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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: Otogi-Zōshi (お伽草紙)
Author: Dazai Osamu (太宰治)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/

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Dazai Osamu, *Otogi-Zōshi (Fairy Tales)* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

"Ah, it has started," the father said when he heard the guns. He put down his pen and stood up at once. A warning alone did not always move him, but when the anti-aircraft guns began to fire, he stopped working. He placed a hood on his five-year-old daughter, lifted her into his arms, and went down into the air-raid shelter. His wife was already there in the back, holding their two-year-old son on her back. The hole was dark, narrow, and cold, and the family listened to the sounds above them.

"It sounds close," the mother said. "Yes," the father answered, though she soon began to complain about the shelter itself. "This place is too small." The father said, "No, this size is about right. If it is too deep, the ground may fall in on us." She said they should make it wider, but he gave a weak answer about the frozen earth and said they could do it later. Then he turned his ear to the radio report and tried not to speak more.

After the mother became quiet, the little girl began to say, "Can we go out now? Can we go out now?" The only thing that could calm her was a picture book. So the father opened one and began to read old tales like "Momotaro," "The Sparrow with the Cut Tongue," "The Old Man with the Lump," and "Urashima." His clothes were poor, and his face was plain, and no one looking at him would think he was a special man. But he had a strange gift. Even while he read the printed story in a dull, soft voice, another story began to grow inside his mind, warmer, larger, and more alive than the one on the page.

So, in that cold shelter under the sound of war, he came to the tale of an old man with a lump on his cheek.

The Old Man with the Lump

In his mind, the old man lived in Awa, at the foot of a high mountain. He was not a wicked old man, and he was not a foolish one either. He simply loved sake very much. Men who love sake are often lonely in their own homes, and no one can clearly say which comes first, the loneliness or the drink. But this old man, whenever he sat in his house, always wore a sad and cloudy face, as if something inside him could never rest.

His home was not a bad home. His wife was still alive, though she was near seventy, and she was strong in body and calm in manner. People said she had once been beautiful, and even now her back was straight and her eyes were clear. But she was a quiet woman, and she cared for her work more than for talk. If the old man cried, “Spring is here. The cherry trees have opened,” she would only say, “Is that so? Please move a little. I must clean there.” Each time, the old man’s joy fell at once like a bird struck from the air.

They also had one son, a man close to forty, and he was even harder to live with in a quiet way. He did not drink, did not smoke, did not laugh much, did not grow angry, and did not even seem to take pleasure in anything. He only worked in the fields and lived with such good behavior that the people nearby respected him deeply and called him almost a holy man. He had not married, and he shaved little, and he seemed less like a warm human being than a tall piece of wood or stone. So the family, seen from the outside, looked serious, proper, and worthy of praise. Yet for the old man, it was exactly that goodness that made the house feel heavy.

At home, when he drank in the evening, nobody scolded him. That might have been easier to bear if they had. Instead, his wife and son simply ate beside him in silence. When the sake warmed him a little and made him want company, he would say, “It is truly spring now. The swallows have come back.” But the others would say nothing. Then he would murmur some old line about a spring night being worth a thousand pieces of gold, and still there would be no answer. His son would finish eating, bow politely to the meal, and rise, and the old man would turn over his cup and say sadly, “Then I suppose I will eat now.”

On fair days, however, he had one true pleasure. He would hang a small bottle of sake at his waist and climb Mount Tsurugi to gather wood. After working a

while, he would sit with his legs wide on a great rock, clear his throat in a grand way, and say, “What a fine view this is.” Then he would drink. In the mountains his face changed. The sadness that clung to him at home fell away, and he looked almost young again. Only one thing stayed the same, and that was the large lump on his right cheek.

That lump had appeared about twenty years earlier. One autumn, after he had passed fifty, his cheek had begun to feel warm and itchy, and little by little it had swelled. He had touched it and laughed in a lonely but playful way. “Well now,” he had said, “it seems I have a dear little grandchild.” His son had answered very seriously, “Children are not born from cheeks.” His wife had only asked, “It is not dangerous, is it?” and had shown no more interest. Neighbors had spoken with pity and asked if it hurt or got in the way, but the old man only smiled and shook his head. In truth, he had come to love the lump. He washed it carefully each morning and treated it as the one companion that truly belonged to him.

On a day like this, alone in the mountains and happily warmed by sake, he liked to touch the lump and talk to it. “Do not be afraid,” he whispered as if speaking to a child. “There is no need to be too proper in this world. Even goodness can be too much. Our holy son is a great man indeed.” Then he would laugh softly, stroke the lump, and complain to it about small things that he could not say aloud at home. The lump never argued, never turned away, and never answered in that dry voice his wife used. It only sat there on his cheek, quiet and faithful. For a lonely man, that was enough.

Then, without warning, the light changed. The sky grew dark, and a wild wind came running over the mountain. Rain fell hard and fast, and the whole mountain turned white with mist. Birds flew up from the trees in fear, and the old man watched them with interest. “This cool rain on my lump is not bad,” he said, still sitting for a while as if he had all the time in the world. But the rain grew colder and stronger, and at last he stood with a sneeze. “No, this is too cool. Now I am cold.” He tied up the wood, put it on his back, and hurried into the trees.

The forest was full of creatures hiding from the storm. Monkeys, rabbits, and birds pressed into the dry places, and the old man greeted them all like old friends.

“Excuse me. Let me pass. Do not mind me,” he said cheerfully. At last he found a great old tree with a wide hollow at its base, and he crawled inside. “Ah, this is a fine room,” he said. “There is no severe wife here, and no holy son, so please, all of you, make yourselves at home.” He was so pleased with this joke that he chuckled to himself, leaned back, and soon fell asleep, his bottle empty and his breathing soft.

When he opened his eyes again, the storm had passed. The forest was full of pale moonlight, and the wet leaves shone as if they had been washed for a festival. A bat flew out of the hollow above him, and the old man sat up in alarm. “This is bad,” he said at once, for he thought of his wife and his son waiting at home. They had never truly scolded him, but that made his late return feel even worse. He shook his bottle and heard one last little sound inside, drank the final drop, and felt a small warm courage rise again in his chest. Then he crept out of the tree, looked into the bright night, and heard strange voices and laughter coming from deeper in the woods.

Part 2

The voices came again, and this time they were mixed with rough laughter, clapping hands, and strange cries. The old man bent low and moved toward the sound, careful not to step on the wet branches. Soon he came to the edge of a small open field in the forest. There, under the clear moon, sat a ring of large red creatures in tiger-skin cloths. They were drinking, shouting, rolling on the ground, and trying to dance, though their dancing was so foolish that the old man almost forgot to be afraid.

