o'clock. I found Oshin waiting in my room. The moment she saw me she threw herself down, which could hardly have failed to startle even me. I hurriedly knelt down beside her.

'What is it? What's the matter?' I saw that she was crying. 'Shin-chan, tell me what is wrong.'

'It's mother. She said something awful.' Oshin looked up and indeed tears were streaming down her face, but I could not tell whether she was laughing or crying.

Somewhat relieved, I asked, 'What did she say?'

'She didn't come right out with anything, but I think she suspects us.'

'Did she say something?'

'All of a sudden she asked me what I wanted to do. Do about what, I said. You can tell your mother at least, she said. Don't you and Mr Sawamura have some kind of understanding? I didn't say anything. Then she started telling me how important a girl's virginity is, and that sort of thing. I started to cry. She said if I wanted to marry you she wouldn't object, that she is fond of you too. All I had to do was tell her my mind was made up and she would come to see you—tonight if I liked. I almost asked her to do that, but I thought if she mentioned it to you without warning it might conflict with whatever you had in mind. I didn't know what to tell her so I didn't say anything. Then she stopped talking and that made me feel worse and I went on crying. I knew I had to say something, so finally I asked her to talk to you but to let me see you first. Do what you like, she said, but I could see she was a little annoyed. Then I came right here and I've been waiting for you ever since.'

I was utterly dumbfounded. At a time like this any decent person would have comforted Oshin and resolved to see her mother without delay. In my case the resolve was not forthcoming. My character being what it is, I cannot suddenly become excited in a situation like this.

You think perhaps I blurted out some callous remark before Oshin, but I did not.

'Well, then, your mother will be coming up soon to talk to me. We can work it out,' I said calmly. I began to stroke Oshin's back as, leaning against the brazier, she wiped away the traces of her tears. Immediately

the old passion began to flame up and I drew near to her. What a despicable excuse for a human being I am.

At that moment the door slid back and in came Oshin's mother (or, as I and two or three of the other boarders called her, 'Mother').

In the past few months, Mother almost never came to my room when Oshin was there. I was taken off guard and quickly drew away from Oshin, who immediately left the room. Mother sat down and I turned to face her across the small charcoal brazier.

'There is something we ought to talk about,' she began without hesitation. She tried to affect a business-like air but it was, after all, a difficult subject to broach. She faced me, smiling uncomfortably.

'Yes . . .' Even this response I managed only with great difficulty.

'I think you know what I want to say. I am very worried. I have to know what your feelings are.'

'No, my opinion is of no importance. It is what you feel that—'

'I myself have no objections. If you want to spend your life with Oshin . . . I have always admired your character and would be very pleased.'

'But I am such a—'

'Then let's settle it now. If we . . . if we don't . . . of course you of all people would never do such a thing, but what would people say about you two young people under the same roof, and who knows what they would think at your school . . .?'

'Yes, yes, that's why I, what shall I say, I thought I might just, tell the, tell just the principal and ask his advice . . .'

'A very good idea. Yes, that would be the best thing, to have the principal become the official go-between.' And so the matter was settled.

Oshin's mother no longer doubted that everything would work out. She was convinced that all would end well once I had spoken with the principal. By suggesting this solution I had opened an escape route. 'Honest' men like me are always tossed by the waves, yet we manage to ride them.

After Oshin's mother had gone back to her room (I myself lived in the one-room second story) I sprawled out on the floor and lay there in a fog for some twenty minutes, staring mindlessly at the ceiling. Except for an occasional lowering and raising of the eyelids, I did not move. I waited, fairly certain that Oshin would come back upstairs. When there was no sign of her, I spread out the bedding and went to sleep.

The next morning Oshin came to straighten up my room. She behaved just like a wife. She said very little, speaking mostly with her eyes. She

straightened my clothes and just before I went out said quietly, 'You will talk to the principal today, won't you?' There was not the slightest hint of doubt in her voice. A talk with the principal, she assumed, involved nothing more than briefly describing the situation to him.

When classes were over I took the principal aside and told him about the marriage plans. Of course I said nothing about my relations with Oshin. I merely told him that my landlady had asked me to marry her daughter and asked him what he thought I should do. Anyone else he would have immediately suspected of having seduced the girl, but he trusted me.

'Do you want to get married?'

'Either way, it doesn't matter. But I thought I should ask your opinion,' I answered casually.

'Well, I'm against it. You are too young. If you were twenty-five or -six it would be different, but you aren't even of legal age. Of course there *are* people twenty-five not so mature as you, but let's face it. You are simply too young.'

