

## **AI-Generated Graded Readers**

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Publication webpage:

[https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated\\_graded\\_readers.html](https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated_graded_readers.html)

Publication date: March 23, 2026

### **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: Shinpan Hōrōki (新版 放浪記)

Author: Hayashi Fumiko (林芙美子)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/>

Original Japanese text available at:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000291/card1813.html>

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Hayashi Fumiko, *Diary of a Vagabond [Hōrōki]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

## Part 1

When I was a child, I learned a sad song in a small school in North Kyushu. It was a song about a traveler far from home, thinking of parents and an old town with pain in the heart. I remember that song even now. Other children sang it in an easy way, but I could not. The words entered me like cold wind at night. I was still very young, yet I already knew that “home” was not a simple thing.

I was born to wandering parents, so the road became my first home. My real father was a cloth peddler from Iyo in Shikoku. My mother was the daughter of a hot-spring inn in Sakurajima, in Kyushu. She had married a man from another place, and for that reason she was pushed out by her people. My parents drifted until they settled for a time in Shimonoseki, and that was where I was born. Since they themselves had no safe place to return to, I too grew up without one.

Because of that, the song about a dear hometown always hurt me. I listened and sang, but inside I felt empty. I had no village to miss in the same simple way as the others. My parents had been shut out, and I had been born outside the gate with them. So from the start, I belonged more to roads, inns, and changing skies than to any one town. Even as a little girl, I felt that I had been made for travel before I had chosen it.

When I was eight, a hard wind entered my life. My father had done well for a time in Wakamatsu, selling cloth and other goods. He had money then, and his business was said to be strong. But he brought another woman into the house, a geisha who had fled from Amakusa near Nagasaki. I did not understand the whole matter then, but I felt the fear in the rooms. Snow fell around the old New Year, and my mother finally took my hand and left that house with me beside her.

I still remember Wakamatsu as a place one reached by boat. That memory stays in my mind like a gray picture seen through winter mist. I remember the cold, the moving water, and the feeling that something had broken forever. My mother did

not speak much as we went away. I also stayed quiet, because children understand sorrow before they learn its full meaning. I only knew that we were leaving one life and stepping into another life with no clear end.

The man I later called Father was not my real father. He was my stepfather, a man from Okayama. He was honest, but too weak in spirit, and at the same time he had wild dreams that pulled him into trouble. Half his life seemed filled with struggle. After my mother joined her life to his, I became a child carried along with the two of them. From then on, we hardly ever had a real house, and cheap inns became the shape of our days.

My mother used to say, “Your father does not like houses. He likes goods, loads, and the road.” That was how she explained him to me. So we went from place to place across Kyushu, carrying things to sell and never staying long. I learned the smell of poor inns, wet bedding, old wood, and cooking smoke better than I learned the names of flowers or rivers. We slept in one place, then another, and the world kept changing outside the door. I began to think that this was simply how people lived.

I first entered school in Nagasaki. I wore a modern dress that people thought fine at the time, and I walked from a cheap lodging house near Chinatown to the school building. But that start did not last. After Nagasaki came Sasebo, then Kurume, then Shimonoseki, then Moji, then Tobata, then Orio. In four years I changed schools seven times, and I never stayed long enough to grow roots. Other children had close friends, but I had only greetings, looks, and then another goodbye.

Each new school felt the same in the beginning. I entered a room full of faces that already knew one another. Desks, shoes, voices, and games were already in their places, and I was the extra piece brought in late. Before I could get used to the teacher’s way of speaking or the road to the gate, we moved again. My books changed, my seat changed, the town changed, and the sky itself seemed to change. Little by little, I stopped believing that friendship would stay.

At first I still tried to hope. I watched other girls laugh together and wanted to join them. I listened to their talk and copied their tone, but I always felt one step

behind. When I had just begun to learn a street, a shop, or a class song, my mother and stepfather were already packing for the next move. A child can get tired in the heart before she knows the right words for it. That kind of tiredness began to grow inside me very early.

At last, when we were living in the coal-mining town of Nogata, I could not bear school any longer. I was about twelve then. The town itself felt dark and heavy, and my spirit had become the same. One day I spoke to my stepfather with all the force I had left and said, “Father, I do not want to go to school anymore.” It was not a sudden wish. It came from years of moving, losing, beginning again, and never belonging anywhere.

No one around me thought a girl of my age should simply play. People said it was a waste to let me grow without work. There was always something to sell, something to carry, something to earn. Our life was too poor and too uncertain for soft talk about childhood. So my words did not fall into a quiet room full of surprise. They fell into the hard daily world of people who counted rice, coins, and tomorrow’s road.

That was how my school life ended. I did not leave school because I hated learning itself. I left because life had already pushed me away from the desk and toward the road. I had learned how quickly places changed, how weak comfort could be, and how heavy money sat in the minds of adults. The child who had sung of a faraway home was now moving toward work instead of lessons. Soon I would begin to sell things and walk the streets as one more small traveler in a restless world.

## Part 2

Nogata was a dark town under a dark sky. Morning and evening looked almost the same, because coal dust seemed to hang over everything. Even the water had a hard taste, as if iron had melted into it. In July we settled in a cheap inn in Taishomachi called Umayu, the Stable. My stepfather and mother still went out every day with goods in boxes on a handcart, selling knitwear, socks, cloth, and belts to

miners and pottery workers. They left me behind at the inn for long hours, and the town became my new world.

At first I walked around with three sen tied in my sash. I was a stranger there, and I looked at everything with sharp eyes. Nogata was not lively like Moji, and it was not beautiful like Nagasaki. The women were not bright and pretty as they had seemed in Sasebo. The roads were rough with coal dust, the houses looked tired, and the shops stood in rows like a freight train that had stopped and turned into a town. Candy shops, noodle shops, junk dealers, bedding lenders, and small dark stores all sat there under the dirty air.

The women I saw were also different from the women in other towns. In the hot light of July they walked in old skirts and thin underclothes with bare arms, their faces dull with work. In the evening groups of women came back carrying shovels or empty baskets, talking loudly as they went toward the long miners' rows. There was no soft air in that place. Everything seemed made of dust, sweat, noise, and tired feet. Yet I watched it all with a child's wide and restless eyes.

My small coins quickly disappeared on picture booklets and cold sweets. Then I stopped being only a girl who wandered and stared. Since I was not going to school anymore, I was sent to work at an awa-okoshi factory in Susaki-machi for twenty-three sen a day. Rice then cost about eighteen sen, so that pay meant something in our house. At night I borrowed books from a lending shop nearby and read them in the dim light. Heroic stories, sad love stories, and grand endings filled my head until I began to dream foolish, shining dreams.

I did not know what life was, but I already wanted to escape it. Around me, grown-ups spoke about money from morning to night. Debt, rent, food, stock, weather, and wages made up the talk of every day. So my own bright dream became very simple and very poor: I wanted to be rich. I wanted money enough to stop hearing the sound of hunger in the room. When rain fell for days and my father's rented cart stood wet outside, we ate pumpkin rice again and again, and even holding the bowl felt lonely.

The inn itself was like a small, broken world. There was a half-mad former miner whom everyone called Shinkei, "Nerves," because an explosion had

damaged his mind. He was gentle, and he often helped me pick lice from my hair. There was also a blind storyteller from Shimane, two miner couples, a peddler who sold snake wine, and a prostitute with one thumb missing. One day that woman took me to the bath, and I saw a snake tattoo around her stomach, with a red tongue near her navel. I was still a child, but I stared at that blue, cold snake as if I had seen a ghost.

The town changed with songs and fashions even in all that dirt. A sign for Katyusha appeared, and soon the sad song from that story spread through the mining streets. Girls began to part their hair in the middle like the actress, and I too was caught by the dream of it. I did not fully understand the love in that tale, but it made me feel soft and far away from my own life. I went by myself again and again to see the moving picture. After that, I played Katyusha with other children in an open square where white oleanders bloomed, and sometimes we also played at being miners.

I was a strong child then, full of movement and easy courage. After about a month I left the candy factory and began to peddle goods myself. My father bought fans and small cosmetics, and I carried them in a gray cloth bundle across the Onga River, through a tunnel, and into company housing and miners' huts. There were many traveling sellers in the coal fields, so I became one small voice among them. I had two young companions now and then, Matsu-chan, a sweet girl from Katsuki who later was sold away to Qingdao, and Hiro-chan, a thirteen-year-old boy who sold dried fish and wanted above all to become a real miner.

I liked walking and selling. My fans were cheap, ten sen each, painted with carp, Mount Fuji, or the Seven Gods of Good Luck, and they sold well among the miner families. I often sold twenty in a day. The wives in the miners' barracks bought more than the women in the cleaner company homes. There were also crowded Korean housing rows, with half-naked children playing over thin mats. Under the fierce sky the dug-up earth lay open, and from far away came the noise of carts and tracks like far thunder.

At noon the miners came out of the dark pits in sudden waves. They seemed to rise out of the earth itself, black with sweat and coal dust, moving slowly toward

food and air. I walked among them with my little goods, calling out and showing the fans. Their bodies shone as if they had been dipped in black syrup, and when they lay down on the ground they breathed like large animals. In the stillness after the meal, the song of Katyusha floated again from one place and then another. Evening lanterns crept low over the ground, and the whistle sounded sharply through the coal hills.

When fans stopped selling well, I changed again and began to sell anpan for one sen each. I walked the long road to the mines, resting often and sometimes eating one myself. My stepfather had quarreled with a miner over business and sat in the inn with his head wrapped in cloth, while my mother opened a banana stand near Taga Shrine. Crowds of miners came from the station, and bananas sold well enough to keep us alive. When I finished with the bread basket, I would sit near my mother's place or wander toward the shrine and pray before the bronze horse, asking only that something good might happen to us.

In October there was a strike in the mines, and the whole town changed at once. The shops became quiet, as if the town were holding its breath, but the miners themselves moved with angry energy. People said strikes happened often, and that men simply left one mine and flowed to another. For sellers this meant trouble, because credit could vanish overnight when a man disappeared. Still, merchants said miners were good customers because they bought fast when they had money. I listened to all of this as if it were part of the weather.

At night, under the dim lamp, I read detective stories while my mother spoke in a tired voice to my stepfather. "You are past forty," she would say. "Please settle somewhere and live seriously." He would answer sharply, and then only the long sound of rain would remain. The thumb-less prostitute, always half-drunk and strangely cheerful, said she wished for a war, because then money would pour into the mines and the world might turn upside down. I did not understand such talk fully, but I felt that every adult around me was waiting for some violent change.

One cold night in November, my father, mother, and I were pulling our handcart home from Kurosaki when my father told us to climb up and ride because the road

was still long. My mother and I sat on the cart, and he pulled us forward singing. Then two starving Korean miners called out from the dark behind us. They said they had not eaten for two days and begged for money to get as far as Orio. My father was silent for a moment, then gave each of them fifty sen, and the two men, trembling under the stars, followed behind our cart all the way back to town.

Soon after that, my father went to Okayama because his father had died, and he wanted to sell family land to raise money for a new start. He came back with only forty yen, bought pottery to sell, and then left alone for Sasebo to work. He told us, "I will call for you soon." So my mother and I stayed in Nogata and lived by her bananas and my anpan. I did not hate the work at all. As I went from house to house, coins gathered little by little in the purse I had made, and I was proud when my mother praised me for being clever at trade.

For two months we lived like that. Then one day I came home and saw my mother sewing a beautiful light green sash. She said my father from Shikoku had sent it, and for some reason my heart beat fast when I heard that. Not long after, my stepfather returned to fetch us, and the three of us left Nogata by train. As the train crossed the bridge over the Onga River, I looked out at the white road along the bank, the same road I had walked so many times with my goods, and it filled me with a deep sadness. A white sail moved upriver in the falling light, and inside the train peddlers shouted about rings, balloons, and picture books while my father bought me a ring with a red glass stone.

