

Encounter on a Dark Night (Yamiyo, 1894)

People often wondered just how large the compound was, surrounded by its garden wall. How long had the front gate been boarded up? Storms had had their way with the place, and what remained was disquieting. There were none of the proverbial ferns running rank among the ruins, but on the rooftop weeds now choked the tiles. Who was it who lived there mourning the past?

The time for silk brocades was clearly gone. Now, one was fortunate just to cross Miyagi Plain, somehow to make it through the autumn fields of hagi, where the lonely call of the deer echoes for his mate. Even a princeling can fall from favor, left to doubt if they were not a dream, those days when he rubbed elbows with the Court on mats spread out for a viewing of the summer moon. The November winds are cold, nothing lasts for long. From a silent pool, the Asuka River suddenly becomes a torrent.

Malicious rumors lingered, and no one came to call. How moving – three lonely people, a mistress and her servants. They dwelt in the capital but they could well have been hiding in a mountain hut.

"That's where the swindler met his end," people said, pointing at the house. There was evidence, however, that if indeed the man had speculated, it might not have been from sheer greed. He left little wealth behind. The censure that lived on after him was because the good things to his credit he had done quietly. Few were witness to his kindness. Scandal, rather, would long remain attached to the house, the garden, the old pond. Best not say any more – it was horrid, people thought. And yet on rainy nights talk would often turn to the details of Matsukawa and his house. Everyone agreed: somehow or other it was an eerie place.

From the very beginning, there had been little sign of life in the big house. It had increasingly taken on the appearance of some deserted temple, a ruin where every sound rang ominously. Scant effort was expended to maintain the place. Rooms not in use were closed off, and the shutters were fastened tight for days on end. It was like the empty villa where Prince Genji's love, Yūgao, had died of fright.

The mistress of the house, Oran, though no heroine from the old romances, was all the same a young woman to whom her servants were devoted. Unlike Yūgao, she was possessed by no demons, yet her existence was a strange and lonely one. An air of mystery shrouded her quiet life.

The nights were especially sad. In her dark rooms burnt a single candle. Only the shadow on the wall kept her company. Alone and disconsolate, she Hut up through the nights, heard the bells toll daybreak. The woman's past and the question of her future would have troubled the toughest of men. The most awesome of gods would have spilt tears for her.

It was the fifth month by the lunar calendar, the twenty-eighth day. No moon graced the evening sky. Only a moment before it had been dusk, but already the night was black. The wind whistled fiercely through the big oak behind the house. It was like a woodland there, dense and overgrown. Almost without noticing it, she heard the sound of waves rising on the pond in back. Who could guess how deep its waters were? The noise seemed near enough to touch. She sat with her elbows on her desk of sandalwood, lost in thought, her eyes half-closed as if in sleep. Now and then her eyebrows would ripple in a frown, a look of infinite sorrow.

The heat of these past few days had been enough to melt gold. How bothersome her abundant hair became in summer weather! She had washed it that morning. It fell to her shoulders with a luster so rich that the black took on a shade of green. It brushed the edges of her cheeks, themselves so pure that snow would suffer in comparison. Connoisseurs of female beauty would surely have lamented her seclusion. There was a radiance about her reminiscent of the goddess Kannon, but she looked more forlorn and still more beautiful.

Suddenly there came a sound of commotion from the front hall. The voice was unfamiliar. The young beauty rose from her languid state and listened carefully. Was it a fire? A quarrel between the old couple who served her? Highly unlikely, she said to herself. But she was suspicious and she straightened her collar, trying all the harder to hear whatever was transpiring. The sound of flurried footsteps reached her.

"Oran, are you reading? Excuse me for bothering you – but do you have some medicine I might borrow?" It was the old woman's voice, speaking from outside the door.

"What's happened? Is your husband sick? The medicine will depend on what's the matter. Calm down and tell me what's happened."

The woman stood in the doorway and spoke with deference. "Oh, no, ma'am, it's not Sasuke. Tonight, just now, like always, he finished making his rounds in the garden and went to check to see that the gates were closed. The side gate isn't shutting properly, and he's always hurting himself on it, so he thought he would fix it. He was opening and closing it, to see what he could do about it, when a rickshaw came along the main road

and lit up the night. It had a lantern with an arrowhead crest, so right off he thought it must be Namizaki coming to see you. He left the side gate open and waited for him, but it seems it wasn't Namizaki after all.

"Just as the rickshaw passed in front of the gate, a young man appeared in the road. Even Sasuke has no idea where he came from, but the wheels of the carriage hit him. Sasuke heard him cry and dashed out, forgetting all about his forehead. (It was sore, you see, from where he bumped it on the gate.) Awful though! The rickshaw flew right by and never even stopped!

"The man who was hit doesn't look too badly off, but he seems mighty weak for such a youngster. He doesn't even have the strength to wobble. The poor thing looks half-dead. Of course, Sasuke wouldn't think of leaving him there, lying in the road. 'I don't know if Oran will approve,' he said to me when he brought him in. 'It's hard to tell whether the boy's conscious. See what you can do for him.' That's what he told me. I'm not exaggerating. The poor thing!"

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From days of hunger and fatigue, the boy's body was as tattered as a cotton rag. Now from the accident he had the wounds where the wheels had hit him, and his fright. It was as if his soul had left him. He barely breathed; for a while he floated in a trance. Balmy scents were in the air. He felt cool and refreshed. Gradually he began to return to his senses, as the veil curtaining his head slowly lifted. Opening his eyes, the boy looked around him. "He's coming to. I'll give him some medicine." He heard her speak and he wondered if he hadn't entered paradise. Beside his pillow was a goddess such as he had never seen.

"What a weakling!" Sasuke scolded. "All he has is a scratch on his little finger. Boys get that much when they slip chasing butterflies. It's nothing to faint over, for heaven's sake. Get hold of yourself, boy, and take your medicine."

"Don't be so harsh," Sasuke's wife rebuked him. "He's tired out all the same, no matter what it's from. He needs looking after."

"Don't worry about staying here," Oran said to soothe the boy. Just relax and go to sleep. It doesn't matter how long you stay. If you want to let your family know, I'll send someone. This kind of accident could happen to anyone, but we don't want your family to worry. Just tell me if there's anything we can do. You're already recovering nicely, but do stay the night. I'll send word. Otherwise, your parents will go imagining terrible things have happened. We must let them know you're safe. Where do you live?"

He did not answer. It was painful for him to raise himself. His face was emaciated. His wide eyes looked leaden, and the bridge of his rather handsome nose was sunken. In contrast, his forehead was prominent and strong, The hairline was thin, but his hair was long and covered his collar. He seemed about to speak. Instead, tears fell. His colorless lips quivered, and he was overcome.

Quietly Oran drew closer. "Here," she proffered him medicine.

"No. I'm all right." He waved it away. "I don't have a home to return to. I don't have any parents. It doesn't matter whether I'm killed in an accident like tonight's, or fall somewhere at the roadside ... nobody's going to mourn for *me*. When people do show me any kindness, it only makes me more unhappy. You should've left me lying at the gate. As long as I go on living, I only see the sadness in the world. I'd as soon die and let the dogs feed on me. It was dark tonight, but I remember the man's face and the crest on his damned rickshaw, and I'll get even with him – even if I can't repay you for being so nice to me. Please let me go now." He started to rise but his step was uncertain, and he staggered as he moved.

"Watch out! Don't be a fool!" Sasuke, who had suffered with his own child, began to berate the boy. "Even if you don't have any parents, show some respect for their memory. They *did* give birth to you. You can't throw everything away so easily. It's because of children like you, who know nothing, that parents worry so." The old man made him sit and listen to the scolding as if he were his own son, and the boy hung his head.

"He looks faint, Sasuke," the old woman warned her husband. "That's why he says these funny things. We have to keep him here tonight and let him get a good rest."

The boy put himself in their care, and Oran returned to her apartments.

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The morning glory by the fence blooms in splendor for a single day, and this is all it lives for. Why should he who knows the limits of his fate tremble over things that might have been?

The boy's family had enjoyed good fortune through his grandfather's generation. Around the region, the man had been revered as a great physician. When his palanquin approached, even the village children would come running across the rice fields to pay homage. Who, then, had led ill fortune down the road toward the boy?

His father died young and his mother was forced to hide in the shadows, for the two had never married. The world is not an easy place. The man's family had their means of preventing her from pressing any claims. The woman knew a protest would avail her nothing. Even if she swore by the gods and by her lover's departed soul that the child she was carrying was his own, in his kinsmen's eyes she would be speaking from greed.

She blamed her suffering on her humble origins, but she wiped away her tears and returned to her family's home. She was already seven months pregnant. It was the second week after her lover's death. Her choices were limited indeed. She soon wearied of a world of growing enmity and she longed to leave this life. The first birth, even in the best of times, is no easy thing. When the child was born she bled profusely, and without ever seeing her baby's face the poor woman died at twenty-one. The autumn rains had taken her away.

From the child's first days, before he had his bearings in the world, he grew up without a father or a mother. The only warmth he knew was when he nestled in the arms of his grandfather, resting his head against the old man's chest. The spring ice thawed and children came out into the fields to play, but he was always excluded from their games. He hid behind trees; he became more and more difficult.

His grandfather was the only one to take pity on the boy. "Poor child! The world's against you!" he sympathized. "No wonder you are twisted – when you grow up like a flower on the edge of the field, with nothing to protect you. You're just unlucky; there's nothing you've done wrong. If people want to look down on you for being an orphan, they're the ones with something wrong. Maybe there *are* no gods in this world. If everyone wants to be our enemy, we'll have to be prepared to fight. After I'm dead, wherever you go they'll be cruel. You can't trust anyone. When they're mean, answer them in kind. They're going to be against you anyway, so don't bother playing up to them. People are worthless. They'll only treat you like a worn-out pair of sandals."

There were tears of anger in the man's eyes. His resentment toward the world would never leave him. The more sympathy he showed his grandson, the worse people seemed to treat the child. From now on, the old man vowed, anyone who tried to hurt the boy would have his grandfather to contend with. He didn't care who it was – even the son of the village headman. He would see that justice was done.

And so the behavior of the two became increasingly unruly. The attitude of the old man – approaching senility and without any farmland of his own to till – was to get even, to show them all. In the end, he was despised by all the farmers who did own land and whose existence was secure. It seemed certain that the lives of the old man and the boy would be snuffed out soon, like night candles put out by the wind.

Not long after the thirteenth anniversary of his daughter's death, the man fell seriously ill. He knew that he was dying and that medicine could not help him. The poor boy and the stubborn old man watched their fortunes ebb still lower. They could see the moon peeking in through the holes in their thatched roof.

Had others heard the way he faced the end, they would have been astonished. The man was determined to go quietly to his death. "No gods will come to greet me with their songs," he joked with a smile on his face. "I wonder where I'm going – heaven or hell?" These were his last words.

Thenceforth the boy was completely alone in the world.

His name was Takagi Naojirō, and he had now reached the age of nineteen. It would be painful even to guess at all the suffering he had known. Of late he had decided to abandon the foothills of his childhood, where Mount Kano had always loomed above him, in the district of Amaha where he was born. Did he have to sacrifice a lifetime, he would ask himself, because he had no relatives? He remembered what he had heard of the traditions of his father's family. The sons had all studied medicine in Tokyo. With both his parents gone and no guardian to advise him on his future, he relied on his own judgment. Perhaps there were evil people in the capital, but surely he had talents he could put to use there. Let people think it rash of him – he was going off to Tokyo. The city would be pleased with him. He was sure that people there would find him capable.

Were he alive today, perhaps Meng Ch'ang-chün would have given the boy a warm reception, but with others Naojirō did not fare well. His quirks were like kinks in a thread already braided. He wanted for any of the qualities that one might call appealing; he was a clumsy fellow into the bargain. Before learned men and the heads of temples where he called, eager to find work, he did not make a favorable impression.