'Well anyway, I told her I wanted to talk to you about it first . . .'

'That's fine. I will refuse for you.' He was quite offhand.

'It won't be that easy, I think. They are very determined.'

'Yes, I had heard the woman was quite taken with you, but now it is really serious. Wait a minute, then, there must be something . . .'

He smiled to himself as he thought it over.

'Ah, I have it. When you go home today, tell her this. I am in favor of the marriage but I think it will not look good for you to be living in a boarding house and marrying the proprietor's daughter. Tell her that instead, you should stay with me for a while and after a month or so I can go as a proper go-between and ask for the girl's hand. That way it will look right and of course the conventions will be served. Tell her since I was kind enough to advise you, you want to do as I say. That will convince her, I'm sure. Then you move in with me right away. You can stay with my brother in the three-mat front room. It will be a bit cramped, but you can make do for the time being. Once you are at my place you don't go back to the boarding house. After a month I will go and see the woman and find some reason for ending things. She won't have any objections and you will be in the clear. Yes, that's it. There is no other way.'

I went back to the boarding house. When I presented the principal's plan to Oshin's mother she was overjoyed. Oshin herself was dejected but there was nothing she could say. She stayed in my room that night until

after twelve. I can still remember how sad and lovely she was. She begged me repeatedly to marry her, not in a month but right away. When I told her that I could not come back for a month she asked me to meet her in Kudan Park now and then. I agreed.

I moved into the principal's house. A month went by. I never went to the boarding house, but I met secretly with Oshin four times. The last time we parted Oshin was radiant. 'Tomorrow is the day. He'll come tomorrow. And if the principal doesn't come, you can. Please . . .'

Just as she had hoped, the principal went next day to the boarding house. I waited for him nervously. All that worried me, however, was that my relationship with Oshin might be discovered. The principal came back soon.

'It went more quickly than I had expected. That landlady of yours is quite an intelligent woman.'

I heaved a sigh of relief.

'Did she say anything?'

'What could she say? I told her you were too young for marriage, that we want to postpone it for the time being—not because you object to marrying the girl but because I want you to study a few more years. If you and the girl are meant to marry, then it will be some years from now—we can't be sure when, so if in the meantime she receives any good offers she should go ahead and marry. That was all I said. She certainly could not object.'

'Was her daughter there?'

'No, as soon as I came in she went upstairs.'

'What did her mother say?'

'Her expression did change somewhat when she heard what I had to say, but she took it calmly. She was a judge's wife, she said. She would not be unreasonable. She asked me to convey her regards to you. I didn't know she was a judge's widow. A very impressive woman.'

'Did you see the girl afterwards, as you were leaving?'

'No, I didn't see her. She was waiting upstairs, poor thing.'

I have never seen Oshin since then. One night, a week after the principal's visit, I passed by the boarding house in secret. It had been locked up, and in the gloom I could dimly make out the sign, 'For Rent'.

This is one example of an honest man's activities. Some day let me tell you a few more.

Take no Kido

The Bamboo Gate

1

ŌBA SHINZŌ lived in a Tokyo suburb and commuted to his office in the Kyōbashi section of the city. It was over a mile from his house to the train stop, but he covered the distance each morning on foot. The walk was perfect exercise, he insisted. Always good-natured, Shinzō was well liked at the office.

At home, there were five others besides Shinzō: his very sprightly mother, who was nearly sixty-eight; his wife, aged twenty-nine; his wife's younger sister, Okiyo; his seven-year-old daughter, Rei-chan; and finally the maid Otoku, who had been with them for nearly six years.

Shinzō's wife rarely did any housework. She was rather sickly. Okiyo and Otoku ran the kitchen, with help from Shinzō's mother. Otoku, who was only twenty-three, wielded great authority within the household. She brought to her work the energy and determination of one who had resolved to devote her life to the family, and this often set her word above even that of the venerable old mother. Okiyo complained on occasion that the maid was far too willful, but there was never any doubting Otoku's intentions. She wanted what was best for the family. The victory was always hers.

Beyond the Ōbas' back hedge stood a small cottage that looked like a storage shed. A gardener and his wife lived there. He was in his late twenties and she was about the same age as Otoku. The two women engaged in back fence gossip as though it were some sort of contest to see which one could outdo the other.