### Part 3

Snow was falling when I stepped down at the station, and a line from a poem came back to me. It spoke of getting off at a far station and walking into a lonely town under the light of snow. I felt that line in my body. When I opened the toilet window in the house where I had found work, I saw a lamp outside in the evening dark, small and red like a mountain flower in winter. That weak light made me think of places I had never truly had and of homes that were never mine.

I had gone into service in the house of a writer named Mr. Shuko. I had been

there only a little more than a week, yet I already felt caught. His baby, Yuriko, cried often, and I was told again and again to carry her on my back. “Girl, take the child,” the mistress would call, and I had no choice but to obey. The baby had a sharp, nervous way about her that made me tired at once. Only when I shut myself inside the toilet for a moment did I feel that my own body belonged to me.

Hunger made my thoughts small and strange. I found myself dreaming not of dresses or jewels, but of cutlets, bananas, grilled eel, and tangerines. When my heart grew poor, I wanted to scribble on walls like a foolish child, so I traced the names of food with my finger as if that could fill my stomach. Until supper was ready, I walked the hall again and again with the baby on my back. The house had no peace in it. The master ran up and down the stairs all day with the quick, worried steps of a trapped rat.

He would look over my shoulder and say in a bright voice, “Did the little one sleep well?” Then he would hurry away again. I read Chekhov when I could, pulling a book from the shelf in the hall while the child slept on me. His stories felt like a true home for the heart, calm and sad, and very close to my own thoughts. The master’s own writing did not touch me in the same way. He wrote of worlds far from mine, and I longed instead for the quiet breath of Chekhov.

The wife of the house was a gentle woman, slow and country-bred, and I liked her more than anyone there. The cook made good mixed rice one night, and the smell alone almost made me happy. Yet even then I could see what I did not want. The master worried so much over his child that I began to think I would never spend my whole life as a servant. I looked at the small white flowers growing even on rough weeds and thought that he knew less about simple life than those flowers did.

Then, as suddenly as the work had come, it ended. I was dismissed and given only two yen for more than two weeks. When I stood on the bridge above the railway and opened the paper packet, the coins lay in my hand like an insult. Cold seemed to rise from my feet all the way to my chest. I carried my large cloth bundle and walked without aim, feeling that everything in me had turned rough and dry. I wanted to throw down my load, my hope, and perhaps even my life.

I stepped into an empty house that was open for rent and sat there for a little while, too tired to walk farther. The rooms were dirty, cans lay in corners, and the cold light of December shone through the glass. An old dog looked at me from the porch as if it knew I had nowhere to go. "There is nothing," I told myself. "Nothing at all." I stood there, asking what I should do, and no answer came.

That night I found a bed in a cheap inn in Asahi-cho, near Shinjuku. The road outside was wet and soft with melting snow, and for thirty sen I was allowed to stretch my mud-tired body on a thin bed in a three-mat room with a tiny oil lamp. I wrote a long letter to the island man who had once left me, though I knew he would not save me. My heart felt broken and foolish, yet I still wrote. In that attic room I thought that the whole world was made of lies, and that I myself had become a crooked die thrown back onto the board again.

Deep in the night, a woman suddenly slid under my quilt without asking. A moment later a dirty man opened the paper door and shouted for her to get up. They went into the hall, and I heard the sound of a slap. Then the same man came into my room and questioned me like a policeman. "Who are you? Where are you from? Do you know that woman?" he asked, standing over my pillow with a notebook in his hand. When he finally left, I touched the purse under my head and found that I still had one yen and sixty-five sen.

The moonlight came strangely through the high bent window, and I lay there thinking. A clown can jump down from a high place, I told myself, but jumping back up is harder. Even so, I was not dead yet. As long as I could still walk and still eat something, there might be some road left for me. I stretched out my arms and legs in the dark and tried to believe that hunger would not beat me completely. It was a poor kind of courage, but it was the only kind I had.

In the morning I went to a cheap eating place at the start of Ome Road. While I drank hot tea, a laborer covered in mud rushed in and cried, "Sister, can you give me something for ten sen? I have only one coin." The young waitress answered kindly and set before him a big bowl of rice, meat tofu, and soup. He smiled at once and began to eat with a bright, open face. That sight moved me more than anything grand could have done, because it showed how near warmth and ruin

could stand to each other.

I ate my own poor meal and then went to the employment office in Kanda. Everywhere I turned, the place felt dry and empty, like a wide sand field. The women at the desk looked at me coldly and laughed when they heard what kind of work I wanted. "Office work? Girls from proper schools are already wandering around without jobs," one of them said. "There is servant work if you want it." In the end they gave me only three weak chances: an ink company, work with gasoline, and servant work at the Italian Embassy.

I came back to the inn with little gained and less money in my purse. In the common room, young performers were painting their faces before mirrors and talking in loud, tired voices about how badly they had sold the night before. The next day I went to the embassy in Kojimachi. The grounds were broad, the gravel was clean, and I felt at once that I did not belong there. A foreign woman in black and white showed me the kitchen and the servant room, but everything smelled strange, like soap and stone, and my heart closed before I could say yes.

When I left that grand place and walked down the windy street, I felt more lost than before. I went to a house where I had once known people, but the aunt there was cold. A letter waited for me from a man who had spoken kindly before, yet the letter was only a refusal. By evening, as I walked through Shinjuku, I felt such weakness that I almost wanted to cling to the sleeve of the first man who passed. I stood on the bridge above the station and looked at the purple signal light shaking in the air until my eyes filled and I began to sob like a child.

At last I told the woman at the inn the truth. She listened and said I could stay downstairs with them until I found work. "Why not try for a city bus conductor?" she said. "A good one can earn seventy yen." Seventy yen sounded like a dream from another world. I warmed myself at the low table under a weak light and wrote to my mother, begging her to somehow send me three yen. That same fallen woman from the other night came in eating fried rice wrapped in bean-curd skin, and the inn people spoke badly of her, but I hardly listened. I ate a bowl of noodles given to me with kindness, lay down again in my dirty bedding, and told myself that crying would do nothing. I still had my body, and while I had that, I must go

on working.

#### Part 4

Spring came before I fully understood how I had lived through the winter. One day Mr. An from the knitwear trade took me to the old man who divided out places for the street stalls, and I carried a whole bottle of sake as a gift. His office stood in a narrow side lane off Dogenzaka, under the sign of a building contractor. He sat by a brazier and laughed when he saw me. "So you will sell at night too," he said. "Work by day and by night, and before long you will build a bank." I laughed too, because in Tokyo shame was useless, and work was the only cloth left to wrap around oneself.

That night I opened my stall between a woman who sold fountain pens and an old man who painted names on doorplates whether people wanted them or not. I borrowed a shutter board from a noodle shop and spread out knit underpants on it with a sign that said, "Twenty sen each." The pen seller let some of her light fall across my little space, and I stood there breathing in the spring air. The pavement looked like a river of lamps, and the crowd flowed past like water. In front of a pottery shop, a worn-out student sold calculators and shouted rude jokes at the people. I thought even that was a kind of brave work.

Customers stopped, touched my things, frowned, and moved on. One fine lady twisted and examined a pair of underpants for twenty long minutes before buying only one. My mother came later with my supper and said, "I will watch the stall for a while. You eat now." The food was simple, pickles and fish cake in a stacked bowl, but to me it looked rich. As I ate with my back turned to the road, I saw how worn my mother's clothes had become in the warmer light. I promised myself that one day I would buy her a full bolt of cotton cloth.

The woman at the next stall cried out in a big sweet voice, "You cannot find this here and there. Please take one in your hand and see." Her words rose above the crowd like a street song. My mother, resting for the first time in many days, hummed an old tune in a low voice as if she had become lighter inside. I suddenly

felt salt tears come into my eyes. For a short while, standing there beside her, I almost believed our life had found a place to rest. If only the man in Kyushu, the one we still called Father, could also recover himself, then perhaps this small peace might last.

Around that time I began to watch the city girls with greater hunger in my heart. They wore thin shawls that moved like water when they walked, and I wanted one so badly that the wish itself hurt. Shop windows glittered with gold paper, silver paper, and cherry blossom displays until my eyes grew tired from looking. The blossoms also entered my mind in another way. I thought of them as if they were tied to the lips of poor women, as if each pink flower held a piece of desire, shame, and beauty together. In spring even the sky seemed to whisper that women must sell not only goods, but also smiles, youth, and hope.

I should have saved money for a shawl, but instead I wasted a little on a cheap movie. The film did not please me at all, and before it ended the rain began to fall hard. I ran out and hurried back to the stall, where my mother was already rolling up the mat and gathering the goods. Together we carried everything to the station. The platforms were crowded with people returning from cherry-viewing, bright and soft like goldfish in a bowl, and we had to push our way into the tram. I pressed my cheek against the dark window and wished the rain would grow even stronger and beat every flower from the trees.

My mother caught cold from the rain, so on the next day I went alone to set up the stall. The road was all mud, and Dogenzaka looked as if sweet bean paste had been poured over the stones. Bookshops had put out rows of fresh books, and I wanted them so much that my body almost leaned toward them by itself. But I had no money for books, and no right to stop working. Women passed and laughed as they looked at me, and at once I felt that they were mocking my face, my cheap paint, or my hair. I stared back hard and thought that women could be more cruel than men because they knew exactly where poverty showed itself.

Business was poor, but one student came and bought five things at once, which felt like a blessing. I closed early, thinking I would go to Shiba and buy more goods, and on the way I treated myself to ten sen of taiyaki. When I reached home,

my mother called to me from her bedding, "Mr. An has been struck by a tram. They say he is in danger." I stood there with my load still on my back and could not move for a moment. That night I went to his house in Shiba, where his young wife had just returned from the hospital with swollen eyes. I took some finished goods, left money behind, and rode home thinking that the world was cracked in a thousand places, though yesterday he had still been pushing the sewing machine pedal in good health.

Soon after that, a long letter came from Father in Kyushu. He wrote that the long rains had reduced him almost to hunger and that life there had become as hard as famine. My mother took the fourteen yen we had saved in a flower pot and told me to send it all at once. We hurried to make it into a money order and sent it away. "Tomorrow will have its own wind," I told myself, but the words felt weak. Since Mr. An's accident, even the easy work of selling knitwear had grown heavy in our hands. We were tired clear through to the bone, tired of work, worry, and even speech.

Then my mother said, "We can live in the three-mat room. Why not rent out the six-mat room to someone else?" I felt almost cheerful at the idea and wrote out notices on paper like a child doing homework. We dreamed in poor, hungry ways. We said that if things improved, perhaps we could buy five sho of rice at once and not worry for a few days. My mother sat in the sunshine and spoke of fortune, saying, "Next year will be better. This year you and your father are blocked in every direction." I wanted to shout that fortune meant nothing when bad luck connected itself day after day like links in a chain, but I kept quiet and bit the words back.

No one came to rent the room, because the house was too shabby. My mother came home with a large cabbage bought on credit from the greengrocer, and the sight of it made me think not of soup, but of hot pork cutlets and rising steam. I lay on the floor in the empty room and looked at the ceiling until strange thoughts came to me. My mother said she had heard at the bath that I might try day labor for house service. That might have been sensible, but bowing and bending before the rich felt more bitter to me than hunger itself. Still, hunger was already near,

and late at night, seeing my mother lick her pencil and write to Father for help, I thought with shame that perhaps someone might even pay money for a body like mine.

The next morning I woke and saw that my wooden clogs had been washed clean. That small act of love from my mother almost broke my heart. I went to the dispatch workers' office in Hyakunincho, Okubo, and found two middle-aged women sewing in the front room. The owner handed me a note and a map and said that the work was to assist a pharmacy student. Walking through the May dust toward the tram, I felt lighter than I had in days. Walking itself was often the happiest part of life for me, because in the street I had not yet failed.