Who could take him seriously? He was ready to sell himself in return for an easy life with food and lodgings. One house mistook him for demented and treated him most shamefully. Another, thinking him a beggar, invited him into the kitchen and offered him a meal. If that's what they think I am! he raged, and, with a breach of manners that was scandalous, he shrieked and overturned the tray of food they offered him and bolted from the house.

He had the courage of a wild boar, but wisdom he lacked. Anyone could see that he was something of a fool. There were naturally some who felt sorry for him. "Calm down, calm down," people would say. "Don't be afraid of an honest day's work. If we have anything for you to do, we'll be glad to help you."

He worked for a time gathering kindling for the furnace at the public bath, and for a while he delivered meals for the noodle shop. He worked as a cook. He was hired as a gardener. In one year, he had been taken in for a trial period by thirty different homes. It was bad enough when, after a mere three days or so, he left without so much as a good-by, but there were partings worse than this. The come-hither looks of a disheveled mistress would turn his stomach, and he would answer her overtures with a slap as he absconded. The woman, afraid to tell her husband, took the matter up with the police – one more enemy against him.

His latest job was at a flophouse in the dingy back streets. For the past few days he had been manning the front desk, until the owner said something he didn't like. His old temper flared again. Why the hell should he put up with this? He broke his writing brush in two and hurled the inkstone at his boss. He had no idea where to go; his defiance was going to cost him. Now how would he feed himself? He would bite his tongue and bleed to death before he begged for food. As he heard the bells toll at dusk, he felt worse off than the crows. When they left a place, they could build a new nest.

And so fate brought him to the Matsukawa house. Just in front of the tumble-down gate he was hit by the passing rickshaw. It bore an arrowhead crest, something Sasuke had likewise noticed.

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Three days went by. The boy did nothing but sleep. He could remember little of what happened during this time, save the goddess whom he had seen on the first night, appearing at his pillow to attend him. It was all a blur, and yet he remembered something of her beauty and the lovely voice that had consoled him. When she held him in her gentle arms, it was like being born again in heaven. Would he wake to find that he had only dreamt of feeling like a butterfly among the flowers?

"Take my hand when you are lonely," he heard her say. "Rest your head in my lap when the world is cruel to you. Together we can play among the mountains and the fields. The tears you hide from others you need not conceal from me – my sleeve will dry them all. I shall never hold you in contempt as others have, and, even if your character is flawed, I shall never despise you for your weaknesses. If there are secrets troubling you, offenses in the past that still torment you, tell me of them. It will cleanse your heart and make you feel better.

"I shall always be beside you. When you are angry, when you are disappointed. When you feel ashamed. When you have failed and know discouragement. When all you want to do is flee the world and hide among the mountains. When murderous or thieving instincts have the better of you. When you yearn for the distinction of high rank and high office. When your life seems bereft of beauty and you long to see the flowers and the moon. When you are waiting for a wind to cool you, or a cloud to bring some rain. When your boat is adrift upon the waves, or your little hut amid the mountains is oppressed by raging storms. When you are buried deep within a valley where the sun can never shine. Or when the summer sun pounds down upon the earth. I am your water; I shall quench your thirst. When sleet and snow are falling, let me be your fur robe on cold winter nights. We were never meant to be apart. Who cares what the world has to say? Forget distinctions of good and bad and beautiful and ugly. There is nothing you should hide from me. You must come to feel at home here. In my arms, in my lap."

The voice echoed in his head. Who was she? For these gentle words of hers he was ready to bow down before her.

It was then that he returned to consciousness. He felt consumed with the most intense heat. For a week he had slept, waking only to drift off to sleep again. Now he was in full control of his senses and could eat the gruel set before him. The couple were kind almost to a fault. The way they fussed over everything was enough to make him cry. They told him how wildly he had behaved while he was sick. The cut on Osoyo's forehead, they recounted, was from a cup Naojirō had thrown. But they bore him no resentment; they laughed as they

told him these things. He was sorry for what he had done. He broke out into a sweat. Thoughts of regret came to him. His old shame returned again. What could he say? Timidly, he tried to ask if there had been another one besides the two of them looking after him while he was sick. Sasuke laughed loudly. "If you want to ask a question, go ahead and ask. Nobody's going to hear you – just the mice in the ceiling and the lizards on the wall. There are only the two of us, and the young lady, rattling around the place. No dog, even. We go for a whole year without a visitor, never see a neighbor. In an empty house like this, you don't have to worry about asking questions. You won't be able to stand it here now that you're getting better. You've been dreaming all this time, but now you'll have trouble sleeping when you lie awake and hear the wind in the pine. Poor fellow. I'll bet you're not used to such a lonely place."

"The young lady you talked about – was she the one looking after me while I was sick?"

"Yes, indeed."

Then he had not been dreaming.

Still, he wondered if the soft, soothing voice had actually been real. Was it not perhaps a dream that such a woman had caressed him?

Several days after he regained consciousness, Oran visited him, and the same questions returned to Naojirō. If Oran was the goddess of his dreams, then she had changed herself into an ordinary mortal. She was not without compassion, but there seemed to be a fence between them now. There was something punctilious in her manner. Could this be the woman who had held his hand? Who had petted his head in her lap?

"Dry your tears," she had said, and he could vaguely remember how their hands had touched: he was breathless and trembled with embarrassment – and fear. Everything about the woman in his dreams made him think of the mother he could not recall – her beauty and her elegance and the yearning he felt for her. The Oran now before him inspired the same sort of yearning. She was charming, if slightly intimidating. Was it possible she had ever said all those tender things?

Her hair was different now, though her face had the same beauty as the woman in his dreams, and her comforting voice had the same pleasant tones.

He doubted, however, that she and the goddess were one and the same. He was in a stranger's house, then, a stranger he could not altogether trust. Oran had been kind to him, but he sensed that it was time for him to go.

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Naojirō had made up his mind to be off. He would go as quickly as the arrow leaves the bow. He went to say good-bye to Sasuke and then to Oran.

"Wait a minute." Oran was shocked. "Take a look at yourself in the mirror. How far do you think you'll get when you're as pale as that? You can be stubborn if you want when you're well, but don't expect to have your way while you're still sick. Don't be so impatient. If you don't take things easy until you're better, you won't be able to do anything. I told you when you came here – you should feel at home with us. Don't think you have to go. I want to see you looking strong and healthy. In this last week or so we've already grown accustomed to having you around. You belong here, it seems. You know the saying, 'When sleeves touch, it means there is a bond between two strangers.'"

"You said yourself, Naojirō, you have no home to go to. So what am I to think? You're not going to have an easy time of it. As you can see for yourself, my own fate, like this crumbling house, is uncertain enough. When I compare my plight with yours, though, it scares me. You'll be tossed by the waves – it's a world of uncertainty. You'll grow weary of life. I suppose you won't listen to what a woman has to say. But I feel the same way you do. I, too, have suffered at the hands of others. I, too, have seen better days. If you don't want to discuss these things with me, talk to Sasuke. Or Osoyo. They have experience. They know what life is about. They are the ones to discuss it with. This is not a haunted house, you know," she said, smiling at him. "There aren't any goblins here to trick you. Don't be so afraid to stay."

"I hope you're not teasing just because you know how weak I am. You're right – I have nowhere to go. There won't be anyone to help me if I fall down along the road." He was mortified at his own frailty. The bravado was gone, and there was nothing he could say.

The old man and woman added their own urgings to those of Oran. He ought to stay at least until he had recovered. It was what they wanted, and it was what Oran wanted. He was their guest. Why did that

embarrass him? He could be a great help to them with the work. And for a young man like him, surely that was better than a life of idleness.

Sasuke and Osoyo began to give him tasks to do, first easy ones that would not tax his weakened condition and gradually more strenuous chores as his health improved. He was treated as a member of the family. Caught up in the work, his spirits rose. The days passed, and, though he had never committed himself to staying, gradually he put down roots. Before he was aware of it, he had been there some time. He settled down, and the days went by.

He often worked in the gardens, which, as one might expect of such extensive grounds, were badly in need of repair. Trees and bushes had grown tangled. There were many broken branches. Weeds were everywhere. Ferns and wildflowers grew rank among the grasses. Gradually Naojirō worked his way round to the back garden, uprooting the weeds as he went. There a huge, gnarled pine dominated the scene. It would take several men just to reach around its trunk, he imagined. The lower branches grazed the surface of the old pond, which gave the tree the appearance of a great snake peering into water. It was impossible for him to tell how deep the pond might be.

Once there had been a summer house, but it was gone now. On the hill a few remains still stood. No autumn breezes blew. The setting sun shimmered in the dusk. The sight summoned strange feelings in the boy's heart. It was not a place to be alone. As far as the eye could see, the view was awesome. Even without such a distressing scene, Naojirō was inclined toward the melancholy. He was always lonely, and he felt ever more detached from the world.

Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights, too, it is said that in summer it is the night that is most beautiful. How lovely Oran's house was by moonlight. And how lovely, too, the vine of "evening faces" that grew beneath the eaves.

Oran's rooms were at some distance from the others, down a corridor that turned several times before it reached her suite. It was the innermost part of the house. Here, if Oran, alone in thought, had anything to say, there was only the pine breeze to answer her. Naojirō and the old couple had rooms near the front hall. They lived beneath the same roof, and yet there was a barrier between Oran and the others. Once he had recovered, Naojirō had little chance to open his heart to her.

Sasuke and Osoyo revered the young woman as if she were a deity. They served her with complete devotion. For her, they were ready to throw their lives away as bits of dust. Loyalty is of course commendable, but what they felt toward Oran was more like awe. She was a single, splendid flower they wanted to protect from losing its petals or from being plucked and taken from the garden. They threw up a rope around her and stood watch. No one could approach her, and so Oran had no intimacies with anyone. In time, Naojirō came to share the couple's attitude. He felt more like a servant to Oran, although in fact he was her guest. There were none of the usual opportunities to see her, for she did not indulge in the pastimes common to young women. She was not one to sit on the veranda in the evening with a book of stories and a fan to cool herself beneath the moon. Nor was she given to lolling away her summer afternoons burning incense, perfuming the breeze in the bamboo grove and exorcising the mosquitoes.

Naojirō knew nothing of her life and nothing of her family. He could as easily grasp a cloud as he could know the truth about Oran. Sasuke and Osoyo told him bits of things, but they did not amount to much: her father had been a rich man by the name of Matsukawa something. He had taken to speculating, where money is so easily lost. His wealth had evaporated like the clouds on a mountain peak when they try to come too close to the flowers on the ground. All that remained was his daughter Oran and a legacy of burdens. How sad it was. Even the house was not her own.

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Dew was in the garden and gentle breezes blew. It was still the dim hours of the dawn. Oran awoke early; today was the anniversary of her father's death, and she wanted to pick flowers for his grave.

As she went into the garden with her scissors, Naojirō followed after her. "The baby's breath in back are pretty," he said. Perhaps this would be his chance to find out more about her. He spoke more freely than usual, and she was in good humor. Gathering a handful of lilies and baby's breath and a spray of other flowers, she seemed to enjoy strolling in her own garden, as if it were all new to her.

"Is today the memorial service for your father?" Naojirō asked her offhandedly. "How old were you when he died? You're like me, I guess," he smiled. "We've both been orphans since we were young."

"Let's go down the hill and rest a minute over there. I'm too tired to talk."

"Do you want to go back, then?"

"No, no. Just let's rest a while." They started down a mossy path. "It's slippery; let me hold on to you." All at once she was very close to him as they went down the hill.

When they came out at the bottom, they were standing at the edge of the pond. The ground was level there, and the bushes had been cut back. Oran cleared away some of the remaining debris. "Let's sit here."