When the gardener and his wife moved in, they asked permission to use the Ōbas' well. The Ōbas considered this a reasonable request and allowed them to draw water whenever they needed it. Two months later the gardener and his wife asked if they might cut a three-foot opening in the hedge. Then they would not have to walk around to the front gate each time they came to the well. This request was received less cordially at the Ōba house. Otoku, especially, was opposed to the idea. She insisted that such an opening would be like a doorway for burglars. But Shinzō's kindly instincts won out in the end. They could cut through the hedge on condition that they build a sturdy wooden gate and take care

to close it properly each time. All the gardener did, however, was to cut some twigs of still-green bamboo from the underbrush nearby and weave them together with some shaggy cedar branches.

‘Is this a wooden gate?’ Otoku said loudly when she saw it. ‘Where is the latch? We would be just as well off with nothing at all.’

The gardener’s wife, Ogen, was at the well, scrubbing out a rice pot. ‘It is a perfectly good gate,’ she retorted. ‘You certainly couldn’t expect us to do a professional job. My husband is no carpenter.’

‘Then you should have gotten a carpenter to do it.’ Otoku knew quite well that the gardener could never afford to hire anyone, but Ogen had made her angry.

‘If we were in a position to get a carpenter we would,’ Ogen snapped.

‘All you have to do is send for one. It’s easy.’ Otoku had the last word.

Her sarcasm enraged the proud Ogen, but the gardener’s wife knew Otoku’s influence in the Oba household. She could only lose by opposing her. Controlling her temper, she spoke to Otoku in more apologetic tones. ‘Please don’t be angry. Look at it this way. I will be the only one going in and out. As long as I am careful to keep the gate closed, everything should be all right. Besides, if a real burglar wanted to get in nothing would stop him—not the hedge, not even the front gate. A wooden gate here wouldn’t mean a thing to him.’

‘Well, I suppose you are right. I won’t worry as long as you make sure to close the gate. I suppose you know about the burglars and junkpickers who are always lurking in the neighborhood. You can’t be careless for a second. You know Mr Kawai, don’t you, the army officer who lives near the new bakery? Just two or three days ago, I heard, someone made off with a brand new copper washbasin from his place.’

‘How did that happen?’ Ogen stopped drawing water and turned to Otoku.

‘The maid was using it at the well. She went to hang something up to dry behind the house, and in the split second she was gone, they got it. She had left the gate open, just a crack.’

‘You really have to be careful nowadays. Don’t worry about me—I’ll watch out. But you, too, Otoku. Make sure you don’t leave anything worth stealing unguarded, even for a second.’

‘Oh, I certainly don’t intend to. But it slips your mind sometimes. Watch out for junkpickers, Ogen. Anyone coming in the back gate will have to pass your house.’

‘Oh, I’ll be careful. It makes you feel so stupid when they take even the littlest thing—a piece of firewood or a lump of charcoal.’

'Well, a lump of charcoal is not such a little thing these days. This is Sakura we use. One sack costs 85 sen.' Otoku pointed to the bags of charcoal beneath the eaves. They formed a line running from the well to the kitchen door. 'How much do you get in one sack, after all? Imagine what one piece is worth. It's like burning money. And all of it, this expensive coal and the cheap kind, too, costs twice as much as it did last year. How can we go on like this?' she sighed.

'The six of you must use a lot, too. Isokichi and I don't need so much, but still I find myself buying three sen worth one day, five sen the next. I just don't know. . . .'

Otoku clucked sympathetically. Meanwhile the two had forgotten their quarrel over the gate. They went on chattering at each other as always.

It was late in November when the days are shortest. The sun was beginning to set when Shinzō arrived home. When he heard that the gate was finished, he slipped on his clogs without bothering to change into Japanese clothes and went out to the back yard. He stood there looking at the bamboo gate, smiling.

Otoku walked over to offer her comments. 'That's quite a job he did, isn't it?'

'Did the gardener make this?'

'Yes, he did.'

'It's a funny gate, but not a bad job for a gardener.' He gave it a shake. 'Stronger than it looks. It's better than nothing, I suppose. We can get a carpenter to come over and build us a real one some time. Oh well, a bamboo gate is still a gate.' He went into the house, laughing.

In her cottage on the other side of the hedge, Ogen listened to their conversation and laughed to herself. 'What a smart man Mr Ōba is. There aren't many as kindhearted as that nowadays. I like his wife. His mother can be fussy at times, but she is nice, too. Okiyo is a divorcee and a little hard to get along with, but she is basically kind.' Then Ogen's thoughts led her to Otoku. She remembered the maid's sarcastic remarks. 'If we didn't have to depend on them for water, I wouldn't let her get away with talk like that. She is nothing but a farm girl who has let a little good treatment go to her head. "That's quite a job he did," she says. It serves her right Mr Ōba just ignored her.