The city looked falsely peaceful that morning, as if it were flying flags that said all was well in the world. Shop windows were full of things one wanted to buy, and I tilted my head to fix my hair in the tram window before I got off in Honmura-cho. The house I sought stood back in a quiet lane among large homes. At the gate I nearly turned around more than once. Then a woman called, "Are you from the dispatch office? They telephoned that you had left, and the young master is angry because you are late." I was shown into a narrow Western-style reception room with a faded print on the wall and soft chairs that felt too rich for me.

The young man told me that his father owned a drugstore in Nihonbashi and that my work would only be sorting medicine samples. "Later," he said, "I may ask you to copy things neatly. And in about a week I will go to Misaki in Miura for research. Will you come too?" He was tall, and I could not judge his age well, so I just looked at his face in silence. Then he said, "Why not leave the dispatch office and come here every day?" We agreed on thirty-five yen a month, and when tea and cakes were brought in, I suddenly remembered the quiet sweetness of Sundays at church long ago. He asked, "How old are you?" and when I answered, "Twenty-one," he smiled and said, "Then you should stop dressing like a child." My face burned hot, yet inside I kept saying that if thirty-five yen truly continued, life might become bearable.

But when I returned home, my mother was holding a telegram. It said that my stepfather's mother in Okayama was critically ill. She was not blood to either of

us, yet she was still the one mother of the man tied to our lives, and we felt that she could not simply be left alone. We had only just sent money to Kyushu, and asking the young man for an advance on the first day seemed too shameless. So my mother and I went to the landlord, though our rent was already months late, and somehow borrowed ten yen. We wrapped up the leftover rice as a travel meal and prepared her for the lonely night train.

At the station I bought her a ticket as far as Okayama and said, "I will get an advance within four or five days and send money. Go with courage. Do not lose heart." My mother cried like a child and told me not to act foolishly, promising she would manage somehow. After the train left, sorrow rushed into me so strongly that I thought I might fall over. I wandered out to the broad front of Tokyo Station while my dry skin stung in the wind and the band of the Salvation Army played somewhere in the distance. They sang, "Come, all who believe," but I felt anger at the sound, because poor people had no spare room in their lives for faith. I stood there imagining my mother in a third-class carriage somewhere near Totsuka or Fujisawa, and I prayed for only one thing: that the thirty-five yen job would not disappear before she came back.

## Part 5

After that night at Tokyo Station, life did not suddenly grow kinder. The city kept moving in its own calm way, as if my fear, my hunger, and my mother's lonely train ride meant nothing at all. Some time later, in November, I found myself working in a small celluloid toy factory, and I had already been there four months. My pay was seventy-five sen a day, and from morning to evening I painted bright colors onto little cheap ornaments. The butterflies and hanging toys I touched with my brush went out into the world, while I remained shut inside with the smell of chemicals and glue.

The factory was small, with about twenty women and fifteen men, but it felt full of dead air. Around us lay endless pale pieces of celluloid shaped into butterflies, dolls, and small things for street stalls. From seven in the morning until

five in the evening we bent over them, adding red, blue, and yellow until our eyes ached. The products looked playful, yet the hands that made them were tired hands. It was strange to see happy little toys born from such dull, worn faces.

One of the girls, O-Chiyo from Kanasugi in Nippori, came to work with a white, tired face and a quiet voice. Her father played shamisen in cheap theaters, and there were six younger children at home, so she had no choice but to work. We stood side by side and painted, and sometimes she would tilt her head and speak as if she were half apologizing for being alive. Above us moved the bookkeeper's wife, who had once been a worker herself, and now came to press us harder whenever our speed fell. "Hurry up," she would say, and the men in the shipping room mocked her behind her back, because they knew too well what she had been.

When the day ended, a basket of pay envelopes went around, and all at once the room broke into a small battle of hands. Everyone reached, searched, and grabbed for her own envelope. Then we tied on our sashes again, stepped out through the gate, and breathed like prisoners released for one short hour. O-Chiyo would sometimes catch up with me and say that she had to stop at the market for supper. We bought cheap fish, held them in our cold hands, and walked through the evening air as if that short road were the only easy place left in the world.

"Do you ever feel happy only when you are walking home?" I asked her once. She answered at once, "Yes. Only then." I looked at the dust on her dark hair and felt a sudden wild anger toward the bright city around us. Elegant shop windows shone, trams rang their bells, and people with money walked lightly past us, while we carried fish and fatigue home like old women. At such times I wanted to set fire to all the glitter in the streets and watch it burn down to the same gray level as our lives.

Again and again one question beat inside me. Why did we have to go on living in such a foolish way, day after day, with the smell of celluloid filling our lungs and our youth running out into nothing? We sat cut off from the sun like worms under a board, painting cheap toys while our health slowly thinned away. Yet when I looked at the small butterflies and dolls, I also thought of poor children. Those poor little things might shine for a moment in a festival light or in the hair

of a girl who owned almost nothing. Because of that thought alone, I could still force a weak smile now and then.

My own room was only two mats wide, and everything inside it seemed to accuse me. The earthen rice pot, the bowls, the box that held my rice, the trunks, and the low desk stood there like a pile of debts made visible. Morning light came through the skylight and made bright stripes in the dust over my face. Lying there, I thought of all the big words men loved to use, freedom, reform, justice, revolution, and they all felt far away from my room. What meaning did such words have for women who measured out rice by the handful and counted every coin before sleep?

Then a letter came from my mother. She wrote in awkward kana that her body hurt badly with rheumatism and begged me to send even fifty sen if I could. She wrote that she waited for me and for Father to come back, and that living had become painful when she thought of our poor condition. At the end she had written, "From Mother," in a careful way that made me want to weep and strike the wall at the same time. She became dearer to me in that moment than anything else in the world.

While I was lying there with the letter, a man named Matsuda opened the sliding door and came in. He was a printer, a small man with long hair to his shoulders, and he lived in the same house. He was so kind that his kindness itself made me uncomfortable. Seeing me on the futon, he asked if I were ill, and I turned away and said that all my joints hurt. He sat by my pillow and spoke in a low voice about living together, saying that sixty yen would be enough for two people if they were careful.

His words shook me because no man before had tried to comfort me so softly. Most had only made use of me and then let me drift away like smoke. For a brief moment I thought that perhaps I should accept such an offer and build a poor little household somewhere. But even while I thought it, my chest grew sick. Ten minutes in his company could make me feel as though the air itself had become thick and wrong. So I pulled the quilt over myself and told him that I was not well enough to talk.

He did not grow angry. Instead he said that I should rest and that he would help me while I was away from work, whether or not I ever agreed to join my life to his. That only made the world feel more mixed and difficult to bear. How could a person be both so helpful and so hard for me to endure? That night I went out to buy a sho of rice and, still carrying the cloth bundle, walked for a while through the night stalls at Aizome Bridge. There were cut flowers, Russian bread, dorayaki, dried fish, greens, and old books, and for a little while the crowd soothed me.

But December soon came, and with it the loud season of Christmas in the streets. Salvation Army pots appeared, shop windows filled with birds and decorations, and every paper and magazine seemed to shout about the end of the year. Inside the factory, the blackboard on the wall now carried each woman's daily output like a threat. If we failed to finish the required number, our wages were cut by five sen or ten. The women bent over their work with their waists lifted like brush brooms, and the whole place began to feel like some ugly cartoon of human labor.

Even after the five o'clock bell rang, more work kept arriving, and the pay envelopes did not come. The bookkeeper's wife had already taken her children out in a motorcar, and the younger girls whispered that she had gone to the theater or perhaps to buy New Year clothes. We went on painting and talking in bitter little bursts while our hands never stopped. When I finally carried home the pay for a whole day of labor, it was only sixty sen. Putting the rice pot on the brazier and setting out my bowl and chopsticks, I thought that this, then, was what life had become.

While the rice cooked, I sealed into a letter to my mother five pink fifty-sen notes that I had saved over a long time. Five yen was not much, yet to me it felt like flesh cut from my own body. I looked around the room and thought how foolish the five-yen rent seemed for two mats and stale air. For a moment I wondered if I should go back to café work as I had before, because at least money moved faster there. Then I ate hot rice with the remains of last night's fish and thought that perhaps life was not wholly worthless so long as one could still feel such warmth in the mouth.

Later, coming back from the bath, I met Matsuda in the dark lane. I said nothing

and passed him by, though I could feel his eyes on me. Somewhere far off, pounding for New Year rice cakes could be heard, brave and steady in the night. The world went on making its old sounds while I kept dragging my tired body through it. I lay down again in my narrow room and felt that storm wind was building somewhere beyond the city, though it had not yet reached my door.

## Part 6

The next trouble came from inside the house itself. The landlady, a thin woman with thinning hair and a sharp voice, stopped me and said, "Do not be so stubborn. Mr. Matsuda wants to lend you money. You should take it. My house is living on the rent from people like you." Her words burned me more than hunger had done. I wanted to leave the house at once and never see her face again. Poverty was never only empty pockets. It was also the shame of being spoken to as if your life were a small broken object on another person's shelf.

I hurried out toward the street at Nezu, hoping only to escape that voice. Near a post box by a liquor shop, Matsuda was waiting for me with a postcard still in his hand. He smiled in the same gentle way as always, and that smile annoyed me at once. "Please take it and say nothing," he said. "I would even give it to you, but if that troubles you, then call it a loan." Before I could stop him, he pushed a little paper-wrapped bundle of money into the fold of my sash.

I felt ashamed, awkward, and angry all at once. My old-fashioned short-sleeved jacket suddenly seemed too childish and poor, and I wanted to run from both the money and the man. So I pulled away, climbed onto the nearest tram, and only after it had gone some distance did I realize I was riding in the wrong direction. The city outside looked gray and cold, and I let it carry me because I had nowhere I truly meant to go. At last I got off in Ueno, stepping down into the bitter air as if I had been dropped there by mistake.

Near the station stood a labor office with a high, glaring sign that shook in the wind like a signal from a wrecked ship. I went in because movement was easier than thought. The clerk, broad and rough like an ox, looked me over from head to

foot before he spoke. “What kind of work do you want?” he asked, while his eyes measured me as if I were goods for sale. The boards were full of notices, each one offering a place, a wage, or a burden, and all of them seemed to say the same thing: your body will be used, and that is the bargain.

He told me there was work as a maid in a sushi shop in Shitaya. I asked for it, and he even lowered his fee from one yen to fifty sen, perhaps because I looked too poor to squeeze harder. When I came back out, the sky had turned even darker, and the park beyond lay under a heavy winter light. Men without homes slept on benches as though cold itself had become a blanket over them. Looking at them, I felt no distance at all, only a kind of kinship that frightened me.

There in the park stood the bronze statue of Saigo, and I found myself speaking to it in my mind. We are both from Kagoshima, I thought. Do you not miss Kirishima, Sakurajima, the warmth of real tea, and the sweet taste of karukan? “You are cold,” I said to the statue in silence. “And I am cold too. You are poor in your own way, and so am I.” The thought was foolish, yet in that moment it comforted me more than any sermon could have done.

There was no time to sit with such thoughts for long. I had to go to the factory again in the afternoon, because life did not stop for hurt pride. Work felt especially bitter that day. The paint, the celluloid smell, the endless little colored things, all of it entered my head like smoke. I kept thinking of the money at my waist and how weakness always came wrapped in kindness when it came from men. To live was hard, and to accept help was sometimes harder.

That night, after I came back, I found that Matsuda had slipped his money into the drawer of my desk as if to make refusal impossible. I sat and looked at the little packet for a long time. I told myself that I could repay it, and then the matter would be clean. But clean things did not exist for people like us. Poverty mixed gratitude, anger, need, and shame into one muddy feeling that would not separate. I thought, weak people have one true name, and that name is poverty.