Naojirō was delighted. She was treating him almost like a brother.

"Come over and sit down," she urged, making room for him in the clearing.

"That's all right. I'll sit over here," he said, squatting amid the withered grass.

"So you lost both parents early, too?" she asked him. "I don't even know what my mother looked like. My father raised me by himself. I miss him so much. It's bad enough ordinarily, but on days like this – I wish I could find some distraction, some way to forget. You probably have the same memories."

"Yes, I do." The boy's eyes glistened. "How many years ago did you lose your father? Your parents must have been young."

"No, they weren't so young. My father died eight years ago. It was a parting like something in a nightmare."

"From a sudden illness?" The boy kept pressing for details.

"Illness? No. My father drowned in this pond."

Naojirō turned white with surprise and looked away.

With her cool eyes, Oran seemed to be smiling. She had no idea how the nun felt when she took her grandson, the Emperor Antoku, with her to the bottom of the sea, but she knew that her father had had enough of the sadness of living, and had sought a quiet place to sleep. Waves might disturb the surface, but, when one thought about it, the depths of the water were at peace. There, at the bottom of the pond, was a better refuge from the world than any mountain hut or cabin by the sea.

Silently Oran stared at the ripples on the pond, gathering momentum as a wind came up through the pines. It sounded in the tops of the trees and made the grasses stir, but Oran did not attempt to leave.

"Naojirō, why are you so quiet about yourself? Don't make me do all the talking. It's your turn to tell me something."

The boy felt words stick in his throat. He looked down into the grass.

"That won't do at all," Oran laughed at him. "Don't be like a girl."

It scared him that he should still feel such emotion. Was she laughing because he showed this on his face? He was a sissy next to her. It didn't upset her in the least to go on and on telling him about these things, while it sent a chill through him just to hear her story. He couldn't speak, and he tried to keep her from seeing his discomfort. Was he imagining it? Surely the color had gone out of his face.

"I suppose such talk is not for others' ears," she sighed. "Telling everything one knows may be the usual way, but I'm sorry I mentioned these things. I don't have to say it, I suppose; I guess you find it repellent to talk about your family, too. I won't say anything more." Her coloring had changed.

"No, it's natural that you want to talk about your father. Don't be upset."

She had spoken to him with the frankness of an old friend. "I'm a little embarrassed all the same; please forget what I've told you," she said as she stood up to leave. "Let's be going now."

"I'll carry the flowers for you."

"No. That's all right. Give me your hand instead."

They started back along the same path. Her white hand held Naojirō's shoulder. He looked slight of build, but she recognized that he was, after all, a tall young man.

"How old are you, Naojirō? Nineteen, twenty? You're young enough to be my younger brother. How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know – one or two years older?"

"Hardly. I'm twenty-five. I'll be thirty soon, and then it's all downhill."

"Really? You look younger."

"Is that a compliment, or are you making fun of me?" Her face flushed as she walked along.

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If a woman is gentle and submissive, one need ask for nothing more. If she has some gifts and develops them, all the better. But there are those who, faced with adversity and standing at a fork in the road, are resolute and fan the flames of their problems until they spread in directions that were previously safe. Even if Buddha or Confucius were to take her hand and offer her advice, "Save your lectures," she would say, "I'm not interested." She would turn away and hide her tears. This, truly, is someone who is headstrong.

When a woman is blessed not only with a pretty face but also with a lovely bearing and a gentle education, once she has found a husband she cannot be faulted on any grounds. She seems flawless, complete.

But how fragile good fortune is! Oran had come so close to this perfection. Her father, all that she had left in life, had died. It would have been bad enough had he succumbed in due course to an illness, after nursing and medicine had done all they could and his allotted time was up. But such was not the case. The charges of speculation and shady business deals lingered long after they had prompted him to act. Oran herself did not accept the accusations, and when she tried to reckon with whatever offense had led her father to his suicide, she found it hard to believe that heaven made no distinction between right and wrong. The one who had committed a crime was not her father, but the unctuous gentleman with his fancy clothes and his neat little beard. Her father had been only his assistant. Her father was the one who had had to run ahead and clear the path. He was the one to be sacrificed, like the taster swallowing the poison, while his master survived to sleep on soft pillows and dream of flowers on a spring night. At the very least, he might have felt compassion for the daughter of the man he was indebted to. But now when he passed her gate, he was loath to stop for fear of rumors. Disgusting, indeed, is the human heart!

Oran was adrift on a wild stream. In her young woman's heart, sadness and fear and bitterness mingled. But she was her father's child, she told herself, and she had to do something. If it seemed evil, so be it. Her character had never been a virtuous one, in any case. She must be sure to look calm, at peace on the surface, while she went about seeking revenge. She was ready to accept the consequences. Her father summoned her from the afterworld. Never mind if it was not the highest realm of paradise; she could find a home in hell. Oran vowed to carry out her dreams. She was not acting on a whim. She would often force a smile when in fact she felt like crying, and she would look up toward the eaves to disguise her emotions. She felt the pain of sadness, but her actions belied it skillfully. There was a sorrow there that people did not see.

Love was something she did not believe in. One hides one's feelings for a man, but eventually they come out as clearly as the random patterns on a cloth. And then, there are the barriers that keep the two apart. One suffers waiting for a man who does not come. It is not a pleasant thing, love.

Hooking up with Namizaki had proved as painful for Oran and her father as being caught is for a fish. Relations between the men were based solely on money. But she had been sincere in her feelings for Namizaki, though in the end he ignored her. She felt like a single piece of thread, unwound and discarded.

Namizaki Tadayou. A handsome man he was, and a member of the Lower House of the Diet. He lived over in Banchō, and his name was often heard these days. He came from a prefecture not far away, but no rumors had circulated to mar his chances of election. His secrets had been kept between himself and Matsukawa. One did wonder, though, where half his present fortune came from.

When a man is active in the world he has many acquaintances, and rumor had it that her father had an excellent husband in mind for Oran. Then clouds appeared and evening fell on the hibiscus tree. Namizaki had said he would marry her. After matters had proceeded that far, he went abroad. The months passed, and by the time he returned her father was dead. Today Namizaki was a man of influence. He had cleared away the clutter of his former life. But perhaps she ought to fish it out again—the promise he had made.

The halls of government and administration were things she knew nothing of. Yet Oran could well imagine that Namizaki's recent marriage into the aristocracy had helped him get ahead, along with his talent for rhetoric. Indeed, she herself had fallen prey to his palaver. Regrettably, until the autumn of her twenty-fifth year, she had been living in a dream. For whose sake had she remained chaste? Her fidelity was worth no more than the color of the evergreen when there is no one in winter to appreciate it.

She had contemplated her position, and she could not see doing any of the usual things. She was not about to abandon the world for the dark robes of a nun, off somewhere in the fields of Saga, tamely viewing the autumn scenery while she nursed a grudge against her former love and read the sutras out of some half-baked belief in enlightenment.

If she were going to engage in anything so extreme, she wanted to show the world, to do something she would be remembered for. If she could not have the repute of a thousand years, she would settle for a

moment's glory, even if it meant difficulties later. Oran herself was startled to acknowledge how much of the demon she had in her, but she was prepared to accept it as her true nature.

The notion that life can be lived without rancor or regret is an illusion only love leads us to believe. How frightening is the mind of a woman with a broken heart!

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Winds rustled the reeds as summer yielded to fall. Nothing had changed at the Matsukawa house, except for Naojirō's decision: he was giving up his ambition to become a doctor.

Before, he had always been determined; he was ready, he believed, for the most arduous tasks in order to attain his goals. With his mind made up, nothing was beyond his reach. He was a man, and when he said he would do something he did not go back on his word. Until now he had been despised by every good-for-nothing in every village where he had lived, and, lately, even by Sasuke and his wife. They took him for a fool and told him he could never be a doctor. But he would show them. If he didn't, he could hardly claim to be a man. Did they think he had no backbone?

Whenever he got onto the subject, the veins stood out on his temple and he pounded his fist.

"You don't know yourself," Sasuke told him scornfully. "Becoming a doctor and planting potatoes are two different things. Give up these plans of yours – they'll never come to anything."

Oran, who felt sorry for the boy, was a more sympathetic audience: "If you have your heart set on it, it's not impossible, I suppose. Remember, though, the competition is severe, Naojirō. Failure is quite common. There are so many people in the world, and, my goodness, more every year. Not to mention the tuition. Where will that come from? You say your mind's made up, but I wonder if resolution alone is enough. Your good qualities – your earnestness and your integrity – I'm afraid aren't worth much in today's world. Things don't always go smoothly. Success is not automatic. If you keep that in mind, and if you still go ahead and accomplish your goals, why, it would be wonderful, of course. But I can't help worrying about all the difficulties."

Ever since he left home, he had been running blindly, never looking back. How could he recant his vow to be a doctor? But he had stumbled through life, he was menaced and rebuffed. And then he was hit by the rickshaw. From one misstep he had sustained an injury that might well deform him for life.

His benefactor, too, suffered in this same floating world, in the same autumn wind. The gate and walls around her house were crumbling. She lived hidden like a jewel buried in the dust. She looked perpetually sad. And so Naojirō began to have his doubts. Perhaps heaven did not, in fact, look out for the good.

No one in his family – not his father nor his mother nor himself – had ever even harmed the smallest insect. When he saw a starving puppy, he was always ready to share his food. He had not expected, then, that he would go through life creating enemies, hated by others, without a place to live. But he would not grovel to achieve his goals. Trailing around like a dog on the muddy heels of some patron did not appeal to him. It would be sleazy to rise in the world that way and then assume the air of the benevolent healer. He would give it up, this dream of his. He would not become a doctor after all. He'd sooner live like a monkey, with no skills to depend upon, than compromise his own integrity. Once he had given up his hopes, he would never mention them again.

But it meant that he had nowhere to go. The world was his enemy. Without a dream to sustain him, what was he to do? There was only Oran to turn to. And her fences were in ruin. The autumn grasses ran wild in her yard. Her garden resembled an open field. She was a wild flower damaged by the storm, with a pitiful enough future herself.

He had always been a simpleton. Oran, however, was another story. She was a woman, and yet she had incredible will. No doubt there were not many people as cowardly as he, but Oran had enormous strength. Nevertheless, she was isolated from the rest of the world. She had no one to depend upon. A single pillar could not support an entire house. Sasuke and Osoyo were completely dedicated to Oran, but, in Naojirō's eyes, they alone could not save her. In a strong wind this flower of theirs was defenseless; the petals would scatter.

The couple had been serving Oran's family through several generations. How many years, then, must they have known the young woman's kindness? By comparison, Naojirō's debt to Oran dated from only yesterday. But he was ready to lay down his life for her. If it sounded like big talk, he meant it. When he thought about all

the uncertainties in life, he would gladly let Oran's wishes determine his fate. He had not yet pledged his loyalty to her, but his intentions were apparent in his face.

People react strangely to things. The fonder Naojirō became of Oran, the cooler Sasuke and Osoyo grew. Their kindness to him when he was wounded – before they even knew him – had been totally sincere; there was no reason why it should have disappeared. But Oran came first. And Oran came second. In their eyes, anyone who interfered as Naojirō had done was a dolt who didn't know what's what. Even Sasuke himself, who had held Oran in his arms when she was just a baby, never forced his opinions on her. He kept half his thoughts to himself. Oran's wish was law. This was as it should be. But a boy without a home falls down, receives aid, and does not know gratitude. He starts acting like the young lady's brother! It was detestable. The only thing to do with someone like that was to look him in the eye and set him straight. Sasuke didn't hesitate to do so.

The upshot was frequent bickering. One would have thought Sasuke too old for such a thing; it troubled Oran, and for the life of her she could not decide who fared better in the arguments.