At first he stared with wide eyes and held his breath. Then he looked more closely and saw that these beings, though strange and ugly, did not seem cruel just then. They were drunk, cheerful, and foolish, like men at a country party after too much sake. The old man, who still had that last little warmth of drink in his body, began to feel close to them instead of frightened by them. “They are enjoying themselves,” he whispered, and a kind of joy rose in him. A man who loves sake

often feels friendly toward anyone else who is happily drunk.

So he watched their dance a little longer and could not keep from smiling. One fell over while trying to jump. Another beat his knees and howled. A third rolled across the grass and seemed very pleased with himself. “What poor dancing,” the old man said softly. “I should show them how it is done.” Before fear could return, he stepped right into the middle of their circle, lifted his arms, and began to dance his proud Awa dance.

He stamped, turned, sang in a bright voice, and let his body move with easy joy. The lump on his cheek shook and shone in the moonlight, and that alone seemed to make the creatures laugh harder. They cried out, slapped the ground, and rolled over one another in delight. The old man, pleased by their pleasure, danced even better. He forgot his wife, his silent son, the dark house, and even the long lonely years that had sat inside his chest.

When at last he stopped, breathing hard but smiling, the creatures gathered close and spoke together in whispers. They seemed to think very deeply, though their thoughts were not deep at all. Then one of them said, “Come again on the next moonlit night and dance for us once more.” Another pointed at the old man’s cheek and cried, “We will keep this precious thing as a sign that you will return.” Before the old man understood their meaning, they pulled the lump away as easily as if they were plucking a fruit from a branch.

“Ah, no, that is a problem,” the old man cried. “That is my dear grandchild.” But the creatures only shouted with pride, happy with their own cleverness. They believed they had found the perfect way to make him come back. The old man touched his cheek again and again, full of surprise. Yet he felt no pain, and the soft morning wind on the smooth skin felt so light and strange that he could not decide whether he had lost something or gained something.

So he walked down the mountain at dawn, thinking in his easy way. “Well,” he said to himself, “I have lost my one little friend, and that is sad. But my face is lighter now, and I have had a good night of song and dance. Perhaps it is half loss and half gain.” While he was still speaking to himself, he met his son on the path. The son took off his head cloth, bowed, and said in his grave voice, “Good

morning." The old man only answered, "Ah, yes," and hurried on, while the son, though surprised at the missing lump, chose not to speak of his father's face.

At home, his wife welcomed him calmly and said nothing about his late return. She only told him that the soup had grown cold and began to set out his breakfast. The old man sat down in a small, careful way and wanted very much to tell her everything. He wanted to speak of the moon, the forest, the strange feast, and the creatures who had taken his lump. But her quiet face and straight back defeated him, and the words stayed in his throat. At last she looked once at his cheek and said, "The lump seems to have dried up." "Yes," he answered. "It must have broken and the water came out," she said, and he could only answer, "Perhaps so."

Now in the same village there lived another old man who had a lump on his left cheek. He was not poor, not lonely, and not gentle in the same easy way. He was a large and proud man with a big nose, sharp eyes, good clothes, and some learning, and the people spoke to him with respect. But he hated his lump with all his heart. He looked in the mirror again and again, sighed over his ruined face, and even tried to hide the lump inside his long white beard, though the top of it still showed out in a most foolish way.

His house, unlike the first old man's house, was full of noise. He had a young wife who laughed often and a pretty daughter who laughed even more. "Mother, why is Father's lump so red?" the girl asked one day. "It looks like an octopus head." The mother laughed and said, "Or like a wooden temple drum hanging from his cheek." "Be quiet!" shouted the old man, and he went into a dark room to stare at himself in the mirror. When he later heard that the poor sake-loving old man had somehow lost his lump, he hurried secretly to learn the story.

The moment he heard about the moonlit feast, he was full of excitement. "Good," he said. "I too will have mine removed." That same night, because the moon was bright again, he marched into the mountain like a warrior going to battle. He carried an iron fan, tightened his mouth, and told himself that he would so impress the creatures with his art that they must obey him. But a dance done with too much pride and too much effort often becomes a bad dance. When he reached their circle, he bowed stiffly, opened his fan, stared hard at the moon, and began

a grand and heavy performance that seemed to last forever.

The creatures were filled with fear at once. One by one they rose and ran away into the dark trees. “Please wait!” the old man cried, chasing them in pain and shame. “If you run now, I am lost. Please take this lump away.” In their fear, they misunderstood him and thought he was asking for the other lump they had kept from the first old man. “If that is what you want, take it,” one of them cried. So they fastened the old lump onto his right cheek, and the poor man went home with two heavy lumps on his face.

It was a cruel result, though he had done no real evil. He had only been too proud, too stiff, and too full of his own grand idea. No wicked person stood at the center of this story. The poor old drinker was not bad, his quiet family was not bad, the proud old man’s laughing wife and daughter were not bad, and even the foolish mountain creatures were not truly bad. Yet one man still came to grief, and that is why this tale is not only about reward and punishment. It is about the comedy and sadness of human character, which runs quietly under all our lives.

Part 3

Urashima

Urashima Tarō seems to have been a real man, or at least many people long believed so. He lived, they say, in Mizunoe in Tango, on the northern coast of what is now Kyoto Prefecture. People even spoke of a shrine there for him, standing on a lonely and windy shore. Of course he did not live there alone. He had a father, a mother, a younger brother, a younger sister, and many servants, for he was the eldest son of an old and well-known family.

Such eldest sons, in any age, often have a certain kind of nature. They like beauty, taste, quiet pleasure, and a way of living that looks fine to others. In the best words, one may call it elegance. In worse words, one may call it idle play. Yet Urashima was not wild, not rough, and not lost in drink or shameful love. He had manners, family pride, and enough property that he never needed to throw

himself wildly into life.

His sister, who was sixteen and full of life, used to say, “Brother has no spirit for adventure at all. He is too careful.” His younger brother, who was dark, strong, and rough, said, “No, that is not it. He only thinks too much about looking fine.” Urashima never grew angry when they spoke so freely. He only smiled a little and answered in his calm and wise way, “To let curiosity burst out is one danger, but to hold it down is also a danger. All people live under fate.” Then he would go out alone, walk beside the shore, and murmur little lines of verse to himself.

As he walked by the sea, he often thought about people and their endless judging of one another. The sand, the small crabs, the reeds, and the wild birds did not criticize him at all, and he thought human beings should learn from them. “Each person has his own way of living,” he said softly. “Why can we not respect one another’s way?” He gave trouble to no one and tried to live quietly and with taste, yet people still laughed and spoke about him. So he sighed, not loudly, but as if the whole world had become a little tiresome.