While I sat there, a short poem came into my head about working only for the moment of going home. I thought of Takuboku, who could turn the simple act of returning home into something gentle and almost bright. But when I came home

from the factory, I did not sing. I threw my stiff legs across the whole width of my two-mat room and opened my mouth in one great empty yawn. That was my one happiness, if happiness it could be called.

From the factory I had secretly brought back a tiny painted doll, a little Kewpie only a few inches tall. I set it on the shelf above my bowls and looked at it with a strange feeling. The eyes were mine, the wings were mine, the color was mine, and yet I could never keep the better things I made. I poured miso soup over cold rice and ate my poor supper quickly. While I was still eating, I heard Matsuda coughing outside the window in a loud and almost deliberate way, and then he came in through the kitchen door.

“Have you already started supper?” he asked. “Wait a little. I bought some meat.” He lived alone and cooked for himself, just as I did, and I could smell the rich steam from his oil stove almost at once. Then he said, “I am sorry, but would you cut these green onions for me?” The request annoyed me. After slipping money into my drawer without asking, he now spoke to me with a closeness that felt almost like a claim. I wanted to refuse him simply to protect the last corner of myself.

Far away, in some other house or yard, people were pounding rice for New Year cakes, and the brave sound carried through the night. I sat in silence, chewing salted radish, while from the kitchen came the lonely small sound of Matsuda beginning to chop the onions by himself. That sound hurt me more than his words had done. At last I slid open the paper door and said, “All right, I will cut them.” There was sadness in yielding, but there was sadness in refusing too, and I could not find a path without it.

As I chopped the onions, I said that I had paid five yen to the landlady and still had five left from what he had given me, so I would return that part. Matsuda did not answer at once. He stood there lifting red slices of meat from a piece of bamboo leaf and putting them into the pot. When he finally looked up, I saw one small tear shining on his twisted face. From deeper in the house came the landlady’s sharp hysterical voice, rising and breaking like something cracked. Matsuda only lowered his eyes again and began to wash rice in silence.

“You had not even cooked your rice yet?” I asked. He said, “No. You were eating, so I wanted to finish the meat quickly.” Those simple words struck me harder than speeches about love or sacrifice. When he divided the meat onto a Western plate and set some before me, I swallowed it with a feeling I could hardly bear. I thought of many people I had known, men who talked loudly, men who promised things, men who used my labor, men who vanished. All of them seemed cheap and foolish beside this silent plate of meat.

For a moment I thought that perhaps I could marry Matsuda after all. After supper, for the first time, I went into his room and sat there a little while. He had spread newspapers out on the floor and was arranging New Year rice cakes into a basket with quiet care. The sight should have made me warm inside, but instead the softness I had felt suddenly tightened into something hard again. The more peaceful the room looked, the more I felt trapped by the thought of belonging there. Without saying much, I went back to my own room.

Outside, the storm had begun in truth. Wind beat at the house, and the night sounded full of tearing paper, shaking boards, and invisible blows. I looked at the tiny Kewpie on my shelf and felt a wild laugh rise inside me. “Kewpie,” I thought, “hurry and turn into a dove.” Let the storm blow harder, I told the dark. Let it blow and blow until all these mean little rooms, all these false kindnesses, all this hunger and shame are scattered. The wind answered against the walls as if it had heard me.

## Part 7

In April, I woke one lonely morning and stared at a black parasol hanging on the thin wall. If I shouted for the earth to split in two, nothing would happen. I was only one poor black cat in a quiet room, and the world would only say, “Be still, be still.” Beside me the man was still lying there, turned away in sleep. I looked at his hair and thought how easy it would be if the quilt could simply close over him and never let him out again.

He was a theater man, always talking about comrades, art, and the future, yet I

had begun to despise the sound of his voice. I had seen the black bag he kept locked so carefully. Inside it were letters from women and a bankbook with two thousand yen in it. Even after finding that, I still had to hear him sigh and say, “I will soon have nothing to eat. I may have to join someone’s company, though I have my pride.” I was the kind of woman who grew soft when a man spoke in pain, and that softness made me furious with myself.

I had gone out for several days trying to find work because of him. I came back each time tired as a fish’s torn insides, yet he still played the poor man before me. The money in his bag was not the money of a starving actor. With two thousand yen and a young actress at his side, he could live quite well for a long time. Thinking of that, I felt ashamed of every beautiful tear I had shed for him.

Still, we looked from the outside like a quiet married pair. That was the bitterest part. He would wrap his arm around my neck as if it were natural, and I would smell not love but the remains of other women, the wife who had stayed with him for years, the younger actress, the whole dirty crowd of his old desires. At such moments I thought it might be easier to become a prostitute than to go on acting out this false tenderness. At least that life would ask for less faith. At least it would not hide behind noble words.

At last I jumped up and kicked his pillow. “Liar,” I thought, though I do not know whether I spoke the word aloud. Outside, April was bright with flowers, almost painfully bright, and the air itself seemed to be calling me away. I felt as if some dark god were stretching out a hand through the spring haze, telling me to run, to work somewhere no one knew me, and to begin again. The room could not hold me. I wanted to tear free from every knot that still tied me to that man.

Even so, leaving was not simple. I walked the streets looking down at the ground, and the more I walked, the sadder I became. I felt like a sick dog shaking in the cold. I thought of selling myself, selling my labor, selling anything, because I was poor and because the city was full of people buying and selling all day long. At evening, when I stood on the porch and listened to the man practice his lines, the scent of white blossoms came through the air and brought back my girlhood for one strange moment.

He was practicing a role called *The Razor*; a part for which he was known. I had once seen him perform it years before in Kyushu, when I was still almost a child and theater seemed like a shining world. Now he stood in lamplight speaking with great force, and I watched his shadow on the wall. Then I thought, with sudden pity, that he too was miserable in his own way. His face beside the script, under the purple lampshade, seemed to move farther and farther away from me, as if he were already becoming someone I had once known and already lost.

That night, sitting side by side on the porch, he began to talk about a woman he had lived with for seven years. He told me how she had slipped away to other men when they traveled together, and how he had even taken pleasure in making her cry. He spoke on and on in the dark, as if I were only a place where he could pour out old stories. I sat there feeling like the one forgotten person in a play, someone left outside the circle of the real action. When I grew deeply sad, the soles of my feet begin to itch, and that foolish sign came over me then.

I took out my mirror and lifted it toward the moon. My face, with its dark brows, turned in the small glass like something caught in water. "I want to live alone," I finally said. "I do not care what happens now. I only want to be by myself." He suddenly came back to life at those words. Tears broke loose in him, and he tried to hold me, speaking of the pain of parting as though he were already acting on a stage again.

I could not bear it. I left him upstairs and went out into the town of Dobuzaka. At a noodle stand I bent over a bowl and drank Chinese liquor, trying to spit out the bitter taste of the man's false sorrow. The night air felt better than his hands. Even bad food and cheap drink were cleaner than pity mixed with lies. By then I knew that the end with him was close.

After that, I started working as a day maid in a beef shop. I had thought any honest work would be better than being fed by a man, and in truth eating from his hand had felt worse than chewing mud. In the beef shop I carried heavy meat plates up and down the steep stairs while people shouted for more orders. "One more roast," the customers called, and I ran with the dishes while rich smells of simmering meat filled every room. My money belt slowly grew a little thicker,

and that gave me a hard kind of comfort.

Yet the work nearly crushed me at once. My legs trembled from the stairs, and by midnight the shop was still full. The head maid, a woman called Osugi with her hair tied high, tried to cheer me and said, "You will get used to it in two or three days." But the others all lived in, except for me and one other woman, so they were in no hurry to leave. They laughed, begged food from the customers, and went on wasting time as if the night were endless. I could think only of the long road home and how far my body still had to go.

When I finally left, it was close to one in the morning, and the streetcars had already stopped. I had to think of the whole distance from Kanda back to Tabata. Streetlights went out one by one like fox fire, and a wet wind blew through the empty roads. By the time I reached the edge of Ueno, fear had entered me so strongly that I stopped and could not move. My hair trembled in the wind, and I stood looking at a bright Jintan sign blinking on and off in the dark.

I wanted anyone at all to walk with me. My heart was full of one desperate question: after suffering so much, did I still have to keep faith with that cold man? Then a workman in a happi coat came past on a bicycle like a shadow. In my fear I ran and called after him, asking whether he was headed toward Yagaki-cho, and when he said yes, I begged him to let me go part of the way with him. I must have looked pitiful, because he stopped at once and said gently, "Then get on."

I tucked up my hem, held my clogs in one hand, and climbed onto the back of the bicycle. Holding his shoulders, I suddenly felt how strange I was, a woman riding through the deep night behind a man she did not know. Tears came to my eyes, but along with them came relief. I prayed silently that nothing bad would happen before I reached home. Looking at the white letters on the back of his coat, I slowly felt my courage returning.

When he left me in Nezu, I thanked him and went on my way almost singing. The fear had passed, and the night road no longer seemed endless. Yet I was still going back to the same cold man, to the same poor room, and to the same life that had already begun to rot. Even so, I walked quickly, almost lightly, because sometimes the body goes on living before the heart has agreed. That was how I

returned, carrying my weariness like a hidden load through the sleeping city.

## Part 8

A few days later, a futon came from home, thick with the smell of sea salt and country air. I spread it out in the sun along the porch and beat the dust from it, and while I worked I found myself whispering, “Father, Mother,” as if the words had risen from the cloth itself. The warm light lay over the futon like a blessing from far away. For a little while I felt softer inside than I had in many weeks. A thing sent from home could still reach me, even here, even now.

That evening there was to be a performance by the Civic Theater, and the man had gone out early with his box of stage paint and his costumes. I stood at the upstairs window and watched his eager back moving away down the road. There was a dryness in my heart, like a flowerpot that had not been watered for many days. Still, I followed him later to the hall in Yotsuya, because hope and humiliation often made me walk the same road. The hall was already packed when I arrived, and the play was the one in which he always shone, *The Razor*.

His younger brother saw me at once and blinked in surprise. “Why do you not go backstage, sister?” he asked. He was a carpenter, a good and simple man, and he lived in a different world from his brother. I liked him for that very reason. He did not speak in great ideas, and he did not carry the smell of false art around him. I stayed where I was and looked toward the stage.

The play had reached the scene of a violent husband and wife quarrel. Then I saw her, the actress who stood opposite him and spoke with such confidence, such ease, as if she belonged there beside him more than I ever had. At that moment a sharp female jealousy rose in me for the first time. The man on stage wore the night robe he had slept in beside me. That very morning I had seen a tear in the back and had left it unrepaired on purpose, thinking bitterly that such a selfish man deserved no care from me.

I sneezed again and again in the thick air of the hall, and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to leave. So I went outside with two or three poet friends and

stood in the warm night air. The evening was so gentle that I thought it would be good to throw off all clothes and run through the dark like a mad child. The soft spring weather made my anger feel almost beautiful for a moment. Yet beneath it, pain stayed firm and cold.

Not long after that, he told me, "If I send you a telegram, come back at once." I did not trust him, but I took the fifteen yen he gave me and hurried toward the station with a strange excitement beating in my chest. I told myself I was going back to my salt-smelling home by the sea. "Let everything else go," I thought. "I have no use for any of it now." Before I left, we sat at a white table in Seiyoken and ate a small farewell meal in Japanese style, as if we were parting in peace.

"I think I will stay there and amuse myself for a while," I told him. He answered in a weak, troubled voice, "Even if we part like this, I know I will miss you. I only do not know what to do with myself now. My feelings are too confused." I listened, but his words did not settle anywhere in me. On the train, I thought that perhaps I would even try smoking, just to become another person for a little while. At the station shop I bought several packs of blue Bat cigarettes before I leaned from the window for our cold last handshake.

"Goodbye. Take care of yourself," I said. "Thank you. Goodbye," he answered. Then I closed my eyes hard and opened them again, and the tears that had been held back all at once overflowed. I sat in a corner of the third-class carriage for the Akashi line with no luggage worth speaking of, my legs stretched out in front of me, and let myself cry. I even thought that if some town on the way looked interesting, I might step off there and begin another life without warning.