'But still, you have to admire her. She is not bad looking, and she is about my age. She could still get married any time she wanted to, but she works heart and soul for the family. No ordinary woman could do that. And she is so honest it is almost frightening. The Ōbas are making no mistake when they trust everything to her. . . .'

With such thoughts running through her head, Ogen lit the lamp and picked up the charcoal basket. There was not a piece left in it. She touched the sooty old kettle and was relieved to find it still hot. 'I hope Iso gets back before the water cools off. If he doesn't get that advance there will be no fire tonight or tomorrow. We can manage a fire, though. We can always burn leaves. What we haven't got is tomorrow's rice.' She heaved a sigh. Ogen seemed terribly pitiful, sitting alone under the dusky lamp, ashen-faced, her hair in disarray.

Just then her husband Isokichi came slouching in. Ogen asked him immediately whether he had gotten the advance. Without a word, he handed her his wallet. She opened it.

'Just two yen?'

'Uh-huh.'

'What can we do with two yen? As long as you were getting an advance, why didn't you ask for five yen?'

'I did.'

'I am sure your foreman would have loaned it to you if you had really pressed him for it. Look.' She showed him the empty charcoal basket. 'There's no more left. And if we buy rice tonight there will be no money left, either.'

Isokichi puffed silently at his pipe, then knocked the ashes into the brazier. He drew the little table towards him and started to eat without waiting for Ogen to serve him. Instead of the customary tea, he poured plain hot water on his rice and sloshed it down. He seemed to find it quite delicious.

Stunned into silence, Ogen sat and watched. Isokichi devoured one mound of rice after another, and showed no signs of stopping even while working on his sixth bowlful. Amazed at first, Ogen began to find him comical.

'Are you really so hungry?'

'I didn't have anything to eat this afternoon,' Isokichi said, filling his bowl for the seventh time.

'Why not?'

'When I got to work today after making the gate, the foreman gave it to me for coming late at such a busy time. I told him about the gate. He said he doesn't give a damn what I do at home. I got so mad I tore into my work. I never looked up when the girls came around with snacks later on. After all this I hated to go to him for money. But I knew I'd have to, and at quitting time I asked him to loan me five yen. "It must

take a lot of nerve for a loafer like you to ask for an advance," he said. He told me to be satisfied with two yen. What could I do?"

Thus, in a single burst, Isokichi explained both his hunger and his failure to bring home more than two yen. As his story ended, his chopsticks came to rest.

Isokichi was normally a reticent man, and whenever he spoke he did so with difficulty. But when the occasion demanded it, as this one did, he could express himself with great animation and pepper his speech with strong language. Such outbursts delighted Ogen immensely. And yet, though they had been married almost three years, Ogen could not be sure whether Isokichi was a loafer or a hard worker. As a Tokyo woman of changeable moods, she was content to live with uncertainty. She told herself that 'my Iso' might take three, four, even ten days off from work, but that he could do the work of three men if the need arose. However bad the situation might become, they would not suffer, she believed. Yet she had never considered what constituted a 'bad' situation. She trusted Iso to resolve emergencies with a boldness of which he and no one else was capable. And yet she had doubts. Sometimes he seemed utterly spineless. These misgivings arose whenever she was feeling their poverty most keenly, and the combination was simply too depressing. She strove to banish them from her thoughts.

Isokichi was one of those 'inscrutable' men. The Ōba women found his presence vaguely unnerving. Even Otoku treated him respectfully. Whenever she seemed hesitant with him, or Okiyo was overly polite to him, Ogen fairly burst with delight.

But after all, Ogen was fed up with their never-ending poverty. This was the time of life when Isokichi should be bringing home his best wages, yet still they were without a decent, settled home. The places they lived in were never much more than sheds or the corners of old warehouses. Soon the wives of the other gardeners came to think of Ogen as an 'inscrutable' woman—a fool.

When Isokichi had finished eating, Ogen rushed out with a basket. She returned with a few chunks of scrap charcoal. While she worked at starting the fire, she chattered on and on about the bamboo gate, what had happened with Otoku, what Shinzō had said when he saw it. Iso offered not a single comment.

Soon Isokichi was yawning broadly. Ogen spread their thin, soiled bedding on the floor. Their two bodies huddled together as one, they drew the single blanket up over their heads and went to sleep. The cold night wind blew in through the cracks in the walls and floor.