Just then a small voice called from near his feet, “Urashima-san, over here.” This was the famous turtle. It was not one of those little pond turtles that appear in garden pictures, and it was not some foolish toy from a child’s book. A turtle that rides through the deep sea must be a true sea turtle, with wide strong flippers, and that creates a problem, because such turtles do not belong naturally to the cold northern shore of Tango. But a story has its rights too, and since Urashima must live in Tango, the turtle simply had to come there somehow, and that was that.

The turtle stretched its neck and looked up at him. “Do not act so coldly,” it said. “You know me. I am the turtle you saved the other day.” Urashima stared and then said, “What are you still doing here? If children catch you again, you may not escape alive.” The turtle answered, “You wound me. Since that day I have come here morning and night to wait for you. I wanted to repay your kindness and see you once more.”

Urashima gave a small bitter smile and said, “That was careless, and perhaps foolish. You should have stayed away from danger.” The turtle answered at once, “There you go again. Just now you were sighing that you hated criticism, yet you

call me careless, foolish, and now even selfish. Is that not criticism too?" Urashima blushed a little, for the turtle had struck him well. Still he lifted his chin and said, "What I speak is not criticism. It is advice, or rather a warning for your good."

The turtle laughed and said, "Say what you like. I have heard enough. Please get on my shell." Urashima stepped back and stared. "What nonsense are you speaking now?" he said. "To sit on a turtle's shell like a clown in a fair is not my idea of good taste." But the turtle would not move. "I am not joking," it said. "As thanks for your kindness, I will guide you to the Dragon Palace. So come. Get on."

Urashima almost laughed out loud. "The Dragon Palace? That is only an old dream, a beautiful tale sung in poems and handed down in stories. It does not exist in this world. It is a longing, a lovely thought, a place for the imagination." His voice had grown gentle and proud, and the words came out in a polished way that pleased him. But the turtle laughed harder than he did. "You truly know how to spoil a good thing," it said. "You speak of beauty, but you do not know how to believe in it."

Then the turtle began a long speech, and its speech was so bold and quick that Urashima could hardly interrupt. "People call it adventure when a man crosses a deep valley on a hanging vine," it said, "but if he truly believes there is a beautiful flower on the far side, then he is not showing off. He is only going to the flower. You dislike adventure because you dislike risk, and you hide that behind fine words. You proud people think disbelief is wisdom, but often it is only fear of loss." The turtle's eyes shone as it spoke, and the wind moved softly over the sea behind them.

Urashima was now offended and drew himself up. "You speak far too freely," he said. "There are differences in nature and in birth among living creatures, and such things are not made by me. I know very well what kind of life belongs to me, and what kind belongs to you. You seem to wish to pull me down into a lower world and call it friendship. You boast that you will take me to the Dragon Palace, but I understand your trick well enough. Go back to the sea and trouble me no more."

The turtle only smiled in a sly but not cruel way. “That is rich,” it said. “When you saved me from the children, you were pleased with your own kindness. But would you have done the same if a rough fisherman had been beating a sick beggar? I doubt it. You helped because it was safe, clean, and even a little charming. Your kindness was a play. Still, I do not hate you for that. I like you. That is why I tease you, and that is why I want you to come with me. In the Dragon Palace there is music, dance, wine, good food, and, best of all, no endless criticism. No one there wastes his life speaking ill of others or praising himself.”

That last point touched Urashima deeply. He had grown tired of judgment, though he hid that tiredness behind elegant talk. “If such a place truly exists,” he said more softly, “it would be pleasant to see it.” The turtle gave him a sharp look. “You are still saying ‘if,’” it replied. “You want to dream beautifully, but you do not want to act. That is a poor kind of elegance.” Urashima, who was gentle by nature, had now been pushed so far that he could not easily retreat.

So at last he gave a helpless smile and said, “Very well. There is no end to your talking, and perhaps no peace until I obey you. I will trust you and sit on your shell.” At once the turtle’s face brightened, and its voice grew almost severe with joy. “That is better,” it said. “Not ‘try’ and not ‘perhaps.’ Once a man steps forward, he has already chosen.” Urashima sighed, looked once more at the familiar shore behind him, and prepared to leave the world he knew.

Part 4

Urashima sat down on the turtle’s shell, and at once the shell widened under him. In a moment it had grown so broad that two mats could almost have been spread on it. The turtle moved slowly, slid into the water, and carried him away from the shore. They swam perhaps one town’s length from land, and then the turtle spoke in a sharp voice unlike its earlier teasing tone. “Close your eyes,” it said, and Urashima, who had now given himself up to the adventure, obeyed at once.

The next moment he heard a sound like a sudden shower. The air around him

grew softly warm, and a wind touched his ears. It was like a spring wind, yet heavier than any wind on land, as if it had body and weight of its own. Urashima kept his eyes closed, but he could feel the world changing around him. The quiet shore, the smell of sand, the cries of birds, all of that seemed to move very far away.

Soon a tight and uneasy feeling rose in his chest, almost like the sickness of a man at sea. “Are we there already?” he murmured, half asleep and half afraid. “At the Dragon Palace?” The turtle answered with dry pride, “Of course. Where else would I bring you?” Urashima opened his eyes and gave a strange little cry. “How wide the sea is,” he said, though what he saw did not look like any sea he had ever known.

There was no shore in any direction, no boat, no cloud, no line between sea and sky. Above, below, before, and behind, there was only a dim, endless brightness of pale green. It was not exactly dark, but it was not full daylight either. The heavy springlike wind still touched his face, and aside from their voices there was no other sound at all. Urashima began to feel that he had left not only his village, but the ordinary world itself.

After a while he noticed, high and far to the right, a small dark mark, no larger than a little handful of ash thrown into the air. He pointed and asked, “What is that?” The turtle answered in a calm voice, “The shadow of the moon.” Urashima laughed a little and was not sure he believed it, yet he had to admit that “the moon’s shadow” sounded better than any dull explanation. In such a place, a man wanted beautiful answers, even when he doubted them.

Then the whole world changed again. A deep roaring sound came over them, and some great force rushed through that green emptiness like a storm wind. Urashima nearly slipped from the turtle’s shell and clung to it with both hands. At the same time he felt a strange turning in his body, as if the turtle had rolled over and was now swimming with its belly upward. He could not understand what had happened, yet instead of falling away, he felt himself fixed to the shell and carried onward through a half-turned world.

“What was that?” he cried. “Can there be storms under the sea?” The turtle

answered, “Why not? Do you think the sea is a poor copy of the land?” Urashima, wishing to repay some of the mockery he had suffered, said, “Then there may be fires too, and perhaps snow. Since there is air enough for us to speak, many things may be possible here.” The turtle gave a small unwilling laugh, and for the first time since they left the shore, Urashima felt that he had not entirely lost his dignity.