Above my head hung the railway map, and I read the station names one by one. "Should I get off at Shizuoka?" I wondered. "Or Nagoya?" Each new place pulled at me, but fear pulled back just as hard. Leaning against the dark window, I watched the lights of houses pass by outside, and then my own face appeared in the glass as clearly as if I were looking into a mirror. I saw myself there, lonely and restless, a woman running away without yet knowing where she meant to arrive.

In my mind, I heard a strange little song of freedom. "It is over with the man,"

I told myself. "Children in my chest are waving red flags. They are celebrating." The thought was foolish, but it lifted me for a moment. I imagined them cheering, lifting me high like a poor queen returning home. Then the dark outside swallowed the dream again.

The night beyond the window had turned black as deep water. I pressed my eyes, nose, and mouth against the glass and cried until I felt like a piece of salted fish hung out to dry. "Where am I really going now?" I kept asking myself. Every time a peddler called at a station, I opened my eyes in fear, as if the answer might be standing there on the platform. Then another thought came, simple and wild: if living was this hard, perhaps it would be easier to become a beggar and wander from place to place, free in at least that one way.

I sank into childish dreams, then laughed, then cried again, and when I looked at the window I saw my own face changing shape again and again. It was like watching a hundred little selves perform for me in the dark. "So there is even this way to live," I thought with sudden wonder. I sat up straighter on the hard seat and kept staring at my own changing face with tenderness, almost with affection. A person who has little else may still have that, the strange company of the self.

But my freedom did not last long. On a later day, in weather so lonely that it felt almost mad, I wrote a foolish poem about being in love with the Buddha, asking that calm, distant being to fall into the fire of my chest. Rain had been falling since morning, and by night it struck with wind so fiercely that it seemed ready to pierce both body and heart. I pasted the poem on the wall, but it did not make me happy. What floated before me instead was a pale telegram form. "Come at once. Need money," it seemed to say, and I knew I would go.

I truly had received such a telegram from him at an inn in Takamatsu, and I had cried with joy when it came. I returned carrying gifts and foolish hope, only to find that before even half a month had passed we were living apart again. He had paid two months of room rent for me and then moved himself to a boarding house in Hongo, leaving me behind like good furniture stored in a room. Yesterday I had carried a large bundle of his finished washing there, climbing the broad stairs as eagerly as if I were going to meet a real lover. And there, in a clean room where

the evening lights had just begun to glow, I found him locked together like fish with that young actress.

I stepped back into the dark hall with tears filling my eyes. My whole face, no, my whole body, felt hard and stiff, like a doll made of wire. Yet when they saw me, I laughed out loud in a bright childish way and kept my eyes fixed on the leg of the desk so that I would not break apart. After that, I ran madly through a broken little world. In a bar I even cried, "Kiss me for fifteen sen," like a spoiled child with no dignity left. The memory of it still burned in me.

"All men are worthless," I thought. I drank whisky and sake together in furious confusion, wanting to kick men down, trample them, and forget them. Yet now, as rain beat quietly outside, I lay still and listened to it, imagining him inside a mosquito net swollen with wind, his arms around the actress's neck. The picture made me want to climb into an airship and drop bombs on them both. Instead, weak with hangover and hunger, I staggered to my feet, poured all the rice I had left into the earthen pot, and went out to the well. Everyone downstairs was away at the bath, so I could wash the rice without shame, making a loud clean sound in the rain while the white water slipped away in a single stream through my fingers.

## Part 9

In June, I woke to a clear morning after the long rain. When I pushed open the shutters, white butterflies were moving outside in the light like bits of soft snow. The air smelled strong and clean, and it carried a rough, manly smell of summer that surprised me. At once I felt that I must do better work and live in a better way. I threw away the cigarette ends that had been lying all over the brazier and looked around my attic room with new eyes. A woman living alone under a roof could still feel a kind of freedom when the morning air came in blue and fresh.

But the day did not stay bright for long inside me. The happy letter I had hoped for did not come. Instead, I got notice from the pawnshop, and even the thought of the interest made me sick. "Let the four yen and forty sen vanish," I thought in sudden anger. Even so, I dressed myself in a striped kimono with a yellow sash,

took up my parasol, and went out looking like a cheerful girl with good fortune before her. As always, I made my way to the secondhand bookshop.

“Please buy this a little high today,” I said to the old bookseller. “I need to go a little farther than usual.” He smiled out of the wrinkles in his face and gently picked up the book I had brought. It was Stirner’s book on the self, and he gave me one yen for it. I laid the two silver half-yen coins on my palm and then slipped one into each sleeve as if that made me richer. After that I went to the same cheap eating place as always and sat over my meal thinking how far I still was from the small quiet table of ordinary people.

I asked myself when I would ever become the kind of woman who could eat without fear and without counting coins. A few children’s stories would not feed me well, yet café work wore the body down, and being fed by a man cut the heart. So I kept living from one moment to the next, selling books, writing a little, and somehow staying alive. When evening came and I had returned from the bath, I was cutting my nails when Yoshida, the art student, came up to visit. He carried a landscape painting with him and smelled strongly of oil paint and outdoor air.

I had met him before through a poet friend, and I did not love him or hate him. But when a man comes once, then again, then a third time, his visits begin to grow heavy in the room. Yoshida lay down under the purple lamp and said he was tired, then suddenly sat up and recited a poem by Hakushu in a low voice. He said that the poem always came to mind when he looked at me. The wind bell outside moved softly, and I slid toward the light and rested my face against his chest. I heard his troubled heartbeat and felt a deep, sad trembling pass through me.

For a little while I almost forgot everything else. The smell of the oil paint, the quiet room, the warm body near mine, all of it wrapped around me with painful sweetness. We both tried to hold back what was rising between us, and the effort itself made the moment burn more strongly. Yet even in that closeness, the memory of the man I had left was more alive than the man before me now. When Yoshida finally went away and his tall shadow disappeared beyond the gate, I caught up the mosquito net in my arms and began to cry. I called the other man’s name like a spoiled child who cannot stop herself.

Another June day came, and I woke uneasy because a friend of that former man, a man named Isori, was moving into the next room. For no clear reason I felt there might be some plan behind it, and that fear stayed with me all morning. On my way to the eating place I bought incense for the little roadside Jizo, as if that might calm my heart. Then I washed my hair, felt a little fresher, and went up Dangozaka to visit my friend Shizue. A small poetry pamphlet called *Two*, which held our work together, was supposed to be ready that day.

Shizue leaned by the window as she often did, her short hair soft around her face, and we talked in the easy way of women who are joined more by feeling than by long explanation. By evening we went together to the printer and received the little pamphlet. It was only eight pages long, but it felt fresh and bright in my hands, like a piece of fruit just cut open. On the way back we stopped and sent copies to different people, and I thought how good it would be if I could keep such work going by the strength of my own labor. Later, at a coffee place, an older writer praised the pamphlet warmly, and both Shizue and I stepped out into the street feeling for a short time like lucky women.

Around then I also gave a poem about the little celluloid factory to a new magazine. Another poem of mine, one written to the man I had left, appeared in the newspaper. When I saw it there, I felt almost ashamed. "I must stop writing such things," I told myself. "They are poor. I need to study more and write better poems." Yet that same evening I went out to a café in Ginza where there was a poetry display, and I stood looking at my poor handwriting shown grandly before others. I met acquaintances there, spoke a little, and came home with the old mix of pride and emptiness inside me.

Then came a day of fine rain. Under the lamp I read an old Chinese poem about white flowers and longing, and while I read, the desire to travel returned to me with great force. The room had grown too still, and the trains passing Tabata Station in the distance sounded like the sea at night. After Isori had moved in next door, he often did not return until after one o'clock, and the people downstairs, who worked regular jobs, went to sleep early, so the whole place felt like a lonely house in the hills. I grew more and more restless, wanting not only beauty, but

some beautiful person beside me. At last I shut the book, went downstairs, and told the landlady that I was going out to a discount movie.

She said I was lively to go out so late, but I only opened my umbrella and walked to the picture house on the wet road. The film was *The Young Rajah*, and on that rainy night even its cheap Eastern music pleased me. Still, I was alone there, and when the show ended I came back through the damp dark like a gutter rat returning to its hole. As I climbed the stairs, the landlady called sleepily that someone had come looking for me. In my room I found Yoshida there, rolling up a sheet of paper he had meant to leave behind. He apologized for staying so late, and I answered lightly, though both of us knew light words were not enough.

Rain beat harder outside while he stood there, too tall for the small room, and I felt as if one more step from either of us would break something. I had begun to want him very much, and that frightened me. At the same time, I was already tired to the bone of men, tired of desire, tired of the way hope and regret twisted together. He looked at me and said, "Are you playing with me?" I answered, "Why do you say that?" but even to my own ears the words sounded weak and foolish.

The truth was simple and cruel. I wanted a friend, a gentle friend, someone warm enough to take away this terrible loneliness, but I was afraid of being carried away again. I sat with both hands on the desk, staring into the lamp, and I could see my own fingers trembling. It felt as if the two of us were pushing hard against the same pole from opposite sides, neither able to let go. Soon tears began to rise in me. I thought that perhaps I would rather die than be drawn once more into confusion, and still I could not help feeling the fresh blood and youth in him, his thick chest, dark brows, and bright eyes.

A different Sunday came after that, and I went out with Isori and Shizue to visit friends in Kichijoji. Later a painter named Uenoyama came by, and I remembered him from years before, when I had been a servant girl and he had come in worn shoes and a miserable coat to sell a painting. I had quietly nailed the sole of one shoe back in place for him then, though he probably never noticed. Now he drank and spoke freely, and when he left, the room grew empty again. Lying on my bed that night, I made a poem in my head about sitting on the earth as if it were a

turning chair, losing one red slipper, and calling out for someone to strike me hard and send the other slipper flying too. Downstairs the pigeon clock struck three, and I lay awake listening to it in the dark.

## Part 10

One June day I was reading a poem called “The World” by Verhaeren, and one line stayed in my mind. It said that the world is made of stars and people. I read on, but my heart did not rise with it. Everything around me still seemed full of yawns, delay, and dull waiting. The poet told people not to fear the impossible, and to drive on a golden horse toward it, but I could only stare at those words with tired eyes. A red balloon passed across my window, and I thought how hard this floating world was to live in.

Then a letter came from home. My father wrote that I must become practical and stop making people worry about the cost of my own living. He told me not to grow proud because of any small talent I thought I had. He also wrote that my mother had become much weaker, and that I should come home once if I could. Inside the letter was a money order for five yen, and when I put it on my knees I felt both gratitude and shame so strongly that I wanted to laugh and cry together.

Another June night, a blue light was burning in the corpse room across from us. I thought that perhaps another soldier had died. Two shadows moved softly across the blue-lit window as men kept watch inside. At the well, Mrs. Kuroshima looked up and said, “Oh, a firefly is flying.” I went out to the porch to see, but by then there was nothing left in the dark air except the feeling that something had passed.

That evening the Tsuboi couple and the Kuroshima couple came to visit. Tsuboi laughed and told us how he and Kuroshima had gone to buy a wash tub and, by mistake, had been given both the tub and too much change. We all listened as if it were a wonderful story from a novel. Even my husband and I envied that lucky mistake for a moment. Our row house, standing between the military morgue, the graveyard, the hospital, and a cheap café, felt like a lonely boat caught in mud.

Before long the men were talking of food, not ideas. “Why do we not make

bamboo-shoot rice tomorrow?” one of them said. Then another answered, “Then let us go steal the bamboo shoots.” With that, the three men went off toward the hill behind the barber’s house, where there was a grove. We women had wanted to walk farther and see the town lights, but instead we wandered through the fair at Taishido, looking at the small stall lamps shining along the bamboo path like water from a fountain.