They drew in their legs and arms as best they could, but Isokichi's back was still no more than half covered.

2

December came, and the weather suddenly turned colder. The suburbs of Tokyo showed the signs of winter. Ponds froze over and needles of frost dotted the ground. This came as a surprise to those spending their first winter in the newly fashionable suburbs. But Ōba Shinzō, to whom it was a familiar experience, simply pulled on his boots, got into his heavy overcoat, and commuted to work as usual.

The first Sunday of the month was like an Indian summer day. The sky was a clear, deep blue, the sun shone brilliantly, and the air was perfectly calm. Shinzō's mother and wife decided to spend the day shopping. They took Rei-chan and Otoku downtown with them, leaving Shinzō and Okiyo at home.

The ladies of the Ōba family rarely left home. A trip downtown they called 'going to Tokyo'. Preparations for such an excursion involved great commotion. The house was thrown into an uproar as the four women dashed about changing their clothes and getting ready. Once they had gone, the house fell utterly silent, as though all signs of life had disappeared.

Still in a quilted house-kimono, Shinzō lay in his sunfilled study, reading the paper. Before noon he was bored. Stepping onto the veranda he walked idly up and down.

Shinzō heard Okiyo calling to him through the paper door of her room.

'What is it?'

'I know you are looking for lunch,' she said playfully. 'Well, we don't have a thing.'

'I see.'

'"I see"! We really don't have anything.'

Shinzō slid back the door to Okiyo's room. He found her sewing away busily.

'You seem to be working very hard.'

'It's a little coat for Rei-chan. Pretty material, isn't it?'

Shinzō did not answer her. He was looking about the room. 'You ought to be doing that in a sunnier room. You don't even have a brazier here.'

'It's not as though my hands were freezing. Besides, we are trying to economize these days.'

'Economize? On what?'

'Charcoal.'

'I admit charcoal has gotten expensive lately, but not so expensive that we suddenly have to start economizing.'

Shinzō knew nothing of such problems. He had no interest in household affairs.

'Shinzō, don't you realize that we spent more on charcoal than on rice last month? And we are just getting into the coldest season. We must be very careful how we burn charcoal over the next three months. It could really get out of hand. Otoku does nothing but complain all day long how much we are spending, and I see what she means.'

'Yes, but what's the good of catching cold for economy's sake?'

'Oh come now, that won't happen.'

'No, not today. Today it happens to be warm out. Not even mother could catch cold when it is like this.' He stretched, yawning deeply. 'I wonder what time it is.'

'It must be near twelve. Shall we eat lunch?'

'No, I'm not the least bit hungry. Funny, at the office lunch always seems so far away. . . .' Shinzō wandered off, peeking idly into all the rooms. When he got to Otoku's room he walked in. He had never been in the maid's room before. He found the window had been left wide open. When he leaned out to have a look around, he came face to face with Ogen from next door. She had looked up just as Shinzō's head emerged from the window above her. She flushed a deep red and finally managed a flustered word or two.

'I see you use very good charcoal here. . . .' She was holding a piece of Sakura charcoal and started to juggle it. The open charcoal bags were lined up in their place beneath the window. Ogen had to pass by them on her way from the bamboo gate to the well.

Shinzō, too, became somewhat flustered. Floundering in search of an appropriate comment, he said, 'I think the women know more about. . . .' and, smiling amiably, drew himself back inside.

Shinzō went straight to his study and thought over what he had seen. He found it difficult to reach a conclusion. It was impossible for him to hold to his initial judgment—that Ogen had been on the verge of stealing charcoal. Perhaps she had in fact been merely looking at it. Perhaps she had picked it up quite innocently as she walked by, then blushed instinctively when she found someone looking at her. And of

course it was the master of the house himself peering down. That might have surprised her. Shinzō wanted very much to believe the less damaging explanation, which seemed more reasonable the longer he considered it. Eventually he was able to. He decided in any case to mention this to no one.

If she had actually been stealing, however, the consequences of ignoring it could prove unpleasant, Shinzō thought. But having been seen once, she could hardly go on doing it. The best thing was to say nothing. He was sure of it now. In any case, Otoku was right: they should never have let the gardener put up the bamboo gate.