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In autumn, the last glow of sun sinks into the dusk, and crows returning to their nest give out a plaintive cry.

A messenger in dark livery arrived with a letter box from Namizaki. It was a rare occurrence.

Oran sat watching the sun's parting rays reflected on chrysanthemums along the bamboo fence. Suddenly Osoyo came running in. "Oran, you have a letter!"

"What a surprise! 'Then they are not the sleeves of my beloved,'" she said ironically, reminded of the poem, 'these white chrysanthemums before me.'" She took the letter from Osoyo and went into her sitting room.

The letter was lengthy and infuriating; he began without so much as an apology for the long absence.

All kinds of things had kept him busy, he said. Yet he often thought of her. He was like a little boat just trying to navigate among the reeds that overran his life these days. But tonight, at last, he was free, and by himself at the pied-à-terre he kept in Somei. She would know why he was there. No one would trouble them. He had things he wanted to tell her. There were too many eyes watching at her place, too many noses sniffing around. He had sent his rickshaw for her.

The man hadn't lost his way with words, Oran mused as she showed the letter to Osoyo. Nor had he lost his talent with the brush. In the old days, a letter like this in his pale and elegant hand would have sent Oran into paroxysms of delight. Tonight she had her guard up.

"Well, you can be carefree about it, miss. But I can tell by reading this, that's not how he feels. It's obvious how eager he is to see you again, after all this time. Hurry up – I'll help you get ready. His man is waiting."

"Do you mean you think I should go? Oh, you are naive," Oran smiled.

There was a time when she had been bewitched by his letters. If he hoped that it would happen again, however, he was living in the past. The Oran of today had put away her girlishness. She was wise to the old tricks. Shyness was not what kept her from visiting him tonight. Oh yes, she knew it was common practice for a man to stop seeing a woman suddenly, contemptible as it might be. She was resigned to that. But she would not reconcile herself to his arrogance. He was too smug about his rise in the world. He was trifling with her. She had to live with her father's bad name, but she had no need of a jester's reputation.

He said they had to be discreet, but that was only his excuse. Why couldn't they have met on dark nights? When a man loves a woman, he will travel a thousand miles barefooted to be with her. She didn't have to read the newspapers to know how many nights a month he spent at the house in Somei – a stone's throw away from here. If anything, he went out of his way to avoid her. When he had to pass her gate, his rickshaw went faster. She pitied him, if the prospect of meeting a young woman could cause him so much anxiety. It would seem she had restricted his little universe.

But she saw through him now. The invitation was a ploy to relieve his conscience, to undo the fetters hampering his movement, to expand his world again. He wanted to deceive her and hear her say once more how she loved him. He would tell her not to worry. If he couldn't take her for his lawful wife in this world, they would be together in the next. He wanted her to live quietly in the shadows. Then he would be at ease again. Oh, she knew him well. Indeed, he must be worrying a great deal. How could she have caused him all this apprehension? They were not two people from the same back alley who had tired of each other and had nowhere to retreat. They had positions in society, after all, and they ought to refrain from acting disgracefully.

For her part, she would keep her bitterness to herself. In her heart of hearts, she smiled with indifference to the man.

In reply to the letter, Oran complained of a cold and a lamentable appearance. She begged pardon, but in her present dishevelment she could not bring herself to call on someone so important. On the surface, then, it was a gracious letter, and she sent it off with his messenger.

The rickshaw Namizaki had dispatched for her pulled away from the front gate. On the messenger's coat was the same arrowhead crest that Naojirō had seen on the rickshaw lantern the night he was run down. Could it be the same carriage? The man's arrival had piqued Naojirō's curiosity, since Oran so seldom had a visitor. He kept his eyes on the messenger as the fellow waited for Gran's reply. And then, suddenly, the man turned to leave. On the back of his jacket was the same mark: the arrowhead crest.

"Who was that?" Naojirō asked Sasuke.

"You're full of questions, aren't you? Just a messenger – they do come now and then, you know."

The chilly answer left Naojirō without a rejoinder. Sasuke might at least have told him where the man was from, there was no harm in that. He was not trying to start a fight. Naojirō began to leave the room when Sasuke said more:

"What good would it do you to know? It's Oran's letter, so you'd have to ask her what it's all about. I guess I can tell you who the man was, though. He works for Namizaki, the Diet member you read about in the papers."

"Is he a relative of hers? I've never seen him visit. Or maybe he used to come before I was here?"

"Nosy, aren't you? What are you asking all the questions for?" Sasuke was laughing at him.

"Nothing. I was just curious. The messenger had the same crest on his jacket that I saw on the lantern of the rickshaw the night I was hit."

"So what do you want to do? Cut off his little finger? Like to get even, eh? I'll bet you were a snake in the last life. I have to hand it to you, though. You don't forget. You're dependable. The man who forgets the wrongs people do him is the same kind to forget a debt of gratitude. Yes, I have to admire you for that." Sasuke was often irritated with Naojirō and said things that he later regretted. But now he had spoken from the heart.

Naojirō was for once speechless.

The day's developments weighing on his mind, the boy went to visit Oran's rooms that night. Sasuke listened from outside, and he heard things he had never expected. With his head nestled in her lap, tearfully Naojirō confessed his feelings to Oran. The two of them consoled each other, while, behind the door, Sasuke could just make out the young man's shadow.

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A poem with feeling and taste can still want for a true expression of the heart. Where does it go, youthful sincerity? We seem to take it for the mark of a fool.

The night had worn on. Oran was sitting by her lamp when Naojirō surprised her. She could tell he had been crying, as he bowed down before her with a great show of respect. It was no casual visit he was paying.

"What's all this about?" she asked impatiently. "Don't be so formal. What's troubling you?"

Her words only elicited fresh tears from the boy. He took a deep breath. "I'm going to be leaving you."

Oran was completely startled. "Why? Did you have a fight with Sasuke? I know he's stubborn and his complaints get on your nerves, Naojirō, but he means well. You shouldn't let it bother you so much. He's always upset about something."

"No, it's not that. He didn't say anything. And the fights – I'm used to them. I just don't have anything to look forward to in life. I'm tired of living." He bowed low again and wept.

"What are you saying?" Oran sat up straight. "That you want to die?"

"You don't think I'd joke about it, do you? I keep thinking about what you told me in the garden that day. About your father drowning in the pond. You said it was the only quiet place, away from the world. Well, I'm someone who's never had any peace of mind, any quiet. Ever since I was born I've been unhappy and unlucky. I'm tired of it. What's the point? I can't hope to repay you. You've been so kind to me, Oran, for months now. I owe you everything, the way you've taken care of me. It's been wonderful for me. It's the first time I've really been a part of the world – and the last. I feel as if I've seen enlightenment, all of a sudden, and I can't take this world any longer. You're the only one I'll miss. You've done so much for me. I couldn't leave without thanking

you. There are so many things I wish I could say ... I can't put them into words. I hope you have a long and happy life, Oran; I hope you get everything you want. Me, I was born a fool. I guess I was never meant to spend life with someone as fine as you are. I'll look out for you, though, when I go to the next world."

His words were choked with tears. "You see, I couldn't live without your affection, Oran. I feel more dependent on you all the time. If I could be content just to see you and hear your voice – but I can't any more. I have feelings I don't even understand myself. It's as if there were a fire in my heart. I sometimes wonder where these embarrassing thoughts of mine come from. Now I think I understand. Tonight, when I found out whose messenger that was, I knew I wanted to die. It's uppity of me to say it, but I was jealous. I felt hatred as I watched him. And, to make it worse, he had the arrowhead crest on his jacket – the one I wish I'd never seen. I was almost crazy that night it happened, but I do remember, just for a second, seeing the man with the little beard riding in the rickshaw that hit me. Now I know his name. Namizaki. I hear he's a member of the Diet. He must be important. But that's not how I think of him. He's a good-for-nothing, as far as I'm concerned. My mind keeps coming back to what he did that night. Nothing would make me forget. I hate him, and yet he's the man you're in love with! I guess that makes us enemies. I don't know what to do. It frightens me. I want to kill myself. But I don't want to cause *you* any grief.

"If by some chance I'm wrong – I mean, if there's no connection between the man who hit me and the man who sent the letter tonight – it doesn't really make any difference. It only shows how depraved I am. My suspicions come from bad thoughts. I could do terrible things, Oran. Even if I hide how I feel, in my heart I follow you everywhere. The shame of it! I'll go to hell, and that soft voice of yours will be there with the flames to torture me. I'm alone ... When I think of all the changes that have come over me, I feel like a different person. I don't know myself what awful things I might do. I'm going to die without repaying any of your kindness. At least I won't be causing you any more trouble. You probably loathe me. After I'm gone, do you think you could find it in your heart to pray for me?"

His voice quavered and tears welled in his eyes as he knelt before her.

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Who was it who said love is a transitory thing? Who said there is no fidelity?

Oran was abashed to look back on the life she had led until yesterday. Had Naojirō really been so in love with her? She'd felt sympathy toward him, yes, but she had never expected he would want to give up his life for her. Only now did she begin to appreciate him. No one had ever expressed his love with such sincerity'. No one had ever offered to sacrifice his life. In the past, what had captivated her childish heart had always been the externals: a handsome face, a clever mind, things as temporary as a spring breeze. And so she had fallen in love with Namizaki. She did not like the thought of being inconstant, but certainly she was not the one who had been unfaithful. Namizaki had dropped her like a fan he didn't need when fall came, a remnant of summer forgotten in the autumn wind.

"I'll tell you something, Naojirō. I know it's stupid for a woman to hold a grudge against a man who abandons her. But life has made sport of me. I feel as if some wicked god has taken over my heart. I can't hold my head up in front of you. I'm on the road to evil. You must detest me. Don't you find it frightening? If you don't, and if you're not afraid of devils, then consider me your wife. From tonight on, you will be my husband.

"Oh – and yet you're right to give up the world, Naojirō. Some day I'll do the same. There have been times when I've known happiness. What are they, though, compared to all the sadness? This world! I tell you, it's a gathering of the damned.

"Naojirō, listen – if you're truly fond of me, perhaps there is something you could do. What I'm going to ask may sound unkind, or cold-hearted. Between casual acquaintances, such things could never be said, but you and I are different. I understand now completely how you feel. You must imagine how painful it is for me to make this terrible request.

"The man who wrote me tonight – I was once in love with him. Not any more, though: he's my enemy. He's the one responsible for this shackled life I live. I'll be bound to him until these ties are cut. I don't know – maybe this too is part of being in love. All I know is that I hate him now. The resentment I have against him is with me day and night. I'd like to kill him with these two hands of mine. But I can't. Put yourself in my position. Unfortunately, I have to take care of things for my father. God knows, it's not from any desire on my part. There are the instructions in his will to be carried out, you see. But you – if you're going to take your life anyway – you could do it in my place. Why don't you wait for a chance on a dark night and do the killing for

me? It doesn't matter how you do it. Ah! When did I turn into such a witch? If only I could die, I would!" She was a woman who never cried, but now there were dewlike tears on her sleeve.

"The arrowhead crest you hate so much – I'm sure it belonged to Namizaki. He would have been on his way that night to the house he keeps in Somei. And he wouldn't want anyone to know about the accident. Especially since it happened in front of where I live. That's why he fled like lightning. Yes, I'm sure it was Namizaki. In a way, it was my fault, since he was trying to avoid me. When you think of it, I'm the one to blame for all this. I haven't really rescued you; I've led you down the road to death. Now everything depends on your pledge. Give your life for me, Naojirō! At least kill Namizaki. With luck," she whispered, "you can escape. But be sure to wait till dark before you come back. We don't want anyone to see you. Once you're in here again you're safe. There's no one here. No one ever visits, not even stray dogs. A woman living alone like me – the police will never suspect. So you must try to escape."