On another clear June day, I said I wanted to see the green on the hill, and we made a plan for a walk. I locked the house and went out after my husband, but somehow he had taken another way, and I could not find him. I went up and down the hot road, growing more upset at every step. When I finally came back, he had already returned home angry, and the moment I entered, he shoved me hard and threw a scrubbing brush and bowls at my chest. I stood afterward by the well, looking at the blue clouds, thinking that all this pain had begun only because one road had been mistaken for another.

My sadness rose like a child’s sorrow then. I remembered the strange days of childhood when I would look at my own shadow and then feel as if it had risen into the sky with me. The wide blue above me seemed to call up all those old feelings at once. I wanted to sing some wandering song from a far land, something full of thirst and distance. More than anything, I suddenly thought of my father and mother and how foolishly I had forgotten that their love was the only steady thing in my life.

Still wearing my apron, I walked past bamboo, little streams, and Western-style houses and went down the slope as if I were going toward the sea. For one wild moment I thought of Onomichi and felt sure I would smell salt in the air. But when I reached the open place below, there was no sea at all, only a factory motor growling near the police box. I stood by the stop at Mishuku until I almost grew faint from hunger. Two old women had been watching me for some time, and at last they came over and asked kindly if I had some heavy trouble in my heart.

They led me slowly away and began to tell me stories of faith. They said that crippled people had learned to walk through belief, and that sad people had become joyful children of God. Their talk was all about Tenrikyo, and I let them

lead me because I had no strength left to resist. The place itself was cool and quiet, with water sprinkled in the garden and green maple leaves spilling over the wall. Inside, the old women bowed before the altar and then stretched out their arms in a strange dance.

A middle-aged priest in white clothes offered me tea and anpan and asked where I came from. I said that I did not truly have one fixed home, but that my family register was in Higashi-Sakurajima in Kagoshima. He seemed surprised that it was so far away. By then I was too hungry to care about dignity, and I bit into the bun at once. It was harder than it looked, and crumbs fell all over my knees, but I kept chewing and told myself that nothing mattered except that my mouth still knew taste.

After that I bowed once before the altar and left almost at once. The crumbs filled the holes in my bad teeth, but even that did not trouble me. When I reached my own house, the door was shut as tightly as the mouth of the man inside. So I went to Tsuboi's place instead and stretched out there like a body washed up by the road. "Do you have a little rice?" I asked, and his kind wife, who was also worn down by living, lay beside me and spoke of how tired she was of life itself.

Then she said that Taiko had received rice from Shinshu and that perhaps we should go there. Kuroshima's wife clapped her hands like a happy child at that idea. A different day soon came, and I went into Tokyo. At Shinchosha I saw Takeo Kato, and I received six yen as payment for poems I had published. Even Kagurazaka, a street I usually passed with closed eyes, looked bright and rich to me that day, and I stopped to peer into one shop after another as if I had suddenly become a woman of means.

Yet even with the six yen in my sleeve, I could not forget the truth. I thought that no matter whether a person was called neighbor, family, or lover, such words dried up when there was not enough to eat. A drawn flower withers quickly in a hungry room. I wanted to work with energy and joy, but too often I found myself bent small under cruel talk and daily pressure. Looking at fine bread in display cases and at bright people in the streets, I felt again how light and beautiful the unknown world seemed compared with mine.

On the long ride home, that sadness returned. Poetry was the only true comfort I had left, and without it I think I would have become only a hard shell. That night, Iida and Taiko came over singing nonsense songs in cheerful voices, and somehow their silliness softened the room. At Tsuboi's place I was given some blue pea rice, and even that small bowl looked lovely to me. In poverty, people often join together more nakedly than friendship alone can explain.

Another night there was a festival at Taishido, and from our porch we could see the sumo ring in the open space in front. We all stood on tiptoe, listening to the referee call out the names of the wrestlers. When a familiar local name was shouted, we burst into laughter as if it were the funniest thing on earth. After that the talk turned to ghost stories, and Taiko spoke about ghost lights she had once seen by the sea in Chiba. She had beautiful skin and had also suffered because of men, so perhaps that was why I listened to her with such feeling.

We stayed up until after one, making flower games and talking. On still another night, Hagiwara came to visit, and we had no money for drink. So we sold one quilt to the junk dealer for one yen and fifty sen and bought cheap shochu with it. There was not enough rice either, so we bought balls of udon and all ate together. It was a poor and foolish meal, but in such hours even that felt like life refusing to end.

## Part 11

On a hot day in July, I saw a newspaper story about a noblewoman who was said to help lost boys and girls. Her picture looked calm, kind, and full of rich peace, and the sight of it stirred me deeply. "Perhaps even a half-bad girl like me might be saved," I thought. I cut out her address at once and set off for her house in Azabu with foolish hope beating in my chest. I wore only a summer cotton robe, but in my mind I was already walking toward a new life.

The house was large, cool, and quiet. A maid looked at me and asked, "Are you the Miss Hayashi who makes bread?" I almost laughed, because I had come not to bring anything, but to beg for help. Still, I answered politely that I wished to

see the lady of the house. The maid led me to a fine room with a sofa by a wide window, and I sat there looking at the beautiful garden. Blue curtains moved softly in the breeze, and for a little while I felt that even the air in rich houses was made from a better world.

When the lady came in, she was wearing a thin black summer coat and looked fresh from her bath. She asked, "What is your business?" and I felt at once that my brave plan was breaking apart. I said that my husband was ill and that I had heard of her help for troubled young people, so I had come hoping for some kindness. She answered in a smooth, careful voice that she only helped support such work, and that if I needed employment, I should go to the women's group in Kudan and ask there. Before long I found myself back outside, as light and useless as a bit of dust blown from a sleeve.

Walking away, I burned with shame and anger. I imagined the lady now scolding the maid for letting such a woman into the house, and I wanted to spit at the whole idea of charity. "What public service?" I thought. "What kindness?" By evening my husband and I were sitting in our dark room without having eaten since morning. We bent over papers and wrote with no clear hope at all, as if writing itself might somehow fill the stomach.

Then, almost laughing from hunger, I said, "Shall we order Western food?" He looked up and asked, "With what money?" I answered, "If we must live from one trick to the next, then let us at least eat tonight. They cannot ask for payment before morning." So we ordered food and smelled meat for the first time in many days. As we swallowed the oily sauce and the rich taste of curry and cutlet, dizziness and joy rose together in me.

When the belly feels a little full, the mind begins at once to dream again. We spoke of ideas, writing, and the future as if fresh green shoots had suddenly begun to rise inside us. I leaned over my orange-crate desk and started to write a little story for children while rain fell outside. Far away, shots could be heard from the direction of Tamagawa, and the sound came through the night like hard knocking on another life. As I wrote my innocent little story, tears gathered in my eyes, because I knew that two twisted people like us might never live well enough even

to eat plain white rice in peace.

Some days later, I was back in the café where I had taken work. By evening I had become so tired and bitter that everything in me felt frozen. A bald man downstairs said in a loose, ugly way, “I am going to buy a woman tonight, but I think I like you better. What do you say?” I rolled my white apron into a ball and bit my lips to keep from crying out. Then I went upstairs to the maids’ room, threw myself into a corner, and called for my mother under my breath like a little girl lost in the dark.

The room upstairs was full of rats, loose bedding, hanging sashes, and old cloth bundles piled like stones. Down below, the noise of the café rose like boiling water, but up there the loneliness felt almost haunted. Tears ran from me in a flood, and the sadness seemed to leave my body like gas escaping from a broken pipe. More than anything, I wanted some honest life where I could work quietly, read books, and rest at night without shame. Yet that wish felt like a fairy story, something too clean and far away to touch.

I thought of books I loved, of Chekhov, of other writers who had once held my heart together. I wanted a small room, morning sun, birds, green leaves, and the sound of pages turning in peace. Instead there was only stale air, café noise, and the lazy pain of a life slipping downward. When the woman called Oyae came up and said, “The mistress is calling you,” I answered, “Please say my tooth hurts and I am lying down.” But the mistress came up herself at last and said sharply, “You know we are short of hands. Come down and work.” So I tied my apron again, forced a song to my lips, and went back down into the thick crowd below as if I were sinking into the sea.

Another rainy day brought a different small sorrow. A girl to whom I had lent my newly made coat never brought it back. One of the other women laughed and said, “You are too trusting. People say you should think every stranger is a thief.” I answered lightly that perhaps I would steal her umbrella in return, and everyone laughed. The girls sprawled about in their powder and summer dress, talking nonsense, scratching their white ankles, and eating sweets while the wind came cool through the window after the rain.

Their talk moved from men to money and back again. One said she had a man but wanted to leave him. Another said she had once had a good one, but he had gone far away. When I said all men were much the same, one girl shook her spoon and told me that even soap differs, with the cheap kind and the expensive kind being nothing alike. Their voices were bright and easy like the summer sky after rain. That brightness only made me feel more lonely, because I could join the laughter without believing in it.

At night I drank too much and let the drink carry me. My earnings that time came to two yen and forty sen, and I took the money with bitter thanks. On another free afternoon, a driver named Matsu offered to take me for a ride in his own old car. "Come on," he said. "Let us drive until the gasoline runs out." The rain was heavy, the lamps in the town had just begun to glow, and for a while it felt good simply to be carried fast through the darkening world.

But near Tanashi the car sank into red mud on a lonely road in a grove of oaks. Rain hammered the windows, thunder shook the sky, and now and then lightning split the darkness open. Matsu sat smoking beside me in his work clothes, smelling of oil and wet cloth. He seemed simple and decent enough, yet I knew too well the ways in which men try to press close in such places. I was no foolish girl of seventeen, and I had learned how to keep one road of escape open.

So when his feeling turned rough, I held my place and said, "If you care for me, do not come at me like that. I hate that kind of love." I even bit his arm like a small wild animal, and tears rose in me from anger more than fear. Toward dawn he fell asleep in the car, his face loose and dull after the night's struggle. Then I slipped down into the muddy road and began to walk away through the cool morning. Birds were calling somewhere far off, and the fresh wind on my swollen eyes felt like a reward.

As I walked through the fields, I thought that perhaps I was already a woman to be despised. Yet the open road, the wild flowers, and the wide July sky made me feel strangely clean again. For a moment I even pitied Matsu, sleeping there in the car like a tired child. Then I hardened my heart and kept going. "Is there no one," I thought, "who will care for me without making me dirty in the same

breath?"

In August the café girls gathered around a table to write letters home. One girl from Akita nodded over her pencil until she almost slept, while another asked me, "How should I begin a love letter?" Around us were dust, heat, watered whisky, and the sound of ice being stolen from the cooler and bitten in secret. I bought myself a cheap wool sash in town for one yen and two sen, then looked through newspaper notices for some calmer work, but nothing worth taking appeared. The medical students came in as always, full of youth and strong bodies, and one of the girls at once put away her letter and pressed her hands to her breast in a foolish sweet pose.

I sat with O-Yoshi and listened while she spoke of the children she had borne, the men she had followed, and her dream of moving up to a better café in Ginza once she had enough clothes. We both agreed that this was no work to live on for long, because it made the body cheap and thin. I kept reading and thinking of quieter words, of books that seemed to say, "Everything is like a dream." But this life was not dreamlike in any gentle way. It dragged at me day after day, and I knew that if I did not get out, I would sink farther into it before I had even noticed the fall.

## Part 12

On another day in August, I thought that I should leave and look for some other café. This work had begun to hold me like a drug, and I hated that slow sinking feeling. Rain fell every day, and the women's room was empty for a little while after the others went to the bath. I sat there reading a hard book about art and life, and the writer said that some people chase only a small dream of beauty while others try to make a new world with action and force. Those words struck me, because I myself felt stuck between the two, unable to move toward either one.