Little by little the roaring passed, and ahead of them a faint brightness began to gather. At first it seemed no more than a milky light in the distance, but then it rose like a mountain. “What is that now?” Urashima asked. “Pearls,” the turtle said. “A hill of pearls.” Urashima stared hard and shook his head. “No, that cannot be true,” he said. “Ten thousand pearls, or even a hundred thousand, could never make a mountain like that.” But the turtle only answered, “You are still judging sea things by the measures of dry land.”

At last they reached the gate of the Dragon Palace. To Urashima’s surprise it was rather small, standing at the foot of that shining height and giving off a pale, soft light of its own. He climbed down from the turtle’s shell, bent a little, and passed through the gate. Everything within was quiet, and the stillness itself almost frightened him. “Stand firm, young master,” the turtle said, striking him lightly on the back with a fin. “Did you imagine that the Dragon Palace was a place of loud dancing and common noise like a village feast on the shore?”

Urashima blushed and took off his sandals. When he began to walk barefoot, the soles of his feet felt strangely wet and slippery. “Where is the palace?” he asked in a low voice. “I see no great hall, no garden, no trees, no bright ornaments. This place is empty like a dream of the dead.” The turtle sighed and answered, “That is because you country people open your mouths at large buildings and painted walls, but feel nothing before a deeper beauty.”

Urashima was already uneasy, and those words made him more uneasy still. He looked down, and suddenly he drew back with a sharp breath. Beneath his feet were countless fish, large and small, lined close together, still as stones, their backs making a long shining path. “This is terrible,” he said. “To walk on living creatures is cruel, and I will not call it beauty.” The turtle answered, “They are not in pain. They are an honor guard, and they know their part better than many people

on land.”

Then the fish moved apart in silence, and from below there came the sound of music. It was like the sound of a Japanese koto, yet softer, thinner, and stranger, with a sadness and sweetness that Urashima could not name. The turtle sank gently downward, and Urashima, gathering his courage, stepped from the fish path into the green light. At once he felt himself drawn down as softly as if the air itself were receiving him. A moment later he stood beside the turtle at the foot of a broad stair that looked like a slope made of cold red fruit, and high above, wrapped in thin blue cloth, a small woman was standing and smiling without a word.

Part 5

“Go on,” the turtle whispered. “She already knows who you are. Just bow, and do not fall apart like this.” But Urashima had become weak with shame and wonder. “What should I say?” he murmured. “My coming here was too sudden. It has no meaning. Perhaps I should go back at once.” Still, because Otohime was smiling, he bent so deeply that his hands almost touched his toes, and the turtle clicked its tongue at him for being too humble.

Otohime said nothing at all. She turned and began to walk slowly across the wide place before her, and Urashima followed. Behind her moved countless tiny golden fish, so small that each one looked like a piece of light, and as they swam around her body, it seemed that a soft golden rain was always falling near her. Then Urashima saw something stranger still. Her pale little feet did not truly touch the ground, but floated just above the shining floor. He thought at once that those feet had never stepped on mud, dust, or any hard road of this world.

The place itself was vast and empty. There were no great walls, no loud colors, and no heavy ornaments. A pale green light filled the open hall, little purple flowers showed through the shining floor, and dark soft rocks lay here and there like sleeping animals. “How can anyone live in such a lonely place?” Urashima thought. Yet the longer he looked, the more that loneliness began to feel noble,

clean, and far above the busy tricks of ordinary life.

The turtle came close and spoke in his ear again. He showed Urashima the flowers, which could be eaten like wine, the soft rocks, which were rich food, and the bright fruits that kept away age. “This is the life here,” he said. “Song, taste, drink, quiet, and freedom. No one forces anything on you, and no one asks for praise.” Urashima listened and felt a deep shame. He had thought himself a lonely and refined man, but now he understood that his old elegance had been little more than a pose beside the still life of this place.

“Then this is true welcome,” he said at last. “A guest is received, and then left free. No one pushes food, no one makes false talk, no one watches your face and worries about manners every moment.” The turtle laughed with pleasure and told him to sit, eat, drink, or sleep just as he liked. Urashima mixed the petals and bright fruit on his tongue and found that they melted into cool wine. It ran down his throat like clear light and warmed him from inside. He looked after Otohime as she moved away and thought he had never seen anything so calm.

He asked where her room was, but it seemed impossibly far away, a little white shape floating at the edge of the green world. He asked why she never spoke, and the turtle answered, “Perhaps speech grows out of fear, and she has none.” Urashima did not fully understand, but he believed it. He lay on the shining ground, listened to the music, watched the fish moving high above like clouds, and slowly forgot his old habits. There was no day or night there, only one endless fresh light like a morning in late spring.

He stayed for many days, though he could not have said how many. He entered Otohime’s room too, and she showed no anger and no special favor, but only that same soft smile. Everything was allowed. He could drink, sleep, wander, listen, or do nothing at all, and no one judged him. Yet in time he grew tired, not because the place was poor, but because it was too perfect for a man of the earth. He began to miss the poor land above, where people worried, argued, and lived in narrow little ways.

At last he stood before Otohime and said, “I must go now.” Even that sudden farewell was accepted without blame. She came with him as far as the stair and

held out a small shell that shone with many colors. Its two sides were closed tightly together, and it fit in his hands like a precious gift. Urashima took it, and before he could find proper words, he was again riding on the turtle's back, leaving the Dragon Palace behind.

On the way home his heart became heavy. He thought of the place he had left, of the thanks he had forgotten to speak, and of Otohime walking alone in that green quiet world. At last he cried out, "Why are you so silent now? Say something sharp to me as before." The turtle answered that farewells were hard and that nothing sounded right at such a time. Then Urashima asked about the shell, and the turtle, still kindly, told him it would be wiser not to open it on land, because strange things from the Dragon Palace might come out.

Urashima believed him and said he would keep the shell forever as a treasure. But the moment he reached the shore, he forgot the turtle, forgot even to say goodbye, and ran toward his home in great excitement. He wanted to tell everyone what he had seen and make them understand that true beauty was larger and freer than all their small ideas. Yet when he came to the place where his house should have stood, he stopped in horror. There was no house, no path, no people, only empty land and the sound of wind.

He wandered in confusion and grief, and at last, with no one left to ask and nothing left that he knew, he opened the shell. White smoke rose from it at once. It wrapped around his body like lost years returning all together, and in that moment his black hair turned white and his youth fell away. Many people think this was only a cruel end, but that is too simple. The gift of the Dragon Palace was not only age. It was time itself, and with time came forgetting.