Naojirō had listened speechlessly. "I understand. You don't need to say any more. I never expected to hear this from you. I didn't intend to live out the night. It never occurred to me that in dying I could answer your prayers. I'll show you I can do it! I've never completed anything before. I've been the model of a coward. But this time I will! My heart's set on it! I'm ready to give up my life. So long as *you* at least think I'm brave, then I'll be happy. Even if he gets me instead, or the police take me and hang me, I'll have no regrets. The only thing I regret is your telling me to escape. You shouldn't have said that, Oran. I'll never succeed with one eye on my getaway. It's cowardly. I'm not a clever man. I don't know any tricks. If my heart is undecided, when the time comes, your advice will only make me hesitate and keep me from concentrating on what I've got to do. I'll be too concerned about making my escape. Talk like that will spoil the purity of the whole mission. Let him kill me – that will be the end of it. If I do kill him, and live to be captured, I won't mention your name, ever. Don't worry. It'll be my crime alone. There's only one chance in ten thousand that the gods will protect me and bring me back to you. We won't see each other again. If I'm caught, I couldn't stand to let the blame fall on you. So don't expect to see me again. We can't associate. Pretend I'm already dead. Listen for rumors if you want to find out what happens. This is the end. I'm ready to die like a man."

He was resolute. There were no tears, but as he left his shadow fell somberly against the sliding door.

It was not a night Oran would soon forget.

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That night Naojirō left the Matsukawa house under cover of darkness.

The next morning Sasuke and Osoyo seemed startled to find him gone. There had been arguments and complaints, but Osoyo had never imagined he might up and leave them. Each morning she would pray to the different gods for Naojirō's safety. The months passed, and winter came.

One day there was an incident in front of Namizaki's house in Banchō. The distinguished parliamentarian was returning in a drunken, sleepy state from an important political rally. It was a meeting he had organized. He had been among the speakers, and the applause was still ringing in his ears. As his rickshaw drew up to the front gate, a man leapt out of nowhere and grabbed the hood of the carriage. It overturned, and the man seized hold of Namizaki, pinning him against the ground. He flashed a dagger and made as if to slit his victim's throat. But perhaps the blade was dull. It grazed Namizaki's cheek, leaving only a superficial cut. "That'll do you for now!" the man yelled savagely and was gone. Namizaki had no idea where he fled, who he was.

There were headlines in the morning paper. A suspect was apprehended, a roughneck member of a rival faction, but eventually he was released for lack of evidence. The assailant was never found.

In a month all talk of the incident died down. Namizaki's wounds healed even faster, within two weeks. Regrettably, his reputation did not suffer. He flaunted his scar as if it were a battle wound.

Once again, Naojirō had failed in a world where others were more cunning. Once again, he was forced to hide in the shadows. How did he fare? His life was no doubt further circumscribed. Perhaps he found a river where he could drown himself. Perhaps he hid away somewhere in the mountains. Or perhaps this final failure forced him to become a new man.

But even stranger was the fate of the Matsukawa house. Within three months, the pavement round the front gate had been handsomely repaired. Each day gardeners and carpenters were busy there. It seemed that someone new was living in the house. And where were Sasuke, Osoyo, and Oran? It's a wide world, after all. These days the trains run everywhere.

DREAM ONE

This is the dream I dreamed.

I was sitting at her bedside with my arms folded. The woman lying on her back said quietly that she was going to die. Her long hair lay on the pillow softly framing her oval face. There was a warm flush on her white cheeks and her lips were, of course, red. She scarcely seemed about to die. But the woman said quietly and clearly that she was going to die. I began to think she would indeed die, so I looked down into her face and asked her plainly if she was really going to die. The woman said she was and opened her eyes wide. Her eyes were charming, deep black ringed by long lashes. I found, reflected clearly at the bottom of those black pupils, myself.

I saw their dark lustre, almost transparent, and found myself still wondering if she would actually die. I bent close to her and asked again, politely, if she would die, and I asked her if she was all right. The woman, opening her dark sleepy eyes wide, said in a low voice she would indeed die and that there was no way out.

Well, then. I asked her attentively if she could see me. She smiled and said I was reflected there. Without a word, I drew my face from the pillow. I sat there, my arms folded, wondering again if she would die.

After a while, the woman spoke again.

"If I die, please bury me yourself. Dig the grave with a large pearl oyster shell. Put a fragment of a fallen star on my grave as a tombstone. Then wait for me there. By and by I will come to see you."

I asked her when.

"The sun rises. And the sun sets. And the sun rises and sets ... When the red sun rises in the east and sets in the west, then I will... Will you wait for me?"

I nodded. Her voice became louder and she said with decision, "Wait for me for a hundred years. Sit at my graveside and wait for me one hundred years and I will surely come to see you."

I told her I would wait. I saw my reflection, so clear in her black pupils before, begin to grow hazy and distorted. Still water replaced the moving shadowy reflection. The eyes closed. From beneath the long lashes tears rolled down her cheeks... She was dead.

I went out into the garden and began to dig the grave with a pearl oyster shell. The shell was sharp with a smoothed edge. Moonlight played on the inside of the shell with each scoop of the damp-smelling earth until the grave was dug. I laid the woman inside. Then I spread the soft soil over her. Moonlight played on the inside of the shell each time I smoothed down the earth. I picked up a fragment of a fallen star and placed it gently on the grave. It had an oval shape. I supposed that its long course through the night sky had worn away its sharp edges into the oval. When I held it and arranged it on the soil, I felt my hands and my heart become a little warmer.

I sat on the mossy ground, my arms folded, and wondered if I would wait for her in his way a hundred years, gazing at the rounded tombstone. Meanwhile, the sun rose in the east, as the woman had said. It was a large, red sun, and as the woman had said, it set in the west. It dropped suddenly, still red. I counted one.

After a short time, the red sun rose again impassively and set again silently. I counted two.

It was impossible to keep track of how many I had seen. Countless red suns passed over my head, but still the hundredth year did not come. In the end, seeing the rounded stone, now covered with moss, I thought the woman had deceived me.

At last, a green stalk sprouted and began to grow, slanting towards me from under the stone. In an instant it was almost long enough to reach me and stopped just at my chest. At the top of the long straight stalk, an oblong bud hanging at a slight angle, came into flower. It was a white lily and had a strong fragrance. As dew from the heavens fell upon it, the flower nodded under its weight. I put my head forward and kissed the dewy white petals. I drew back. And when I looked at the distant sky, only one star was twinkling in the dawning.

"One hundred years have passed. " That was when I first realized it.

DREAM FIVE

This is the dream I dreamed.

It seemed to be a time long gone by, an age as old as the gods. I had been fighting in some unknown war, but had suffered an unlucky defeat and had been captured alive. I was grabbed and forced to sit down in front of the enemy captain.

People in those days were all tall; and they all wore long beards. Each wore a girdle of leather and carried a saber that looked like a stick. Their bows seemed to have been fashioned from thick wisteria vine, neither lacquered nor polished, very simple.

The enemy captain was sitting on what looked like an earthenware vessel turned upside-down, with his bow in his right hand. When I looked at his face, I saw bushy eyebrows that met over the bridge of his nose. There were no razors at that time, of course.

As a captive, I was not allowed to be seated on a bench or chair, so I sat cross-legged on the grass. I was wearing big straw boots. The boots at that time reached right up to the knees. The front and back seams were left unwoven and the straw was gathered into ornamental tufts that swung with every step.

The captain scrutinized my face in the firelight and asked me if I would live or die. It was the custom in those days to ask a captive that question. To answer that one would live meant submission; that one would die meant no surrender at any cost. I answered shortly. "Die." The captain threw aside the bow which stuck in the grass, and unsheathed the stick-like sword slung from his waist. The flames bowed and bent before the winds that blew against the sword. I opened my right hand like a maple and raised my palm over my eyes, the signal for the captain to wait. He returned the sword to its scabbard.

Even that long ago there were such things as love affairs. I told him that I wanted to see my woman once again before I died. He said he would wait until the cock crowed at daybreak. I had to get my woman here before the cock crowed, or die without seeing her.

The captain sat staring into the bonfire. I waited for her, cross-legged in my big straw boots there on the grass. The night went on.

I sometimes heard a branch in the bonfire give way. Every time, the flaming branch would detach itself and fall, scattering a shower of sparks over the captain's figure. His eyes glittered under the black brows. Someone came and threw an armful of new branches into the fire. After a little while the fire would crackle, sounding brave enough to snap back at the darkness.

My woman led out the white horse from the back where it had been tethered to an oak. She passed her hand over its mane three times, and sprang on to its back. The horse was bare-backed, with neither saddle nor stirrup. When she kicked its belly with her long white legs, the horse darted forward at a full gallop. As someone added more firewood, the sky far beyond began to show a faint light. The horse seemed to breathe shafts of fire from its nostrils as it flew through the darkness toward the dawn. The woman kicked ceaselessly with her slender legs. Her hair flew like a long tail behind her in the darkness. And yet the bonfire was a long way off.

Just then at the side of a dark road she heard a cock crowing its long warning of the dawn. She pulled up the reins. The horse pawed the hard rock with its fore hooves, a sharp, ringing sound.

The cock crowed a second time, raising its high-pitched cry.

She let out the tightened reins in a rush and the horse fell to its knees, pitching forward with its rider atop. Below them lay a deep abyss.

The hoof prints still remain gouged into the rock. It was Amanojaku, the nymph of perversity, who had imitated the crowing cock. As long as those hoof prints remain there, she is my sworn enemy.

DREAM TEN

Ken-san came to tell me that Shoutarou unexpectedly came home that night, seven days after he had been taken off by a woman, and that, his temperature having suddenly risen, he is sick in bed.

Shoutarou is the best-looking young man in our neighbourhood and an extremely honest fellow, but he has a favourite pastime that may strike one as odd. When evening comes, he puts on his Panama hat, sits at the door of the fruit shop, and looks at the faces of the passing women, which never fail to entertain him. He never seems to want to do anything else.

When there are few women on the street, he turns to look at the fruit instead. All kinds of fruit. Peaches, apples, Japanese fruits, and bananas are beautifully served in baskets, arranged in two rows, so that the customers can easily select one for a present. Shoutarou looks at these baskets and says they are beautiful. He also says that if he were ever

to enter a trade, a fruit shop would be just the thing for him. Nevertheless, he just sits there in his Panama hat and idles his time away.

Occasionally he comments on the fruit, saying that the colour of that Chinese citron, for example, is nice. Yet he has never bought any fruit, nor does he eat any free. He just extols the colour.

That evening a woman had unexpectedly stopped at the entrance of the store. Judging from what she was wearing, she seemed to be a woman of quality. The colour of her clothing caught Shoutarou's fancy. And her face, too, had a quality he found attractive, so Shoutarou saluted her in a courtly way by taking off his precious Panama hat. Then the woman pointed to the largest basket of fruit and asked him for it. Shoutarou quickly took it and handed it to her. When she tried to lift the basket, she remarked that it was a bit heavy for her.

As he was a man of leisure and very open-hearted by nature, Shoutarou offered to carry the basket to her house, and they left the shop together. He had been away ever since.

Easygoing as he always had been, this was going too far. While his friends and relatives were fretting over what they thought of as quite serious, Shoutarou suddenly came back on the night of the seventh day after he had gone away. People crowded around him and asked "Where have you been, Shou-san?" He merely replied that he had taken a train to the mountains.