I wanted to study, to read more, and to make something better out of my life. At the same time, a rough, foolish, half-wild self ran through my body and pulled me down. I could not tell whether I was moving toward life or toward ruin. By

night I sang empty songs with the loneliness of a person sold into a strange land. My thin dress stuck to my skin with sweat, and the cloth tore easily at the hem. In such heat, all I could do was wait for cooler weather and tell myself to endure one more day.

I even thought that if someone simply gave me thirty yen a month with no conditions, I could live well and use my mind properly. It was a poor dream, but it felt huge to me. Then one day in October I looked up through the square skylight and saw the sky had turned a deep clear purple for the first time. Autumn had come. Sitting in the cook's room with my rice, I felt a fierce longing for the country, for fields, distance, and the quiet of places far from the city. Every customer in the hall looked like a thing to be bought or sold, and I thought with dread that I too was becoming one more item in that market.

After the wide dining room was finally cleaned and put in order, I felt for the first time each day that my body had become my own again. All day and all night I kept thinking, "I must do something. I cannot go on like this." But after standing from morning to night, I came back too tired even to dream. Living in at the café was especially hard, because there was no true rest in it. In the dark room, under an old mosquito net, I lay beside one woman from Sakhalin and another from Kanazawa, and I thought we looked like eggplants set out in a little shop, all side by side and waiting.

Insects cried somewhere near the ditch outside, and I whispered, "Listen, the insects are singing." One of the others answered that on such a night she wanted drink more than sleep. I tried not to cry, but cold tears came anyway. The weak autumn wind moved the edge of the net, and midnight felt very far from morning. We were all lonely women in our own ways, and each of us hid it badly. Even so, I was glad not to be the only one who could not sleep.

After I had saved a little spending money, I went and had my hair dressed in the old Japanese style. The effect was sharp and beautiful, and when the woman tied it tightly and smoothed the front, I felt for a short while like someone finer than myself. On such a day, I thought, a woman should go somewhere far away by train. I changed a silver coin into paper money at the bookshop next door and

put a one-yen note into a letter home, because I knew how happy my mother would be to find money inside an envelope. Then I bought dorayaki and shared them with the others.

That day a great storm came, and rain beat down without rest. In the quiet of evening, the old owner, who slept by the cash safe, began talking to Toshi-chan, the new girl, and asked where she came from. She answered that she was from Toyohara in Sakhalin and had once lived in Aoyagi-cho in Hakodate. Hearing that, I remembered a poem by Takuboku and felt warmth for her at once. She seemed honest, and there was a northern sadness in the way she spoke that made me trust her more quickly than I trusted most people.

Around the same time, word came that my mother's old rheumatism was worse again. There was almost no money at home. In the short spaces between customers, I wrote a children's story called "The Child Who Became a Fish," hoping to sell it and send something back. I worried more because my mother never begged directly. Then Okei-san, who had worked in that house for three years, said in her rough, almost manly way, "Come visit my place in the country sometime. Stay there if you like." She went on to say that talk of eternal love was nonsense, because a politician had ruined her, left her with a child, and gone his own way, so now she worked only because that child was dear to her.

Hearing her speak made my own heart brighter for a moment. She was a splendid person, sharp and wounded, yet still strong. On another rainy day I earned a little, and Toshi-chan said business was bad everywhere. Sitting on the base of the electric fan, she told her life story in a tired voice. She said she had once worked in a large café in Asakusa, had been bullied there, and had come here because a fortune-teller had said this district would be lucky for her. In that house, she was the prettiest girl, the most direct one, and the one with the strangest and most vivid stories.

After work, the bath became our one place of ease. The cooks and dishwashers used it first, and once they had gone up to sleep, we women could stay as long as we wished. Since we never sat down all day, the hot water nearly melted us with relief. Aki-chan would sing, and I would lie on the mat listening until the others

finished. Her song was about giving one's whole self to one person and seeing first love fade like a flower. Hearing it, I suddenly wanted someone who would truly care for me, yet at once I thought, men lie too easily, and it would be better to save money and travel in peace.

There was an odd story about Aki-chan. Because her speech was refined and gentle, the college boys who came for the cheap lunch welcomed her as if she were a sweet flower. They thought she was nineteen and untouched. But when I looked carefully, I saw the dark edges under her eyes and the lines of weariness around her neck, and I knew life had already gone hard over her. One night, when we were all going in to bathe, she stood in the corridor looking helpless, and Okei-san called out loudly, telling her to wash before her body rotted with sweat.

Once she was inside the bath, the truth came out piece by piece. Aki-chan admitted that she had a sick husband at home and a baby as well. Then Toshi-chan cried out that she too had once carried a child, though she had ended it. She said she had lived grandly in Toyohara, had married into a landlord's house, and had even been taught the piano. But a piano teacher had tricked her, and when she became pregnant by him, he coolly told her to pass the child off as her husband's. Furious, she drank a bowl of mustard to destroy the pregnancy and swore she would spit in that man's face no matter where he ran. The others praised her boldness, and I sat there thinking only how weak I myself had been before men.

Not long after, Toshi-chan and I finally ran away from that café. We had whispered often that we wanted to quit, but we were too soft-hearted to leave while the house was short of women and full of students at lunch. At last, early one morning, while the owner still snored and the kitchen rats ran over the floor, we carried our things to the bath room and slipped out. I had only a small bundle with a few books and my toilet things, but Toshi-chan came like a traveler from a comic picture, with umbrellas, a huge bag, and half her life hanging from both arms. We could not get on the crowded trams, so we hid in a noodle shop, then took a taxi to a greengrocer's second floor in Shinjuku where we had arranged to move.

Riding in that taxi, I felt I had no confidence at all in life. Yet when Toshi-chan

said that leaving had been the right thing and that I should study hard and live by my own will, tears came into my eyes. I looked up at the healthy blue autumn sky and wanted to run all the way home into my mother's arms. But even that wish did not come true. Before long, Toshi-chan went back to Sakhalin with her former husband, leaving behind only a padded coat and a little emptiness. Then hunger returned in full force. Selling a few poems and children's stories could not keep white rice in my throat for a whole month, and one evening, weak and shaking, I went out into the windy streets again, searching from café to café like a stray dog, because whatever else happened, I still had to eat.

### Part 13

It was the season when the cry of the roasted chestnut seller drifted through the quarter at night. Hearing that slow, dull voice from the street below made me lonely at once, and I lay in the dark room looking at the window. Since childhood, my teeth had often begun to ache when winter was near. Long ago, when I still cried in my mother's lap, she would put sour plum on my face and let me scream until the pain passed. Now I was older, far from home, and lying in a poor café room with a sick tooth, so of course my thoughts went back to the sea, the hills, and the faces of people I had lost.

The only kind thing in the room was the moon outside the crooked glass. I was staring at it when O-Kimi came quietly up the back stairs. "Does it still hurt?" she asked, and the smell of seaweed reached me before I even saw what she carried. She set a plate of sushi by my pillow and looked at me without saying much more. When I pulled out my purse from under the thin quilt, she struck my hand lightly and said, "Foolish girl," as if she were hitting a bit of cardboard, not flesh. Then she pressed down the edge of my bedding with her kind large hands and went away again, and I felt that a warm human world still existed somewhere.

Before dawn on another day, I dreamed of a thin pale-blue snake moving over the ground with a pink cord tied around it. When I woke, my heart was beating fast, and I felt as if something strange and happy might happen before night. After

the morning cleaning, I sat before the mirror and saw how swollen and blue my face had become from this rough life. I wanted to hide inside the wall. Yet even then I suddenly grew angry with my own dull look and painted my lips a bright, hard red, as if color alone could save me from weariness.

By then I had been in that house two weeks. The pay was not bad, and there were two other women beside me. One was O-Hatsu, who was as fresh and pretty as her name, with a hairstyle that suited her soft face. The other was O-Kimi, tall and motherly, a woman with a good heart who made one feel safe. When the customers thinned out, the three of us would curl together like snails and talk in low voices until the room seemed smaller and kinder than it really was.

O-Hatsu told her own story while drawing letters on the table with spilled sake. "I was born in Yotsuya," she said, "but when I was twelve, a man carried me off to Manchuria." She said she was soon sold into a geisha house there and forgot even the face of the man who had taken her. She remembered only a smooth corridor where she and another girl slid like children, and winter nights when they went to see plays under blankets and boots because the earth was frozen hard. "A newspaper man brought me back at last," she said, and her voice was heavy, though her face still looked young.

One gloomy evening in November, I returned from the bath on the tram road and found a drunken student named Mizuno sitting with O-Hatsu and making her pour him sake. She laughed when she saw me in the mirror and said, "He heard you had gone to the bath, so he ran after you." Then she told the story in a bright, wicked way. He had gone into the wrong side, and when the woman at the stand cried, "This is the women's bath," he answered, "Oh, I thought it was the hospital," and stayed there until he caught sight of me just as I was undressing. Mizuno pressed his thin hands together and grinned like a child asking pardon.

I wanted to shout that if he wished to see a naked body so badly, I would stand under the open sky and let the sun look too. Instead I swallowed the anger and painted my cheeks harder than before. The whole night my heart felt dark and heavy, and I broke egg after egg against the table in a kind of blind rage. Men laughed, drank, and made light of everything, but it was always our shame that

had to carry the joke. I thought that even a woman's body could become just another cheap thing in a house like that. That idea made my skin feel dirty all evening.

On another night the smell of grilled saury filled the quarter. It was the true smell of the season, but in that place it only made me sad. The courtesans were fed saury day after day, and I thought bitterly that scales must be growing under their skin. White mist hung in the street, and the shadow of each telegraph pole lay thin as a needle. Standing outside the curtain and watching the trams rush by, I suddenly envied even the people riding home in silence.

Life itself had begun to feel dull and ugly. I thought that if I stayed there long enough, I would turn rough enough to steal or hard enough to become a robber woman on horseback. A shining-headed fool set a ten-yen note on the table and said, "Drink ten glasses of King of Kings. I will pay if you can do it." I answered, "It is nothing," because by then shame had burned away into something harder. Under the bright electric light, with everyone watching, I drank all ten glasses one after another.

The owner was delighted, of course, because every glass meant money for him. The man who had made the challenge laughed an empty laugh and slipped away as if he had done something clever. I felt only disgust. The whiskey was cheap and sharp, and I wanted to spit it all back into their faces. Yet even while my eyes burned, I felt a wild joy in having done something reckless before them all, as if I had kicked at the whole room with one foot.

I opened the window and breathed the cold night air. In my half-drunk head, songs rose one after another, sad songs of women, faithless men, and foolish love. O-Kimi looked at me with her large eyes and seemed to ask, without words, whether I truly wanted to hurt myself like this. Then she caught hold of me and led me upstairs. I remember her grip more clearly than the song, because it held both anger and pity at once.

Work did not become easier after that. We were allowed to eat only so much, and the owner grew sour if we took rice three times in a day, yet I hated letting customers feed me. After two in the morning the house was still full, because men

from the quarter kept pouring in long after decent people were asleep. The concrete floor sent cold up through my legs until it felt as if all my blood were freezing. O-Hatsu stood there wringing beer from her sleeve and said, "I am sick of this," and I knew exactly what she meant.

It was past four when the last man came in, a pale fellow like silver paper. "Beer," he said. I poured it for him, though by then I could barely hold the bottle straight. He drank one glass, made a face, and said, "What is this? Ebisu? I do not like it," then threw the words behind him and walked out into the fog as if he had tossed away a dead leaf. Something in me snapped at that moment. I picked up the bottle and ran after him into the street.

At the corner by the bank, I threw it with all my strength. The bottle broke at his feet with a sharp crash, and beer splashed over the stones. "If you want beer so badly, then drink it there," I shouted. He turned and cried, "What are you?" and I answered, "A terrorist." "What a poor terrorist," I said when he tried to look brave, and by then O-Kimi and two or three drivers had come running. The man disappeared into a side street at once, and his courage vanished with him.