Shortly after three, the shoppers trooped in from downtown. They gathered in the living room for a noisy review of their excursion. Okiyo had to join them, and Shinzō too was expected to listen and make suitable responses. Rei-chan had embarrassed them by loudly demanding a large doll at a bazaar in Shimbashi; a drunk had bothered everyone on the streetcar; Shinzō's wife had bought him Daitoku's best imported undershirt because of his sensitivity to the cold; and everyone agreed that it was impossible to keep to one's budget when shopping downtown. They went on without stopping, the talkers enjoying themselves far more than the listeners.

At the first break in the commotion, Otoku got up as though she had suddenly remembered something and went out the back door. She returned a moment later with a strangely serious expression on her face, her eyes open wide.

'It's true!' she muttered, staring at each of the others. They waited for an explanation.

'It's true,' she said again. She looked at Okiyo. 'You didn't use any of the charcoal from outside today, did you?'

'No, just what was in the basket.'

'Then I was right! It has been bothering me the way we run out of charcoal so fast. I thought for a while the coal man might be cheating us, packing just the bottom of the bag full. But even so, it shouldn't be disappearing at this rate. Then I had a thought. Yesterday, when Ogen was out, I peeked into their place through a hole in the paper door. And do you know what I saw?' Otoku lowered her voice. 'In that old, cracked brazier of theirs, there were two pieces of Sakura neatly banked with ashes. That clinched it. I was going to say something, but I thought it would be better to set a trap and make absolutely sure. That's what I did today.' She smirked at the others.

'A trap?' Okiyo seemed concerned.

'Before we left today I put marks on the top pieces of charcoal. Just now I found four pieces of marked Sakura and two big chunks of soft coal missing.'

Okiyo was flabbergasted. 'What does it mean . . .?' Shinzō's mother and wife looked at each other in silence. Shinzō himself realized that things had come to a head but decided not to say anything as yet. He simply did not have the heart to reveal what he had seen earlier.

Otoku had expected her shocking news to touch off an uproar but, aside from Okiyo's exclamation, no one said a thing. With a note of disappointment she asked, 'Well, now we know who has been stealing the charcoal. What shall we do about it?' The silence continued.

'What do you mean?' Okiyo asked the maid. 'What would *you* do?'

Somewhat annoyed, Otoku replied, 'The charcoal! Unless we move the charcoal they will just go on taking all they like.'

'Why not put it under the kitchen porch?' Shinzō suggested. He knew that Ogen would no longer be able to steal charcoal, even if they left it where it was. But having once decided not to reveal what he knew, there was little else he could do but show concern.

Otoku dismissed him curtly. 'It is full.'

'Is that so?' After that Shinzō remained silent.

'Why don't we do this?' Shinzō's wife had an idea. 'We can clear out the bottom of Otoku's wardrobe and, for the time being at least, put the coal in there. Otoku's things we can put in the wardrobe in the middle room.'

'Let's do that,' Otoku immediately agreed.

'But,' Shinzō's wife added, 'it will be very inconvenient for you.'

'Not at all. I prefer that wardrobe to my own.'

'That settles it, then,' the old woman spoke up. Then she started to complain. 'I have been telling Shinzō for months to have someone make a storage shed for us. He keeps putting it off and now this happens. None of this had to happen.'

Shinzō smiled and scratched his head.

'No, this is all because of the bamboo gate,' Otoku insisted. 'I said it would be like making an entrance for burglars if you cut through the hedge. Now it looks like the burglars made their own entrance.' Without realizing it Otoku had been speaking in her usual shrill tones.

'Quiet! Quiet! She can hear you,' the old woman broke in. 'I was against letting them cut the opening, but what's done is done. If we suddenly close it up now, there will only be hard feelings. Look at it this way: they are not going to live in that shack forever. We can always

fix up the hedge after they move. Now we have to go on as if there were nothing wrong. Otoku, you must not say a word to Ogen. We didn't really see her take anything. And besides, now it is just a matter of having a little charcoal stolen. Let's not make it any worse. Believe me, when you have people like that hating you, you lose more than charcoal.'

Okiyo shared the old woman's apprehensions. 'I agree. I know how ready you are with your nasty remarks, Otoku, but don't say anything to Ogen. There is no telling what she would say or do in return. It could be terrible for us. And that husband of hers, Iso. What a strange one he is. He is the kind that would get back at you no matter what it cost him.' Shinzō's mother, too, was worried about Isokichi, although she had not said as much.

'What do you mean?' said Shinzō, getting up. 'He is no different from anyone else. Still, it would be best not to get involved with him.'

Shinzō went back to his study. The charcoal question having been settled for the moment, Otoku and Okiyo hurried to prepare supper.