It must have been a long train ride. According to what Shoutarou said, on getting off train, he and the woman had come to a field. It was quite a large field, and wherever you looked, you could see only green grass. Walking along the grass, they suddenly came to the top of a huge precipice. Then the woman invited Shoutarou to jump off. Peering down, he could see the wall all right, but the bottom of it was too deep down to make out. Shoutarou, doffing his Panama hat, politely declined, again and again. The woman asked him whether he preferred to be licked by pigs, since he would not venture to jump off the precipice. Now Shoutarou hated pigs and Kumoemon the balladeer very much, but he thought that even not saving himself from either of these was worth the price of his life. and so could not bring himself to jump. Then a pig came grunting along. Shoutarou reluctantly hit the pig on its snout with a thin stick made of a betel palm. Giving a yelp, the pig tumbled down to the bottom of the cliff. While Shoutarou was still breathing a sigh of relief, another pig came towards him, rubbing him with its large snout. Shoutarou reluctantly swung the stick. With a yelp, the second pig followed the first headlong down the precipice. Then a third pig appeared. At that moment Shoutarou raised his eyes to discover, on the horizon where the green field ended, tens of thousands of grunting pigs trotting straight at him. He was terrified, but he could not stop tapping the snout of each pig one by one, gingerly, with the betel palm stick. Surprisingly, only a light touch of the stick to each snout sent the pigs easily over the cliff. Looking over the edge, he could see the pigs in an endless line, tumbling headfirst into the bottomless valley below. Thinking how many pigs he had dispatched to the bottom, Shoutarou began to feel afraid, and still the pigs came on and on and on. Like a swarming black cloud which had grown legs, continuously grunting, the pigs thrust their vigorous way through the green grass towards him, in a never-ending horde.

Shoutarou had tried desperately to keep up his courage, and for seven days and six nights he had gone on tapping pig snouts, until his arms got weak as a konnyaku jelly. Then one pig finally succeeded in licking him, and in the end, Shoutarou collapsed. Ken-san told me that story of Shoutarou and then advised me not to stare too much at the women. He was right, too, I find. Ken-san also mentioned that he would like to own Shoutarou's Panama hat.

It seems Shoutarou will not be saved. His Panama hat will be given to Ken-san.

SAKAGUCHI ANGO (1906-1955)

IN THE FOREST, UNDER CHERRIES IN FULL BLOOM

Translated by Jay Rubin

Nowadays, when the cherries bloom, people think it's time for a party. They go under the trees and eat and drink and mouth the old sayings about spring and pretty blossoms, but it's all one big lie. I mean, it wasn't until Edo, maybe a couple of hundred years ago, that people started crowding under the cherry blossoms to drink and puke and fight. In the old days—the really old days—nobody gave a damn about the view. They were scared to go under the blossoms. People today think they can have a wild time under the trees, but take the people out of the picture and it's just plain scary. Look at the old Noh play, the one about the mother who goes crazy trying to find her little boy who was kidnapped. She thinks she can see his ghost there, in the shade of the blossoms that stretch off into the distance. She dies crazy, buried in petals (all right, I made that part up). Without people, a forest of cherries in full bloom is not pretty, just something to be afraid of.

When they crossed Suzuka Pass in the old days, travelers had to take the road that ran through a forest of cherry trees. They were all right when the trees were not in bloom, but under the blossoms they'd lose their minds. They'd race for green trees or dead trees, trying to get out from under the blossoms as fast as they could. When a traveler was alone, all he had to do was run out of there to find relief under ordinary trees, but it was harder for those traveling in pairs. No two people run at the same speed, so one would always fall behind. He'd scream for the other to wait, but the first one, crazed with fear, would leave his friend behind. Passing beneath the flowering forest of Suzuka Pass marked the end of many a friendship: the one who had fallen behind would never trust the other again. And so, to avoid passing beneath the blossoms, travelers quite naturally began to take a less direct route through the mountains, until the cherry forest was left in stillness.

Years went by, and then a robber—a cruel mountain bandit—took to living in the hills. He'd swoop down on the highway, strip the clothes from travelers, and sometimes, if he had to, take their lives. But even he went crazy with fear when he stepped into the blossoming cherry forest. He hated cherry blossoms after that. They scared him. Underneath the blossoms, the wind wouldn't blow, but he still seemed to hear it howling. No, there was no wind, no sound of anything, just himself and his footsteps, wrapped in a cold, silent wind that never moved. He'd feel the life inside him scattering like so many soft, silent cherry blossoms, and he'd want to run out of there, screaming, with his eyes shut tight. Of course, if he actually shut his eyes he'd just crash into a tree, so he couldn't do that, which drove him even crazier.

He was an easygoing fellow, though, the kind that never regrets anything, so he just felt sort of strange that this would happen to him. Oh, well, I'll think about it next year, he told himself. He didn't feel like it this year. Next year, when the trees bloomed again, he'd really think about it. He had been telling himself the same thing every year now for over ten years: I'll think about it next year. And another year would pass.

As he went on making excuses for himself, the number of his wives grew from one to seven. The eighth he got from the highway as he had all the rest: by stripping her husband of his wife and his clothes. Then he killed the husband.

From the moment he killed the husband, the bandit felt there was something weird going on. This time wasn't like the others: something was strange, though he couldn't tell what. But he was not one to dwell on things.

He hadn't planned to kill the man at first. He thought he'd strip him like the others and send him off with a good kick, but the woman was too beautiful. He had to kill her man. This took him by surprise—and he could see it had taken her by surprise as well. He turned around to find her on the ground. Her legs had buckled, and she was staring at him with out-of-focus eyes. 'You're my wife now,' he said to her, and she nodded. He took her hand and tried to pull her up. 'I can't walk. Carry me on your back,' she said. 'Sure, sure,' he said, and swung her up. He started walking, but when he came to a steep rise he told her to get down. She would have to walk—it was too dangerous here.

'No, no,' she said, and clung to his back. 'If this trail is hard for a mountain man like you, how am I supposed to walk it? Just think about that.'

'All right, never mind,' he said with a chuckle, exhausted though he was. 'But anyhow, get down for a minute. It's not that I need a rest or anything—I'm too strong for that. But I don't have eyes in the back of my head. I can't see your pretty face. So get down for a minute and let me take a look.'

'No! No!' she cried, tightening her grip on his neck. 'Not here! This place is too deserted, I hate it! Hurry and take me to your house as fast as you can. Otherwise, I won't be your wife. I'll bite off my tongue and die!'

'Never mind, never mind,' he said. 'I'll do whatever you want.'

Melting with happiness, the bandit dreamed of the life that he would share with this beautiful wife of his. He squared his shoulders and turned slowly to show the woman the mountains all around them: front, back, right, left.

'See these mountains? Every single one of them belongs to me,' he said, but she paid him no heed. Disappointed, he said, 'Do you hear what I'm telling you? Every mountain you see here, every tree, every valley, every cloud rising out of every valley—they all belong to me.'

'Will you please hurry up?' she said. 'I don't want to stay here a minute longer. Look at all the rocks on the cliff up there.'

'Never mind, never mind,' he said. 'We'll be getting to my house soon, and I'll make you the best meal you've ever tasted.'

'Can't you go faster? I want you to run!'

'It's too steep. I can't run here, even when I'm alone.'

'So you're a weakling, eh? I wouldn't have guessed it to look at you. I can't believe I've let myself become the wife of such a helpless man! Oh, no, what's to become of me?'

'What are you talking about? A little hill like this.. .'

'Then hurry up, will you? Don't tell me you're tired already?'

'Just watch. When I get past this stretch, I'll run faster than a deer.'

'But you're breathing so hard. And I think your face is pale.'

'Things are always like that at first. Just wait. When I really get going, I'll run so fast it'll make your head spin.'

But in fact the bandit was so tired he felt he was coming apart at the joints. By the time he reached his house his eyes were swimming, his ears were ringing, and he didn't have the strength to groan. His seven wives came out to greet him, but he had all he could do to work the kinks out of his body and lower the woman to the ground.

The seven wives were stunned at the sight of the most beautiful woman they had ever seen, and she in turn was stunned at the sight of the seven wives' filthiness. Some had been beauties long before, but there was no way to tell that now. Sickened at the sight of them, the woman cringed behind the man.

'What are these mountain women?' she demanded.

'They used to be my wives,' he said, which wasn't bad for an answer made up on the spot. 'Used to be.' But the woman was relentless.

'So these are your wives?' she pressed him.

'Well, I mean, you know, that's because I never saw anyone as pretty as you before.'

'Kill that one!' she screamed, pointing at the woman with the best features.

'Oh, come on, I really don't have to kill her. Just think of her as your maid.'

'You killed my husband, didn't you? And now you tell me you can't kill your own wife? What makes you think I'd become the wife of a man like that?'

A moan slipped through the man's tight lips. He leaped at the wife in a single bound and cut her down where she stood. But he had no time to catch his breath.

'Now this one!' screamed the woman. 'Kill this one next!'

The man hung back for a moment, then he strode up to the next wife and sunk his sword into her throat. The head was still rolling on the ground when the woman's clear, lovely voice named her next victim.

'Now this one!' she cried.

The next wife hid her face in her hands and screamed aloud, but the sword shot up in the direction of the scream, then came flashing down. The remaining wives leaped to their feet and scattered in all directions.

'Get them all!' cried the woman. 'Look! There's one in the bushes! And there goes another one behind you!'

The man raised his bloody sword and raced through the woods in mad pursuit. One of the wives was sprawled on the ground, unable to flee. She was the ugliest of them all, and a cripple to boot. After the man had cut down the other wives, he came back to finish her off, but when he raised his sword again, the woman commanded him: 'Don't kill that one. She can be my maid.'

'I might as well kill her while I'm at it.'

'Don't be stupid! I'm telling you not to kill her.'

'Oh, yeah, I guess you're right.'

He threw his sword away and plopped down on the spot. Fatigue welled up within him. His eyes swam, and he felt heavy, as if rooted to the earth. Then he heard the silence and felt a sudden rush of fear. He turned in horror to find the woman standing behind him, looking lost. The man felt as if he had just wakened from a nightmare. The woman's beauty swallowed him: his eyes, his soul ceased to move. But he felt uneasy. He did not know how or why this wave of uneasiness was coursing through his chest, but he could almost ignore it because her beauty had sucked the soul right out of him.

I know this feeling, he thought. Something like this has happened to me before. He thought again, and then it hit him.

In the forest, under cherries in full bloom. It's like that. How was it like that? He didn't know. But it was like that, he was sure. This was as much as he ever understood anything. He was the kind of man who didn't mind if he only got the first part.

The long mountain winter had ended, and patches of snow remained on the peaks and in the shade of trees in the valleys, but the time of blossoms was approaching, and signs of spring glittered all across the sky.

This year when the cherries bloom, I'll do it, he thought. It wasn't so bad when he first went under the blossoms. He would push on and walk beneath them. But, a step at a time, his head would get crazier. Ahead, behind, to the right, to the left, he would see only cherry blossoms bearing down upon him until, as he neared the middle of the forest, a blind fear would overtake him. I'll do it this year, he told himself. I'll stand-no, I'll sit in the middle of the forest when the cherries are in full bloom. And then it came to him: I'll take her with me this time. He glanced at the woman, felt a flutter in his chest, and averted his gaze. The charred shred of an idea stayed within him: She mustn't find out what I am thinking.

She was impossible to please. He would prepare her meals with all the care he knew how to give, but still she would complain about the food. He ran through the hills, hunting birds and deer for her, hunting wild boar and bear for her. The crippled woman wandered all day through the forest, searching for tender buds and roots for her, but never once did she give any sign of satisfaction.

'You mean I'm supposed to eat this stuff every day?'

'Hey, we're giving you special treats,' said the man. 'Until you got here, we ate these things maybe once in ten days.'

'Well, you're a mountain man. This may be good enough for you, but it sticks in my throat. There's nothing up here in the mountains. All night long, the only thing I hear is owls hooting. The least you can do is give me food as good as what I'm used to in the capital, don't you think? A man like you can't imagine what it's like to breathe the air of the capital. You can't know how terrible it is for me to be shut off from the air of the capital. You've taken it away from me, and in its place you give me only the cawing of crows and the hooting of owls. And you're not even ashamed of yourself! You don't see how cruel you are!'