Years can wound people, but they can also save them. Forgetting can look sad, but it can also be mercy. Urashima did not remain a ruined man crying forever over what he had lost. The long distance of years made his shining days in the Dragon Palace gentle and beautiful, and the pain of sudden loss grew softer in his old heart. So he lived on for ten more years, not as a cursed man, but as a peaceful and happy old one.

Part 6

Kachi-Kachi Mountain

In the story of Kachi-Kachi Mountain, the rabbit is not a boy at all. She is a girl, about sixteen years old, quick, thin, and very pretty in a cold way. The tanuki who later suffers so much is not only a foolish animal who did wrong. He is an ugly, clumsy male who has secretly fallen in love with that rabbit girl. Once I saw it this way, the whole story changed shape before me, and every cruel act in it began to make a different kind of sense.

The old picture books tell the tale in a rough and bloody manner. In some versions the tanuki plans something truly horrible for the old woman, and the whole beginning of the story grows dark enough to trouble any child. Newer books make the matter softer and say only that the old woman was hurt while the tanuki escaped. That is easier for children, of course, but then another problem rises at once. If the tanuki did only that, why must the rabbit torture him so long, trick him again and again, and finally send him to such a shameful death?

In the shelter, when I read that picture book aloud, my little daughter suddenly said, “Poor Tanuki.” I did not at first take her words seriously, because lately she had learned that one phrase and liked to use it for everything. But once I heard it, I could not forget it. A child, even when she speaks carelessly, sometimes touches the weak place in a story. I thought, “Yes, perhaps the rabbit’s revenge is too cruel if we read the tale in the ordinary way.”

People who believe in justice prefer a clean blow in the open. They do not like tricks, small humiliations, and slow revenge. So if this rabbit were a brave young man, the whole story would feel wrong. But she is not that kind of figure. She is a proud young girl, sharp and pure in appearance, but merciless toward anything she finds ugly, stupid, or disgusting. Such girls often look almost holy from far away, but a foolish man who falls in love with one of them is usually walking toward ruin.

The tanuki, I think, was exactly that kind of foolish man. He was not handsome

or noble. He was round, greedy, slow in mind, and not much thought of even among his own kind. Yet he had fixed his heart on the rabbit girl, who moved quickly, spoke sharply, and looked at him as if he were dirt. When a man like that falls in love, he does not grow wiser. He only grows more pathetic, and the danger becomes greater because he cannot even see how ridiculous he looks.

He had barely escaped death at the old man's house and came back to the mountain wild with excitement. His fur was dirty, his breath was rough, and he talked too close, with too much spit and too much pride. "Be glad," he cried when he finally found the rabbit. "I got away. I broke through that danger and came back alive. I struck at the old woman and escaped. I am a lucky fellow." He spoke as if he expected praise, and his small wet eyes shone with ugly joy.

The rabbit jumped back at once so his breath would not touch her. "Why should I be glad?" she said. "Do not come so close. You are filthy, and you throw your spit everywhere. Besides, that old man and old woman are my friends." At those words the tanuki stopped as if he had been hit with a stick. "Your friends?" he said. "I did not know. If I had known, I would have let them boil me into soup." Then he hung his head in a way that was meant to look sad, though even his sadness was somehow greasy and unpleasant.

"It is too late to say that now," the rabbit answered. "You knew I visited that house. You knew they gave me beans and let me play in the garden. Do not lie and say you did not know. You are my enemy now." The tanuki begged her again and again to forgive him, stretching out his neck, making weak sounds in his throat, and trying to look miserable. While he apologized, he still kept glancing around for nuts or berries to eat, and once he even picked up something from the ground and chewed it. That mixture of fear, hunger, self-pity, and desire made him look more pitiful than noble.

The rabbit despised him for all of it. "You think only of food," she said. "You smell bad, you are shameless, and now you act as if your heart is broken. Do not come any closer." Yet while she spoke, another thought was growing in her mind. The sharpness in her eyes changed into something almost bright and playful. At last she said in a softer voice, "Very well. I will forgive you once, but only once,

and only on one condition."

The tanuki's whole body shook with hope. "Anything," he said. "Tell me what to do. I will do it." The rabbit kept her distance and spoke as if she were doing him a great kindness. "The old man must be too sad now to go out and gather firewood. So tomorrow morning we will go to the mountain and gather it for him. We will work hard and take it to his house. Then perhaps I will forgive you." The tanuki stared at her as though heaven itself had opened.

"Together?" he said. "You mean we will go together?" His voice turned hoarse with joy. The rabbit answered, "Tomorrow morning. Not today. You are tired, and you are surely hungry too." He nearly danced where he stood. "I will bring food," he said. "I will work harder than anyone. I will cut and carry more wood than ten men. And then you will forgive me. You will be kind to me." The rabbit let a small smile appear at the corner of her mouth and said, "That depends on how well you do."

The tanuki laughed in a low, ugly way, half with happiness and half with desire. "That little mouth of yours is cruel," he said, trying to sound playful, though tears almost came into his eyes. Then he swallowed again, sniffed loudly, and looked at her as if his whole life were hanging from her next word. "Tomorrow," he whispered. "I will come early. I will show you what kind of fellow I am." The rabbit turned away and left him there in the mountain dusk, full of hope, while in her own heart the cold plan had already begun.

Part 7

The next morning was clear and cool. Mist lay over Lake Kawaguchi below the mountain, and the rabbit and the tanuki worked among the wet grass with their bodies covered in morning drops. The tanuki cut wood like a madman. He shouted, groaned, swung his sickle too hard, and cried out whenever he made even a small hurt on his hand. He wanted the rabbit to see how greatly he was suffering for her sake, and that desire made him look more foolish with every moment.

After a while he threw down his sickle and showed her his hand. "Look," he

said, “I have blisters. My throat is dry, my stomach is empty, and I have worked like ten men. We should rest now and open the lunch box.” Then he opened a huge box and began to eat with terrible noise, stuffing his mouth as if the world might end before the next bite. The rabbit stopped working and looked inside. At once she gave a small cry and covered her face, for the box held things so ugly that even she, cruel as she was, felt a moment of disgust.

Yet she said nothing. She kept that thin secret smile near her mouth and went on cutting wood while the tanuki ate, burped, and praised himself. Because she was gentle with him that morning, he believed more deeply than ever that she had begun to love him. When he had eaten enough, he stretched out, slept loudly, and even spoke in his sleep about love charms and happiness. By the time he woke, the sun was high, and the rabbit had already tied her wood into a neat bundle.