Otoku waited for Ogen to appear, as she always did in the evening, to draw water. How would Ogen look tonight, she wondered. Otoku thought it strange when the hour came and no one emerged from the bamboo gate.

An hour after sunset Isokichi came to draw water.

3

Ogen knew that Shinzō had seen her, but she felt she had managed to deceive him. She had gotten the lump of soft coal into her sleeve and, holding the Sakura wrapped in her apron against herself, she was just about to take one more piece when Shinzō looked down from the window. Innately trusting soul that he was, he probably had not realized what she was doing, Ogen believed. Still, when dusk came, she could not bring herself to go to the well.

Before Isokichi came home from work Ogen put out the bedding and lay down. She found it impossible to sleep. At night she could sleep with Isokichi, even on their thin, soiled mattress. The warmth of their two bodies made the cold bearable. Alone, the stiff quilt would not fit closely around her and she felt colder than if she had been up and about. Starting to shiver, she curled up into a tight little ball. One would never have guessed that the thing lying there was a human being.

As she lay awake thinking, she became increasingly upset. Accustomed as she was to being poor, she was still not accustomed to being a thief.

The actual value of what she had stolen during the past few days did not amount to much, but this was the first time she had ever calculatingly taken anything from anyone. When she thought about what she had done, Ogen felt troubled in a way she had never known before, and with her unease were mingled fear and shame.

She recalled vividly the scene in the yard. She could see Shinzō looking down at her. And when she thought of her clumsy attempt at nonchalance, her juggling of the lump of coal, she felt her face burning.

‘What have I done?’ she cried aloud. Gradually she edged towards delirium. ‘What if they find out?’ ‘They can’t find out. Mr Ōba is too good a person to tell.’ ‘You can’t count on that.’ ‘Good people are fools.’ She went on in a frantic dialogue with herself, and soon she was shouting again, ‘Fools! Fools! Great big fools!’ To this she added, ‘They’ll never find out.’

She looked out from under the quilt. The sun had gone down and the moon was shining on the paper door. She did not get up to light the lamp, but curled up under the covers again. It was then that Isokichi came home.

She told him that she was in bed with a bad headache. Neither angry nor surprised, Isokichi did the chores himself. He lit the lamp, added charcoal to the brazier when he found the kettle lukewarm, and went to draw water. He puffed away at his pipe while waiting for the water to boil.

‘How is your headache?’

She did not answer. He stared at the mound of bedding.

‘How is your headache, I said.’

Still she did not answer. Iso said nothing more. Soon the water came to a boil. As usual he poured plain hot water over cold rice and started eating as though he could wait not a moment longer.

Under the quilt Ogen began to sob, but Iso, munching on his pickles and sloshing down his rice in gluttonous ecstasy, could not hear her. And by the time he was through eating, her crying had stopped.

Iso started knocking his pipe against the edge of the brazier, and in response the mound of bedding began to shift. Before long Ogen was sitting up, half wrapped in the quilt. Her knees protruded slightly from the open front of her kimono, but she made no attempt to cover them. Her face was flushed and her eyes moist with tears. She was sobbing steadily.

‘What is this all about?’ Iso demanded. He seemed not the least bit surprised or upset. He was being Iso.

'Iso, I can't stand it any more,' she began. Her voice became choked with tears. 'We have been together for three years, and in all that time there has never been one day any different from all the rest. We just go on and on with barely enough to keep from starving. I never expected things to go easy for us, but this is too much. We live like beggars. Don't you see?'

Iso said nothing.

'All we do is eat to go on living, but anyone can do that. No one starves to death anymore. A life like this is just too awful.' She wiped the tears away with her sleeve. 'You are a perfectly good workman and you have only me to support. But what are we doing? We live in constant poverty. And not just poverty—we have never once lived in a decent house, always in some shed like this or—'

'Oh shut up, will you!' Iso slammed the ashes out of his pipe. Still he did not look at her.

'Go right ahead and get angry if you want to!' Ogen burst out. 'Tonight I am going to have my say.'

'Nobody likes being poor, you know.'

'Then why do you take off from work ten days every month? You don't drink, you don't have any other bad habits. If only you would go to work like you ought to we wouldn't be so poor.'

Iso stared silently at the ashes in the brazier.

'Just work a little harder and things won't be so miserable. We can't even afford scrap charcoal these days. . . .'