The man did not know what to make of the woman's spiteful words. He had no idea what she meant by 'the air of the capital'. What could possibly be missing from this happy life in the mountains? He was at a loss to deal with the misery of the woman as she poured out her resentment. He knew of nothing that could guide him in such a task, and so his frustration mounted.

He had killed more travelers from the capital than he could remember. They all had money, and they all carried fancy things. They were easy marks, but sometimes he would open a bag and be disappointed with its contents. Then he would curse his victim: 'So you're from the capital, huh? Farmers have better stuff than this!' For him, the capital was just a place with people who carried fancy things—things he could rob from them. It never crossed his mind to think about where this 'capital' might be.

The woman took great care of her combs, her ornamental hairpins, her rouge. And she would scream at him if he so much as touched her kimono with his hands caked in mud or dripping with the blood of animals. Her kimonos were her life, it seemed, and protecting them her mission. The space around her had to be spotless, and the house kept in order. Nor could she be satisfied, like the others, with a simple robe and narrow sash. She wanted lots of kimonos and many sashes—sashes she could tie in strangely shaped knots, with the ends dangling down for no good reason. She would add one pretty thing after another until they all came together as one perfect outfit. The man would stare at her, wide-eyed, and then let out a sigh. Now he saw it: this was how a thing of beauty took shape. And that beauty made him full. Of that there could be no doubt. Meaningless bits and pieces came together to form a whole, but if you took the thing apart again, it would just go back to being meaningless bits and pieces. In his own way, he understood this as a kind of wonderful magic.

The woman ordered him to bring wood from the hills and set him to making things. He himself had no idea what he was making or what it was good for. One of the things she called a 'kosho', which turned out to be a kind of chair. On nice days she would have him take it outside for her and sit in the sun or under a tree with her eyes closed. The other thing she had him make was an armrest. Reclining on the floor indoors, she would lean against it and lose herself in thought. All of this seemed so exotic to him, so enchanting and seductive. It was real magic, and though he himself was helping to make it work, it still brought forth cries of surprise and admiration.

Every morning, the crippled woman would comb the woman's long black hair. The water she used was hauled by the man from a far-off spring that fed the river in the valley. He himself was moved to see the special effort that he was willing to expend for her. What he wanted most of all was to be part of the magic—to be allowed to touch that hair as the comb passed through it. 'No! Not with those hands!' the woman snapped, sweeping him away. The man drew his hands back like a child, ashamed, and watched what was left of his shattered dream. The hair reached its full glossiness, the crippled woman tied it back to expose the face beneath, and a thing of beauty came into being.

'I never thought these could be so.. .' the man murmured as he toyed with the elaborate hairpins that lay nearby. Such things had never seemed to have any meaning or value to him before, and even now he had no idea what to say about decoration—the harmony and connection between things. Magic, though, was something that he did understand. Magic was what gave things life. Everything had its own life.

'Stop playing with those!' the woman cried. 'Why do you have to do that every morning?'

'It's so strange. . .'

'What is so strange?'

'Oh, I don't know.. .' the man mumbled, at a loss.

He had found something truly amazing, but he did not know what it was.

And so the man conceived a fear for the capital. This fear was not an actual terror, but more like the embarrassment and nervousness felt by a know-it-all toward something he doesn't understand. Every time the woman spoke of 'the capital', his heart felt a shudder, but because he had never known a sense of fear toward anything he could see in this world, he was not familiar with that feeling, nor was he accustomed to shame. Toward the capital he felt only the hatred he might hold for an enemy.

He had swooped down on thousands of travelers from the capital, but not one had been able to fight him off, he thought with satisfaction. Nothing in the past gave him any reason to fear being betrayed or wounded, a thought that always made him feel pleased and proud. He measured his own strength against the woman's beauty. A wild boar was the one thing strong enough to give him a little trouble, but even the boar was not an enemy to fear. He did not have to be afraid of anything.

'Are there people in the capital with fangs?'

'There are samurai with bows and arrows.'

He laughed. 'With my bow, I could bring down a little sparrow all the way across the valley. I'm sure there's no one in the capital with skin so hard it would break my sword.'

'There are samurai with armor.'

'Would a sword break against armor?'

'It would.'

'I can wrestle down a bear or a boar.'

'If you're really so strong, take me to the capital. Use your strength to surround me with anything I want. Dress me in the best the capital has to offer. If you can make me feel that kind of deepdown pleasure, then you really are a strong man.'

'That's easy.'

The man set his heart on going to the capital. Before three days and nights had passed, he would surround the woman with piles of combs and ornamental hairpins and kimonos and mirrors and rouge. Of this he had no doubt. The one thing that did concern him, though, was something that had nothing to do with the capital.

And that was the cherry forest.

In another two or three days, the cherry forest would be in full bloom. This was the year, he had decided. He would prove that he could sit still in the middle of the cherry forest at the height of the blossoms. Each day he would slip off to the forest to check on the progress of the buds. 'In three days,' he told the woman when she pressed him to take her to the capital.

'Don't tell me you have preparations to make,' she said with a frown. 'Don't tease me. The capital is calling out to me.'

'But still, I have a promise to keep.'

'You have to keep a promise? Here? Who is here, in these mountains, for you to make a promise to?'

'Nobody is here. But still, I have a promise I must keep.'

'How very unusual! There's no one here, but still you have a promise to keep. To whom?'

The man could not lie to her.

'The cherries are going to bloom.'

'So you made a promise to see the cherry blossoms?'

'I have to see the cherry blossoms before I leave.'

'And why is that?'

'Because I have to see about going under the blossoms.'

'That's what I am asking you about. Why do you have to see about going under the blossoms?'

'Because the cherries are going to bloom.'

'Why because the cherries are going to bloom?'

'Because a cold wind fills the place under the blossoms.'

'The place under the blossoms?'

'The place without end. Under the blossoms.'

'The place without end under the blossoms?'

The man got confused and upset.

'Take me with you under the blossoms.'

'I can't do that,' the man insisted. 'I have to be alone.'

The woman gave him a bitter smile.

The man had never seen a bitter smile before, a smile so malicious. He did not think of it as 'malicious', though. He thought of it as something he could never cut through with his sword. He knew this because the woman's smile engraved itself on his brain. Each time he thought of it, it stabbed his mind like a sword blade, and there was no way he could stab it back.

The third day came.

He left without telling the woman. The cherry forest was in full bloom. With his first step into the forest, he thought of the woman's bitter smile. It sliced into his brain with a whole new sharpness. Now he was confused. The cold beneath the blossoms pressed in upon him from the four endless directions. The wind tore through him, turning his flesh transparent, roaring in from all four directions at once, filling the entire space beneath the blossoms. His voice began to howl, and he ran. What utter emptiness! He cried, he prayed, he writhed in agony, he wanted only to get away from this place. The moment he knew he had escaped from beneath the blossoms, he felt as if he were waking from a dream. The only difference was the pain he felt with each labored breath.

The man, the woman, and the crippled maid began to live in the capital.

Each night the man would creep into a mansion under orders from the woman, taking clothes and jewels and trinkets, but these were not enough to satisfy her. What she wanted most of all were the heads of the people who lived in the mansion.

In their own house were heads from dozens of mansions. The heads were lined up in their own special place, surrounded by screens on all four sides. Some heads hung on cords. There were too many of them now for the man to keep track of, but the woman knew them all, even those whose hair had fallen out and whose flesh had rotted, leaving only a skull. She would fly into

a rage if the man or her maid dared to move them. The such-and-such family belonged here, and the so-and-so family belonged there.

The woman played with the heads every day. One head would go out for a stroll with his retinue of retainers. One head family would go to visit another head family. Some heads would fall in love. A woman head would spurn a man head, or a man head would forsake a woman head and make her cry.

Once a young princess was deceived by a councillor of state. On a dark, moonless night, the councillor head crept into the home of the princess head disguised as her lover. Only after he had managed to sleep with her did the princess head realize what had happened. She could not bring herself to hate the councillor head, though. Instead, shedding tears for her own sad fate, she became a nun. Then the councillor head went to the convent and raped the nun head. She wanted to die, but the councillor persuaded her to run away with him to the village of Yamashina, where the councillor head kept her in hiding for himself and she let her hair grow again.

Both the princess head and the councillor head had long since lost their hair. Their flesh was rotten and crawling with maggots, the bone showing through in places. The two heads would drink through the night and indulge in love play, biting each other, teeth clattering against bone, gobs of rotten flesh squashing and sticking, noses collapsing, eyeballs dropping out.

The woman loved it when the faces would stick together and then fall apart. The sight would send her into peals of uncontrollable laughter.

'Eat that cheek, now. Yum yum! Now let's eat her throat. Oh, what a delicious eyeball! Chew chew chew chew chew. Suck suck suck suck. Mmmmm, yummy yummy yummy. Oh! Marvelous! Now take a goood bite!'

The woman's laughter rang out, clear and lovely, as fresh and clean as the ringing of the most delicate porcelain.

One of her heads was that of a shaven-headed priest. On this head she lavished special hatred. She always gave it terrible roles to play. The priest head had to be hated by the others, to be tortured to death or executed by an official. Its hair actually grew out at first, but eventually, like the others, it lost its hair, the flesh rotted off, and before long the head had been reduced to bone. Once that happened, the woman ordered the man to bring her another one. The new priest head he brought retained a trace of boyish beauty. Thrilled, the woman set it on her table, fed it sake, pressed her cheek to its cheek, and licked and tickled it all over. She quickly tired of this.

'I want a big fat one,' she said. 'Make it really disgusting.'

To get the task over with quickly, the man brought back five priest heads at once. There was the head of a doddering old priest, another with thick eyebrows, heavy jowls, and a nose like a toad stuck to its face, one with a horse's face and pointed ears, and one that oozed piety. But the one that the woman liked most of all was a huge priest in his fifties, a truly ugly man with eyes that drooped at the comers, flabby cheeks, and thick, heavy lips that sagged open. She would press her fingertips against the comers of his drooping eyelids and move the skin up in circles, shove sticks up the nostrils of his snub nose, turn the head upside-down and roll it around, clasp it to her breast and force a nipple between its thick lips, laughing all the while she 'suckled' it. But of this head she quickly tired as well.

Then there was the head of a lovely young girl—a pure, gentle, aristocratic head, still childish but with a strangely grown-up sadness in death. Behind her closed eyelids there seemed to lie hidden a jumble of pleasures, sorrows, and knowledge beyond her years. The woman treated this head with all the tenderness she might lavish on a daughter or a niece, endlessly combing out the long black tresses and applying make-up with the utmost care, until a soft, sweet face emerged, bathed in floral fragrances.

For the young girl head, the woman needed the head of a young nobleman. This she also made up with great care. Then the two became lost in mad, passionate, burning love play full of resentful posturing, anger, hatred, lying, deception, and sorrow. But when their passion flared up, the fire from one caught the other and the two became a roaring inferno. Soon, though, some of the filthiest heads—an evil samurai, a lustful older man, and a dissolute priest—came between them. The young nobleman was kicked and beaten and finally killed. Then, from all sides, the filthy heads went after the young girl head, which soon was smeared in patches of the others' rotting flesh. Their fang-like teeth bit into her, tearing off her nose, ripping out her hair. Once this happened, the woman punched holes in the girl head with a needle, cut it with a knife, and gouged out chunks of flesh until it was more filthy and disgusting than all the rest. Then she flung it away.