“I have finished,” she said in a sweet voice. “Let us carry the wood to the old man’s house.” The tanuki rose lazily and said he too would gather his wood and go down at once. He tied up his bundle, and they started home through the mountain path. Then the rabbit said, “Please walk in front of me. I am afraid of snakes in this place.” At once he swelled with pride and said he feared nothing in the world.

She praised him a little, and that praise made him almost melt. He began to boast, then to complain, then to boast again, and his foolish talk rolled on without end. Soon he stopped and said he heard a strange sound. “Kachi, kachi,” it seemed to say from behind his back. The rabbit answered calmly, “Of course. This is Kachi-Kachi Mountain.” He looked uneasy, but because she spoke with such calm certainty, he tried to believe her.

Then another smell and another sound rose near him. It seemed to crackle and whisper, and a hot breath touched the wood on his back. “This is odd,” he said. “Now it sounds like fire.” The rabbit replied, “That is only because we have come to another place on the same mountain. Here it is called Crackle-Burn Hill.” He had no time to question her further, for in the next instant the wood on his back burst into flame. He screamed, danced, rolled, and ran in circles while the rabbit watched.

The next day he lay in his hole groaning with pain. He cursed his bad luck, praised his own looks, cried over his dark skin, and called himself a lonely good man whom women had never understood. In the middle of his complaint, he heard a voice outside selling medicine. The seller cried that the medicine cured burns, cuts, and even dark skin. At those last words the tanuki forgot almost everything else and called the seller in at once.

The seller, of course, was the rabbit in disguise. She spoke like a traveling medicine man, though the tanuki at once felt that something about her seemed familiar. Still, he was too foolish and too full of desire to stop the game. He begged for the medicine, first for his skin and then for his burned back. She warned him not to put it on his face, but he forced some of it toward his cheeks, dreaming of becoming pale and handsome at last. Then, when he begged for more, she spread the fiery pepper medicine over his burns, and he fell into wild pain.

He rolled, screamed, asked for water, spoke nonsense, and tried to explain his whole sad life while the fire ran through his body again. He cried that he had only struck the old woman because he did not want to be made into soup. He cried that no woman had loved him because he was dark and hungry and awkward. He cried that his face was not really bad. Then he fainted. The rabbit left him there without pity.

For several days he hovered between life and death. On the fourth day hunger drove him from his hole, and later, because his body was thick and strong, he slowly recovered. The first thing that returned was his appetite. The second was his desire. So, though any wise creature would have hidden forever, he went again to the rabbit's house with an ugly smile and said, "I have come to visit."

The rabbit nearly died of disgust when she saw him. But he understood nothing. He thought her cry of surprise was joy, and he took her dark face for concern over his old suffering. He thanked her for worrying and began to talk warmly about fate, luck, and the happiness of sitting beside her again. She wanted only one thing, and that was to drive him away forever, but now she saw that driving him away would not be enough. So she made one final plan.

"There are many fine fish in Lake Kawaguchi," she said. "Big ones gather near

the little island, and we could catch them if we used a boat." The tanuki's eyes shone at once. He admitted that he loved such fish but could not catch them well. Then the rabbit said that her own boat was too small for two, but they could make a strong new one together. "Wood is weak," she said. "Let us make it of mud." The tanuki, hearing only the promise of fish and closeness, thanked her with tears and lazily asked her to build it while he prepared lunch.

So they went down to the lakeside. The rabbit shaped a neat little boat from wet clay while the tanuki busied himself with his great lunch box and imagined a future in which such a hard-working female would serve him forever. At sunset the mud boat was ready, dark and smooth and shining. He praised her skill, loaded his lunch first of all, and climbed into the boat with shameless comfort. Then he asked her to tie his boat to hers so that the two could stay together like husband and wife.

She tied the rope, pushed off, and the two boats moved over the bright evening water. The tanuki lay back, smiling and half dreaming, already speaking of her as if she belonged to him. Then water began to rise through the floor of his boat. He cried out, first in confusion, then in fear, and finally in complete panic. The rabbit cut the rope, struck him with her oar when he begged for help, and watched him sink. As he went under, he cried, "Was I wrong only because I loved you?" Then he vanished, and the rabbit wiped her face and said, "What terrible sweat."

So what are we to learn from this miserable end? One may say it warns foolish men not to trouble beautiful young girls too much. One may say it teaches that people often punish others not by justice, but by simple likes and dislikes, and that this is how much of the world truly works. But perhaps the whole tale stands best in the tanuki's final words. He died saying only that he had loved, and in that one cry lies the old sad joke of many stories in every land.

Part 8

The Sparrow with the Cut Tongue

I had once thought that I might also rewrite the story of Momotaro and use it to finish this book of old tales. But that hero stands too close to a poem, a flag, and a shining idea of the perfect son of Japan. I did not trust myself to touch him freely. So I left him alone and turned instead to the story of the sparrow with the cut tongue. The old people in this tale are not the first or greatest people in the land. They are only plain human beings, and for that reason I can follow them more honestly.

This old man lived in the Sendai region, in a poor little hut beside a deep bamboo grove. All day long the sparrows there cried so loudly that they seemed to shake the morning and evening air. The old man himself was weak in body and quiet in manner. He was not a worker of great force, and he was not a man who pushed himself into the world. He had drawn back from many things, almost as if he had decided that life was too noisy and people too sharp. Yet he was not hard or cold. Under his tired face there was still a heart that could be moved.

His wife was very different. She was not a monster, and she was not evil by nature, but she was practical, restless, and quick to be hurt. She worked, cleaned, watched, counted, and judged. The old man moved as if he wished to disturb nobody, but the wife could not live that way. She wanted answers, proper greetings, and clear proof that she still held her place in the house. So the two of them did not live in open battle, yet peace did not settle well between them.

Late in the autumn of that year, one cold morning, hail ran over the bamboo leaves with a bright dry sound. In the yard the old man found a little sparrow on its back, with one leg hurt and useless. He said nothing. He only lifted it with both hands, brought it into the house, laid it beside the hearth, and fed it little by little. The bird did not die. Its leg healed, and after that it stayed near him as if it had made its own decision.

The sparrow lived in his room, hopped over his desk, and sometimes flew down into the yard only to come back at once. The old man fed it again and again with quiet pleasure. When the bird left dirt on the edge of the porch, the wife cried, “That is filthy,” and chased it away with angry hands. The old man never argued. He only rose without a word, took out soft paper, and wiped the place clean as

carefully as if he were caring for a child. The bird came to trust him completely, and he came to wait for its small movements in the room.