Ogen threw herself onto the quilt in a rush of tears. Isokichi started up. He stepped into the straw sandals lying in the dirt-floored foyer and ran out. It was a clear, moonlit night. The air was still but piercingly cold. Iso hurried along to the new road. Half a mile further on he reached the house of another gardener, Kinji. They played chess until after ten. As he was leaving, Iso asked for a loan. He wanted one yen. Kinji could get the money for him tomorrow, but not tonight.

On the way home Iso passed a charcoal shop. Here they sold *sake*, firewood, and scrap charcoal. The Ōba family bought Sakura coal and firewood at this shop and here too Ogen came to buy charcoal. The shop had closed early, which was common practice for stores in new suburbs. Iso ambled up and down out front where the sacks of charcoal were piled under the eaves. Then he nimbly hoisted a sack onto his shoulder and darted down a side road among the ricefields.

He rushed home. Entering the dirt-floored foyer, he dropped the sack with a thud. Ogen, who by then had cried herself to sleep, awoke at the

sound. It made no impression on her. She said nothing and Iso too was silent as he crawled into bed beside her.

The next morning Ogen was surprised to find the sack of charcoal.

'Iso, where did this charcoal come from?'

'I bought it,' he answered, still in bed. He never got up until breakfast was ready.

'Where did you buy it?'

'What difference does it make?'

'Well I can ask, can't I?'

'At a store near Hatsu's.'

'Why did you buy it so far away? You didn't spend today's rice money, I hope?'

Iso got out of bed. 'You were being such a nuisance about charcoal last night that I went to Kinji's for a loan. He didn't have any money so I went straight to Hatsu's. He was glad for the chance to show me what a big shot he is. "Just a bag of charcoal?" he says. "Go to my *sake* shop and tell them I sent you." They gave me the charcoal and I brought it home. We should have enough there for four or five days.'

'At least,' Ogen said happily. She wanted to open the sack right away, but decided to wait. As she briskly set about making breakfast she said, 'That much coal should last *us* more like ten days.'

After Isokichi had left the house the night before, Ogen's troubled thoughts had led her to some realizations. If she was going to urge her husband to work harder, she could not simply lie in bed feeling sorry for herself. In addition, she had better show her face next door in order not to arouse further suspicions.

With this in mind, Ogen went about her housework as usual. After sending Isokichi off with his lunch, she ate breakfast and tidied up briefly. Then, taking a bucket along, she opened the bamboo gate.

Okiyo and Otoku were in the back yard. Okiyo said, 'You look so pale, Ogen. Is something the matter?'

'I caught a little cold yesterday. . . .'

'Oh, that's too bad. You must take care of yourself.'

Besides a curt 'Good morning', Otoku said nothing. She watched Ogen's expression change as she noticed that the charcoal sacks were gone. Otoku smirked at Ogen, who caught this and glared back. Otoku was ready for a fight. With Okiyo close by she had to restrain herself. Just then a delivery boy from the Masuya walked in through the bamboo gate. The Masuya was the store from which Isokichi had stolen the charcoal.

‘Good morning, ladies,’ he said, and noticed immediately that the sacks of charcoal were gone from their customary place. ‘Are you keeping the charcoal somewhere else now?’

Otoku piped up as though this were the opportunity she had been waiting for, ‘We put it all in the house. It’s not safe to keep it outside any more. The price of charcoal is so high nowadays, you feel stupid getting robbed of a single piece.’ She looked at Ogen. Okiyo glared at the maid. Ogen had drawn her water and taken a few steps towards the gate when the delivery boy spoke up.

‘You’re right about that. Someone stole a bag from us last night.’

‘How did that happen?’ Okiyo asked.

‘Because we always leave it piled up outside.’

‘What did they steal?’ Otoku asked, her eyes riveted on Ogen.

‘The very best charcoal—Sakura.’

Ogen staggered through the gate, gritting her teeth as she listened to the conversation.

Once inside, she threw down the bucket and hurriedly opened the sack.

‘Oh! It’s Sakura!’

Shinzō’s wife and mother both scolded Otoku severely. When the sun began to set and Ogen did not appear to draw water, Okiyo became worried. She went next door to comfort Ogen and ask after her cold. It was too quiet inside. She called, ‘Ogen, Ogen.’ There was no reply. She timidly slid back the paper door. The charcoal sack stood in the middle of the dirt-floored entranceway. Ogen had used it to stand on, it seemed. She hung from a sash tied to the central beam, dead.

Two days later the bamboo gate was torn down. The hedge eventually grew back to cover the opening.

When two months had passed, Isokichi married a woman of Ogen’s age. They went to live in Shibuya-mura, in yet another hovel.