The man hated the capital. Once it had lost its strangeness for him, all that remained was a feeling that he could never be at home there. He wore the same flowing robes as everyone else in the capital, but his were short, exposing his hairy shanks. He couldn't carry a sword in daylight hours. He had to go out shopping for what he needed. He actually had to pay for drinks at the sake sellers where the whores gathered. The city merchants ridiculed him. The women who came in from the country to sell their piles of vegetables made fun of him, and so did the children. Even the whores laughed at him.

In the capital the nobles rode in ox-carts down the middle of the avenues surrounded by barefoot retainers swaggering in robes and red-faced with the master's sake. The man would be cursed wherever he went—in the market, on the road, in the temple gardens of the city. 'Idiot,' they would call him. 'Dim-wit.' 'Moron.' But none of this bothered him anymore.

The man suffered from boredom more than anything else. People were boring: there was no way around it. They annoyed him in every way. They were just little dogs yapping at the heels of the big dog walking down the street. He could not be bothered to feel anything about them, not resentment or envy or anger. Nothing in the mountains had annoyed him in this way, not the animals, the birds, the trees, the rivers.

'It's so boring here in the capital,' he said to the crippled woman. 'Don't you want to go back to the mountains?'

'The capital's not boring to me,' she said. The crippled woman spent each day cooking and doing laundry and gabbing with the neighbors. 'I've got people to talk to here. I'm not bored. The mountains are where it's boring. I don't ever want to go back there.'

'You don't think it's boring talking to people?'

'Of course not. You can't get bored if you're talking all the time.'

'That's funny. The more I talk to people, the more bored I get.'

'You're bored because you don't talk to people.'

'You're crazy. I get bored talking to people, so I don't talk.'

'You ought to give it a try. Talk to people. You won't be bored anymore.'

'Talk about what?'

'Anything you want.'

'I don't want to talk about anything.'

Now he was getting annoyed. He gave a big yawn.

The capital had mountains, too. But every mountain had some kind of temple or hermitage on top, and instead of being quiet they were full of people. From up on the mountain, you could see the whole capital. What a lot of houses! he thought. And what a filthy view!

During the day he practically forgot that he spent his nights killing. Now even that was boring. You swung your sword and a head fell off: that was all. And the heads were soft, squishy things. You couldn't feel the bone. It was like slicing through a radish. Though it always surprised him how heavy they were.

He felt he was beginning to understand the woman. A monk was ringing a temple bell like crazy. It was so damned stupid. You never knew what people were going to do next. If he had to live with them all the time, he'd probably want to do what the woman did and live with them as heads.

But the woman's desire was endless, and so now he was bored with that, too. Her desire was like a bird flying straight across the sky with no end in sight: flying on and on without a rest, never tiring, slicing cleanly through the wind.

The man himself was but an ordinary bird—perhaps an owl that hopped from branch to branch, stopping to doze now and then, maybe crossing a valley if it had to. Physically, he was quick and athletic. He moved well, he walked well, with great vitality. But his heart was a lumbering bird. Flying in an infinite straight line was out of the question for him.

From the mountain-top he watched the sky of the capital. A single bird was flying in a straight line across the sky, this sky that changed from day to night, from night to day, in an endless cycle of light and darkness. At the edges of the sky was nothing, just the infinite repetition of light and darkness, but infinitude was something the man found impossible to comprehend. When he thought about the next day and the next day and the next, and the infinite repetition of light and darkness, it felt as if his head would split in two—not from the effort but the pain of thinking.

At home, he found the woman immersed in playing with her heads. As soon as she saw him come in, she gave the command she had prepared for him: 'Bring me a dancer's head tonight. The head of a beautiful dancer. I want to have her dance for me. I myself will sing the accompaniment.'

The man tried to recall the infinite repetition of light and darkness that he had witnessed from the mountain-top. He then might have seen this room as that sky, with its infinite, endless repetition of light and darkness, but he could no longer bring the sky to mind. And the woman was not a bird. She was just the beautiful woman who was always here. But he answered her: 'I won't do it.'

This came to her as a shock, but once it had sunk in, she laughed.

'So now you've lost your nerve! You're a weakling, like all the others.'

'I am not a weakling.'

'Then what are you?'

'I'm just sick of it. There's no end to it.'

'So what? There's no end to anything. You eat your meals every day. There's no end to that, is there? You sleep every day. There's no end to that, is there?'

'But this is different.'

'Different? How different?'

The man did not know how to answer her, but he knew it was different. To escape the pain of having her out-talk him, he went outside.

'Bring me the head of a dancer,' the woman's voice came after him, but he made no reply.

He tried to think about how it was different, but he could find no answer. Little by little, the day turned into night. He climbed the mountain once again, but the sky could no longer be seen.

When his head cleared, he found himself thinking that the sky would fall. The sky would fall. He felt terrible pain, as if someone were choking him. That was it: he would kill the woman.

By killing her, he could stop the endless repetition of light and darkness. And the sky would fall. Then he could breathe easy. But there would be a hole in his heart. The image of the bird would have flown from his breast and disappeared.

Is she me? he wondered. Was I the bird that flew straight across the sky without end? If I kill her, will I be killing myself? What am I thinking?

Why did he have to bring the sky down? He no longer understood the answer to that, either. All thoughts were hard to grasp. And after thoughts went away, the only thing left behind was pain. Dawn broke. He had lost the courage to go back to the house where the woman was. Instead, he wandered through the mountains for several days.

One morning he woke up to find that he had been sleeping beneath cherry blossoms. The tree stood alone. It was in full bloom. He leaped up with a start-but not to flee. It was only one cherry tree, after all. No, he had leaped up with the thought of the cherry forest on Suzuka Mountain. It must also be in full bloom. He sank into a deep, nostalgic reverie.

Back to the mountains. He would go back to the mountains. How could he have forgotten such a simple thing? How could he have thought so long and hard about bringing the sky down? His nightmare had ended. He was saved. He had lost the feel of early spring in the mountains, but now its fragrance pressed in upon him, and he had it again, strong and cold.

The man went back to his house in the capital.

The woman seemed overjoyed to see him.

'Where were you?' she pleaded. 'I'm sorry I tormented you with such impossible demands. But please try to realize how lonely I've been without you!'

The woman had never spoken to him so tenderly before. Her words stabbed him in the chest, and his resolve was on the verge of melting away. But he had made up his mind.

'I'm going back to the mountains.'

'Without me?' she said. 'How could such a cruel thought have taken root inside you?'

Her eyes burned with anger. Her face showed the sharp pain of betrayal.

'When did you turn into such a hard-hearted man?'

'That's what I mean. I hate it here in the capital.'

'Even with me here?'

'I just don't want to live here anymore.'

'But I'm here, aren't I? Don't you love me any more? While you were gone, all I could think of was you.'

For the first time since he had known her, the woman's eyes filled with tears. The anger had vanished from her face, leaving only her pain at his coldness.

'I thought you could only live in the capital,' he said. 'And I can only live in the mountains.'

'I can only go on living if I have you. Don't you know how I feel?'

'But I can only live in the mountains.'

'I'll go with you, then, if you're going back to the mountains. I can't live a day without you.' She pressed her face to his chest, and he could feel the heat of the tears pouring from her eyes. It was true, then—she couldn't live without him anymore. New heads were her life, and he was the only one who could supply her with them. He was a part of her. She could not let him go. But she was also sure she could lure him back to the capital once he had satisfied his longing for the hills.

'Can you live in the mountains?' he asked.

'I can live anywhere if I have you.'

'You can't get the kind of heads you want in the mountains.'

'If I have to choose between you and the heads, I'll forget about the heads.'

The man wondered if he was dreaming. He was too happy. He couldn't believe it. Not even in a dream would he have been able to imagine something like this.

His breast was filled with new hope. Its arrival had been sudden and violent, and the painful thoughts that had been with him only moments before were now somewhere far away, out of reach. He forgot about his yesterdays with the woman, when she had never been so tender. He saw only now and tomorrow.

The two prepared to leave immediately. The crippled maid would remain in the capital. 'Wait here,' the woman whispered to her as they were leaving. 'We'll be back soon enough.'

Now his old mountains opened up before him. They looked as if they would answer if he called out to them. He took the old road. No one ever went that way anymore, and without people to tramp it down, all visible sign of the road had disappeared, leaving only woods and hills. This route would take them through the cherry forest.

'Carry me on your back,' said the woman. 'I can't climb these hills without a road.'

'I don't mind,' said the man.

He swung her up to his back without effort.

He thought about the day he first took the woman. That day, too, he had carried her on his back and climbed up the other side where the road crossed the pass. That day, too, he had been full of happiness, a feeling that today was all the richer.

The woman said, 'The day I met you, I asked you to carry me.'

'I was just thinking the same thing,' said the man with joy in his voice. 'Look,' he said. 'All those mountains are mine. The valleys, the trees, the birds, even the clouds—these mountains are mine. They're so good, I feel like running, don't you? This never happened in the capital.'

'That first day, I made you run with me on your back, remember?'

'Sure I do. I got so tired, I almost fainted.'

The man was not forgetting about the cherry forest in full bloom. But on such a happy day as this, what difference could it make that they would pass beneath it? He was not afraid.

And then the cherry forest appeared before his eyes, a mass of blossoms at their height. Here and there a petal fluttered down in the breeze. A layer of petals covered the earth beneath his feet. But where could they have come from? For, spread out above him, as far as he could see, were clouds of fully opened blossoms, from which it was impossible to imagine that a single petal had been lost.

The man stepped beneath the blossoms. It was utterly still in there, and seemed to be growing colder. Then he noticed that the woman's hands were freezing cold. Now he was afraid, and with the fear came certainty: she was a demon. Suddenly a cold wind began to blow from all four sides of the space beneath the blossoms.

The man saw that clinging to his back was a huge-faced old woman with purple skin. Her mouth gaped open from ear to ear, and her hair was a frizzled mass of green. The man began to run. He tried to knock the demon from his back, but the strength of her grip increased. Her hands dug into his neck; his eyes were growing dim. He was wild now. He pulled the demon's hands apart with all the strength he had, and as his neck slipped out of her grasp, he felt her slide down his back and tumble to the ground. Now it was his turn to attack. He locked his hands on the demon's throat until he realized that he was using all his strength to strangle a young woman, and that she was no longer breathing.

His eyes had clouded over. He tried to open them wider, but that didn't seem to bring his vision back. For all that lay before him, dead, was the woman, the same woman, whom he had strangled with his own hands.

His breathing stopped. At an end, too, were his strength and his thinking. On the woman's body, a few cherry petals had already fallen. He shook her. He cried out to her. He clutched her to him. But all in vain. He threw himself down in tears. Not once in all the years since he had come to live in the mountains had he cried until this day. By the time he was himself again, white cherry petals had begun to pile up on his back.

He was in the very center of the cherry forest. The four edges of the forest were hidden from him by blossoms. Yet his fear had vanished. Gone, too, was the wind that always blew from the edges of the forest in full bloom. Now there was only the hush of blossoms, falling, falling. Here he sat, for the first time, beneath the cherry forest in full bloom. He could go on sitting here forever. Because now he had no place to call home.

Even now, no one knows the secret of the cherry forest in full bloom. Perhaps it was loneliness. For the man no longer had to fear loneliness. He was loneliness itself.

Now, for the first time, he looked all around. Above him were the blossoms. Beneath them was the silent, infinite emptiness, the stillness of the rain of blossoms. That was all. Beyond that, there was no secret.

Some time went by before he felt something inside himself, faintly warm. And this, he found, was his sadness. Little by little, he began to sense the swelling warmth, wrapped as it was in the coldness of the blossoms and the emptiness.

He reached out to pluck the petals from the woman's cheek. But just as his hand reached her face, something strange happened. Beneath his hand lay only drifted petals. The woman had vanished, leaving petals in her place. And as he reached out to part the mound of petals, his hand, his arm, his body vanished. The space filled with petals and with frigid emptiness, nothing more.