After a while the old man even began to speak with it. That does not mean that the bird suddenly became a grand lady in a storybook and made speeches like a court poet. But its little cries had tone and change in them, and the old man, who had grown tired of human speech, listened as if he could hear meaning there. Sometimes he answered in his low, broken way, and the quiet of the room grew lighter. Once, when his wife heard this from another room, she became suspicious at once. She thought she had heard the voice of a young woman.

“I know what has happened,” she said bitterly. “You have grown tired of an old wife like me. You speak of calm, and freedom from desire, and fear of gossip, but if a young woman comes, you start talking at once.” The old man did not deny it in the way she wished. He only said, “Let it be so, then.” Then, after a pause, he added something truer and sadder. “I have a weak heart too. When I speak with people, I begin to judge them, and then I fear myself. People see the faults of others quickly, but they do not see the danger inside their own hearts. That is why I am afraid of people.”

The wife did not accept those words. She only became more angry. “Where is she?” she said. “I heard that young voice. I am the wife of this house, and I will greet the guest myself. Do not treat me as if I were nothing.” The old man lifted his chin toward the desk. “There,” he said. “That is the one.” On the desk the little sparrow was walking in quick circles, pecking the wood and turning its bright eyes.

The wife stared and cried, “Do not joke with me.” The old man said in his slow way, “It speaks, and it says clever things.” Those words were enough. The wife reached out, seized the sparrow in one hand, and said, “Then I will make sure it speaks no more.” She had long hated the way he loved that little bird. In that one angry moment, half from jealousy and half from wounded pride, she forced open its beak and tore out its tiny tongue.

The bird flew up at once and vanished into the open sky. The old man did not shout. He did not strike the table. He only sat there and watched the place where

it disappeared. That silence was heavier than any cry. Then the night passed, and from the next morning onward, he began to wander through the great bamboo grove. “Sparrow with the cut tongue,” he called day after day. “Where is your home? Sparrow with the cut tongue, where is your home?”

Snow began to fall and did not stop. Still he searched. The grove was full of sparrows, thousands of them, jumping, lifting, hiding, and crying in the cold air. To find one little bird among so many should have been almost impossible, yet the old man went on with a strange heat of purpose. He no longer moved like a weak man avoiding life. He pushed through the snow, called into the wind, and returned only when darkness forced him back.

One night the snow grew so deep that even in Sendai people said it was rare. The next morning the sky cleared, and the whole world shone white and hard. Very early, in his straw shoes, the old man went again into the bamboo grove and called in the same worn voice, “Sparrow with the cut tongue, where is your home?” Then a great mass of snow fell from the bent bamboo above him. It struck his head, and he collapsed face down on the frozen ground.

As he lay there between sleep and death, he heard many small voices. “Poor man,” one voice said. “He has died at last.” Another answered, “No, not yet. He has only lost his senses.” Others whispered that if he stayed there any longer, he would freeze. Then they began to speak of the sparrow he sought. They said her name was Oteru, that she had been hurt and had not shown herself since, that she lay weeping because her tongue had been torn out, and that the old man’s wife had done it in a fit of jealousy. So, before he ever opened his eyes, the truth was already moving around him in the cold bright air.

Part 9

The old man still lay in the snow, but the small voices around him grew clearer and clearer. “It was jealousy,” one voice said. “People can be gentle for many days, and then suddenly do something cruel.” Another answered, “Do not talk so much. He may hear us.” Then a softer voice said, “Even if he hears us, it does not matter

now. He came all this way for Oteru, and he would have frozen to death if we had left him here.” Those words moved through his weak mind like light through thin paper.

He tried to open his eyes, but for a moment he saw only white brightness. Then small shapes began to move in front of him. Little girls, pretty as dolls and dressed in neat bright clothes, were standing around him in the snow. Their faces were serious and kind at the same time. The old man thought first that he must still be dreaming, but the cold on his hands and the wet touch of melting snow told him that this dream, if it was a dream, had weight and air and winter in it.

“Can you stand?” one of the little girls asked. The old man did not answer at once. He pushed himself up slowly and looked around, but the bamboo grove no longer seemed like the grove he knew. The snow shone too cleanly, the bamboo looked too green under the white, and the path before him seemed to open where no path had ever been. “Where am I going?” he asked at last. The little girl bowed neatly and said, “To the Sparrow Inn.”

“The Sparrow Inn,” the old man repeated, not with surprise, but almost as if he had expected that name all along. The little girl knelt politely before him, opened her round eyes wide, and said, “Yes. This is the house where the sparrows live.” He studied her face and then asked, “Then are you the sparrow with the cut tongue?” She smiled and shook her head. “No. Oteru is resting in the inner room. I am Osuzu. I am her closest friend.”

“So the little one I have been looking for is named Oteru,” the old man said. Osuzu nodded. “Yes. She is gentle and very good. Please come quickly and see her. She cannot speak now, and every day she only sheds tears.” The old man rose at once. The weakness of his body had not fully gone, but his purpose held him upright. “Then take me there,” he said. “I have troubled the snow and the bamboo long enough.”

Osuzu stood and lightly shook out her long sleeves. Then she led him along a narrow bamboo porch that seemed to float between the snow and the house. The old man walked very carefully, because the green bamboo under his feet was smooth and bright, and he did not wish to slip and make a fool of himself in so

quiet a place. The air there smelled of cold water and fresh grass, though it was still deepest winter outside. Nothing in the house was large or grand, yet each small thing seemed placed with perfect ease.

“Please come in here,” Osuzu said, drawing aside the way into an inner room. It was a bright room, open toward a little garden. Small bamboo grass grew thickly there, and a clear shallow stream ran between the leaves with a quick and gentle sound. Oteru lay beneath a little red silk quilt. She was even more delicate and lovely than Osuzu, pale now from hurt and sorrow, and when she saw the old man, her large eyes filled at once and tears began to run down her face.

The old man sat cross-legged beside her pillow. He did not rush to speak. He did not say, “Poor thing,” or “How cruel,” or any of the soft words people often use when they do not know what else to do. Instead he looked quietly at the stream moving through the garden, and after a little while he gave one small sigh. It was not a sigh of sadness. It was the first sign of peace that had perhaps ever risen from the deepest place in his heart.

Oteru watched him closely. Then, when he turned and said at last, “You need not speak. That is all right, is it not?” she blinked quickly and nodded two or three times with clear joy. That was enough for both of them. Nothing more needed to be explained. The old man felt that if he tried to say too much, the whole calm of the room would break like thin ice under a careless foot.

Osuzu, who had stepped away so as not to disturb them, now came back carrying sake and small dishes of food. She set them down gently and said, “Please take your time.” The old man drank a little and ate a little, though he hardly noticed what he took into his mouth. The sake was warm and quiet, and the food seemed to carry the clean taste of water and bamboo leaves. Outside, the stream kept running with the same quick, clear voice, and Oteru lay watching him as if that alone made her rest easier.

The old man stayed there a long while. He did not sleep, and he did not speak much, but the time passed like a mild afternoon in early spring rather than a winter day in a deep bamboo grove. He had spent much of his life shrinking from noise, from judgment, and from the sharp edges of ordinary talk, yet even in solitude he

had never found full ease. Here, beside the little bird who could not speak, he discovered that peace does not always come from being alone. Sometimes it comes from being understood without speech.

At last he rose. “I should go now,” he said simply. Osuzu, who had expected more, looked at him in surprise. “Already?” she cried. “You searched the grove until you nearly died in the snow. You finally found her today, and now you will leave without even one tender word.” The old man gave a small, crooked smile and answered, “Tender words are the one thing I do not trust.” At that, Osuzu looked from him to Oteru. Oteru was smiling through her tears and nodding, as if to say that this too was enough.

“Then both of you are the same,” Osuzu said, and she began to laugh softly. The old man, quite serious, answered, “Yes. I will come again.” He turned toward the door, then paused and asked, “Tell me one thing. Where exactly is this place?” Osuzu replied, “Inside the bamboo grove.” He frowned lightly and said, “That cannot be. I have walked that grove for many years, and I have never seen a house like this.”

Osuzu smiled with a little secret pride. “It is there,” she said. “But ordinary people cannot see it. If you fall again, as you did this morning, at the entrance of the grove upon the snow, we will guide you here whenever we wish.” The old man stepped out onto the green bamboo porch once more and looked at the pale winter light beyond it. “That is a great kindness,” he said, and this time the words were not polite words at all. They were plain truth, spoken from a heart that had, at last, found a place where it could rest.

Part 10

He stepped out from the Bamboo Inn, looked once more at the pale winter light, and then everything broke apart. The green porch, the clear little stream, the bright room, Osuzu’s laughing face, and Oteru under the red quilt all seemed to fade at once like a picture seen through water. When the old man came fully to himself again, he was lying face down at the entrance of the bamboo grove. His body was

cold, and his straw shoes were wet with snow. “So it was a dream after all,” he murmured, but when he opened his right hand, he found a single ear of rice still there, golden and real in the middle of winter.

He sat up slowly and looked at the rice as if it were a message that had been left for him. “A hairpin,” he said, remembering Osuzu’s words. “This was hers.” The snow shone around him with such hard brightness that he could not easily tell dream from waking life. Yet the ear of rice was warm from his hand, and its grains were perfect. He rose at last and walked back to his hut, holding it carefully, not like a farmer bringing home food, but like a man carrying a sign of something he dared not explain too loudly.

His wife was waiting inside, bent over her sewing. When she saw him enter, she did not greet him with tenderness, but with the cold attention of a person who has been watching another too closely for too long. “You are late again,” she said. “And where have you been this time?” The old man, who had spoken so little at the Bamboo Inn, found that words still did not come easily. He only held out the ear of rice and said, “I brought this back.”

She looked at it and frowned. “In the middle of winter?” she said. “Where did you steal that from?” He answered, “I did not steal it. It was given to me.” She narrowed her eyes at once. “Given by whom?” He said, after a pause, “By the sparrows.” That answer, spoken quietly and simply, was the worst possible answer he could have given to a woman already full of jealousy, hurt pride, and suspicion.

“The sparrows,” she repeated. “So now you will tell me a story and expect me to bow before it.” The old man sat down and tried, in his slow broken way, to explain what had happened. He spoke of the snow, the voices, the little girls, the Bamboo Inn, Oteru, and the rice ear given as a keepsake. He did not make his story larger than it was, and that almost made it harder to believe. The wife listened with her needle in her hand, her mouth growing thinner and thinner, until at last she gave a short laugh and said, “And if I lie down in the snow at the entrance of the grove, will they take me there too?”

The old man answered, “That is what Osuzu said.” Then he added at once, “But it may be foolish to try. It may not happen for you. It may not happen again even

for me.” The wife put down her sewing. “No,” she said. “Now I must see this for myself. You have made me into a fool long enough.” He raised his hand as if to stop her, but not with real force. He was tired, and he knew that once her mind had fixed on something, she would not easily turn back.

She stood up, put away her sewing things, and tied up her clothing for the cold. “Listen well,” she said. “If this is a lie, I will know it soon enough. If it is true, then I too shall go to that house and return with proper gifts, not with one silly ear of rice.” The old man said nothing. He watched her step down into the white yard and make her way toward the bamboo grove. The snow was deep, and her body, still strong from work and stubbornness, moved forward without hesitation.

What happened after that, no one can say with certainty. The old man did not follow her, and the writer himself does not know the hidden roads of the Sparrow Inn. Perhaps she too reached that place. Perhaps she saw the rooms, the little stream, and the rows of gift boxes. Perhaps she spoke harshly. Perhaps she begged. Perhaps she feared she had come too far to return empty-handed. The truth remains closed, like a box no one can open now.

At dusk, when the light had gone gray and the cold had deepened, they found her lying face down in the snow. A great basket was tied upon her back, so large and heavy that she could not rise again after she fell. She had frozen there beneath its weight. People lifted the basket from her body and carried both into the hut. When they opened it, the inside shone with bright gold coins packed close together, enough to blind the eyes of poor villagers unused to such light.

The old man looked at the coins, then at his dead wife, and gave no cry. Others around him were excited, whispering, counting, praising fortune, and speaking of how rich he would now become. But he sat quietly as if the room had emptied of sound. At last he said only, “She had many hardships because of me.” Those who heard him took it for grief, and it was grief, yet there was more in it than that. He knew too well that the gold had come through her last desperate act, and no brightness in the basket could wash away the cold of that evening.

Whether because of the gold or because fortune had at last turned toward him, the old man soon entered service. After that he rose quickly. One office led to

another, and in time he became a chief minister in a whole province. People love stories that join kindness and reward, so they said, “Of course. He loved the sparrow once, and now heaven has repaid him. That is why he has risen so high.” They even gave him a name and called him the Sparrow Minister, as if his whole life had been moving toward that title from the beginning.

Whenever people praised him in that way, he gave the same small crooked smile that had once made Osuzu laugh. “No,” he said. “It was thanks to my wife. She suffered much because of me.” That answer puzzled those who heard it, because they wanted a cleaner story, one with simple reward for simple goodness. But life does not always move in such straight lines, and these old tales know that better than sermons do. So the story ends not only with gold, rank, and a fine name, but with one faint smile, one half-hidden pain, and one remembered woman walking into the snow.