After that I stood breathing hard in the wet white dark, feeling both foolish and alive. I thought again that I wanted to leave such work forever. Yet wanting to leave and being able to leave were not the same thing, and I knew that too well. Hunger, rent, and the next morning's rice always stood waiting behind my anger. So I went back inside with the others, carrying my wild heart like a hidden wound.

## Part 14

In December I went to Asakusa and drank as if drink alone could keep me standing. Asakusa was always a good place for that. The lights turned quickly, the flags over the theaters shook in the wind, and even a lonely woman could disappear into the moving crowd for a little while. My face had grown hard from cheap drink and rough days, and I felt that if I did not laugh, I might begin to scream. I told myself that it did not matter if one more man had gone over to another woman, because the whole world was foolish anyway.

I walked under the bright lamps with my thin scarf letting in the cold. Sweet sake, hot bean soup, and grilled chicken all smelled kind in that place, and for a few coins one could feel almost human again. Now and then I looked up at the theater flags and thought of the man whose name was somewhere among them, laughing at me from high above. I wanted to answer that laugh with a louder one of my own, but the truth was sadder than that. Under the noise and light, I was still only a tired woman trying to keep her heart from cracking. Even so, Asakusa was kind in one way: it let me be drunk without asking why.

The next morning I lay in bed smoking before I even rose. For a lonely woman, that small purple smoke was a strange comfort. The light came in over the worn kimono spread across my little room, and I dreamed of a simple life that I might make with my own hands. I thought that perhaps I should set up a small oden stand, sell hot food and good sake, and finish the year by living honestly in my own way. In my mind I saw bean curd, fish cakes, spinach, and mustard, and that childlike plan made me feel happy for a few minutes.

But such courage never stayed long. I had no one to depend on, and after rent and food there was hardly enough left to buy even one or two books in a month. My savings had become thin, and the darkness ahead looked complete. Sometimes I thought that if I turned thief, I would at least be choosing a road, but then I laughed at myself, because with my bad eyes I would surely be caught at once. The laugh struck the wall and came back to me cold. At last I slept until evening, as if sleep were another cheap drink.

Then O-Kimi came to ask whether we should go to Yokohama and look into a new job. The café where we had worked was dying, and she too had left it behind. We took a newspaper cutting and rode the train together, both of us quiet and tired, though the thought of a new place stirred something in us. When we got off and climbed a hill, the sea opened before us, blue and wide and cold under the winter light. "It has been so long since I saw the sea," she said. I answered that such a strong sea made me want to tear off my clothes and jump into it, because it looked like melted blue glass.

Two foreign men sat by the water looking out at the rough waves, and for a

while we did the same. Then O-Kimi pointed and cried that the hotel must be over there. But the place was only a small drinking house, white and mean, with a bent upper window and stained blankets hanging in the light. A pretty woman in a red kimono stood there playing with a black dog and laughing to herself. Both of us felt our hope fall at once. We had not come for greatness, but even so, that little place was too poor and too sad to enter.

We stood there in silence and looked again at the sea. I thought that it would be good to become a crow, carry one small bag, and travel wherever the wind wished. The cold air pulled at O-Kimi's hair and made her look like a willow in snow. That same day, or perhaps on the next, I went farther still and found myself on a ship with only eleven sen left in my purse. The white sky, the hard sea, and the strong wind made me feel almost wild. I wanted to shout, but the wind would have taken even that away from me.

On the deck the cold cut into my skin, and I held my hands inside my sleeves against my breast. Far out on the sea the smoke from steamers turned into small gray swirls and vanished one by one. As the ship ran over the blue water, faces from my life rose before me, men and women who had spoken, hurt, helped, lied, or simply passed by. The farther I moved from Tokyo, the more I felt that I had been beaten by everything. Yet in that defeat there was also a thin, sharp freedom, because no one owned me out there on the open water.

At dawn someone called that the meal was ready, and I went back into the dark third-class cabin. Actors, pilgrims, fisherwomen with children, and all kinds of poor travelers sat under weak lamps over plain food. Because I wore my hair in the old style, people asked where I had come from and where I was going. A young mother beside a child sang a soft song from the old country, and the sound entered me more deeply than the food did. I thought that even a poor ship cabin could hold a kind of peace if the sea air was clean enough. For the first time in many days, breathing itself felt easy.

When I reached my mother again, snow was already falling in Tokushima. I stood by the yellow paper screen and watched it come down, and my mother answered me in her usual short way when I said the snow had come early. My

stepfather had been gone in Hokkaido for more than four months, and word had come that his trade was not going well and that he would not return to Shikoku until spring. The town itself had grown colder too. The smell of noodle broth hung in the streets, river water seemed to breathe mist, and fewer travelers came to the old inn my mother was trying to keep alive.

Once, long ago, that place had seemed like a beginning. Now it looked tired and almost broken, and my mother kept it going more with stubbornness than with profit. I opened drawers and old chests and found photographs, poor old letters, and clumsy drawings from the days when I had first tried to learn art. Each one brought back another town, another season, another self. At night a wandering couple who played the moon lute used the front room, and their lonely songs mixed with sleet striking the dark outside. Hearing them, I felt the old road of my life open behind me again like a track across many provinces.

Yet country life did not heal me for long. After only a few days, I was already restless. My mother, who always wished for something steadier for me, said that a man from Kyoto, now working at city hall, might wish to marry me. She told me he was decent and handsome, and I answered lightly that perhaps I should meet him, though the whole thing felt like a small village play. For a moment I tried to imagine myself as a quiet country bride, drawing water from the well and smiling shyly over tea. But even while I imagined it, my heart was already looking toward the station.

When the man came, he was younger than I had expected, only twenty-two, with thick brows and full lips. We spoke a little, and then he walked me part of the way under a bright moon. He seemed to have room inside himself, which is rare in men, but the silence between us was longer than our words. At last I told him that he should find a good wife, and whether he understood me or not, he simply went on into the next street under the moonlight. I watched him go and felt no sorrow, only a dull certainty that this road too was not mine.

Back in the house, my mother and I shared a little sake. Looking at her across that poor room, I felt again how easy and deep the feeling between parent and child can be, even when life has broken almost everything else. Leaving her there

among the smoke, the mice, and the weak inn light hurt me more than meeting any man ever had. Still, by then I already knew what I would do. I would pack again and go back to Tokyo. I would write letters to the friends I still had there, and I would step once more into that foolish, hungry, glittering city, because for better or worse, the road was still calling me forward.

## Part 15

In January I finally left the island. I carried a basket full of the first green oranges of the season and boarded a small boat from the shore of Shikoku. The sea was white, and the wind was sharp enough to sting my face. A red lighthouse stood out so clearly that it hurt the eyes. As I watched the cold water and the far sails, I told myself that I must cut away the sadness of the island and begin again.

Even so, that departure did not feel brave. The smell of the fresh oranges and the pale winter sea made me feel like a woman being taken away to be sold. By the time I reached Tempoyama, the sky had turned dark with snow. In a cheap inn near the harbor, I lay on the second floor and listened to a cat crying for a very long time. The dirty bedding smelled of salt and old damp cloth, and I thought that life had become too hard for both body and mind.

I felt like an empty woman. I had no special gift for living, no money, and no beauty that could save me, and what remained was only a restless young body full of hot blood. When I grew too bored, I would bend one leg and spin in the room like a crane, as if foolish movement might drive despair away. There was almost nothing to read there except the paper on the wall that said a night's stay cost one yen. Snow began to fall toward evening, and I sat by the window wondering whether I should turn back to Shikoku at once.

The whistle of ships rose from the harbor, and I opened the window to look out into the snowy dark. Boats with blue lights slept on the black water, and the whole port seemed full of lost souls. Looking at that scene, I suddenly remembered the first man I had loved, the one from so many years before. He had sung old sea songs, and for one moment I could almost hear his voice again through the wind.

Then I remembered how suddenly we had parted, and how far I had fallen since then, and I sat there for a long time with my head heavy and still.

The next day I told myself that I must start all over again with my bare hands. I left the city employment office and took a tram toward Tenma to see about work at a blanket wholesaler. The sky over Osaka was dull, but I liked the thought of working in a place where no one knew me. The riverbank trees bent in the strong wind as if they too were tired. When I reached the shop, I saw that it was much larger than I had expected. The rooms were neat and polished, but the clerks moving inside had pale faces and looked as if they had forgotten sunlight.

An older mistress received me in a tidy room far in the back. She asked why I had come from Tokyo, and because I had already lied too often in life, another lie came to my lips at once. I said that my older sister lived nearby and that I had come because of her. A maid brought tea and sweets on a beautiful plate, and the simple kindness of that act almost made me ashamed. Then the mistress called for her son, and a quiet young man came in and looked at me with bright, careful eyes. The whole house felt so far from my own world that I wanted only to bow and escape.

But when I went back to the harbor inn, a postcard was waiting for me from O-Kimi in Tokyo. She wrote in her usual lively way and told me to come quickly because she knew of an interesting job. Her bright words filled me with sudden energy. Then, to my surprise, the blanket shop also sent word that I could come. So after only five days at the harbor inn, with just one basket in my hand, I went to live in the wholesaler's house like a little dog being taken in by strangers. Inside the office, blue gas lamps burned even in the daytime, and I sat writing addresses on envelopes until my thoughts grew dim and dreamlike.

At three o'clock tea was served, and trays of sweets were brought in. There were nine workers in all, though I could not yet tell one from another. Six were boys or young clerks who ran about with deliveries, and the rest were older people of the house. Two maids looked after the inside work, O-Kuni, who did the rough jobs, and O-Ito, who moved so quietly that she seemed almost asleep. Kansai women spoke gently, but I often could not guess what they were thinking. The

young master's wife had gone to another house to give birth, so the whole place felt even more silent than usual.

At night the big doors were shut by eight, and one by one the men vanished into the back of the house. I would stretch out on the stiff bedding and stare at the ceiling until I felt poor beyond measure. Near the maids' bedding stood two black wooden headrests in a neat row, and on top of one quilt lay O-Ito's red under-robe. I looked at that soft red cloth for a very long time. From the bath came the quiet sound of two women washing themselves without laughter or talk. The silence of the house made everything feel sharper, even the color of a robe or the sound of water.

Before long I grew used to the breakfast of sweet potato porridge. Even so, I often thought with longing of the red miso soup of Tokyo, with taro cut thin and greens mixed into it. My mind became childlike in that house, full of simple dreams about salty side dishes and hot rice. In winter my toes always swelled with chilblains, and that year was no different. One evening, hiding behind stacked boxes, I scratched them until they almost bled. They burned and itched so badly that I wanted to stab them with a needle.

A young clerk named Kanekichi happened to see them. He cried out in surprise and said that such chilblains should be rubbed with the bowl of a pipe after smoking. Then, with simple kindness, he lit his tobacco and pressed the warm metal gently against my swollen toes again and again. I was moved by that small act more than I showed. Even among people who talked of money all day, kindness could still appear in a sudden quiet way.

By February, however, the polished work had begun to choke me. My mother used to say that I was made for fine work, like gold on a folding screen, but such careful work soon made me restless and tired. I grew angry at my own weak nature, how quickly I became bored, how easily I shrank before others, and how badly I fitted into every place. I read *De Profundis* whenever I could, and the words about tears in prison struck deep into me. I thought of friends, family, and all the people who had laughed at me honestly, and I missed even their sharpness. Some nights I wanted to go where no one could hear and cry out with all my strength.

When I sat in the bath and looked up through the skylight, the stars seemed to spill above me. My heart felt old and worn, yet my body remained painfully young, and that difference made me sad. Stretching out my arms in the hot water, I suddenly thought that perhaps I should marry after all. I smelled face powder, drew my brows, colored my lips, and tried on a small smile in the mirror. I wanted to set a comb in my hair and make myself beautiful. In the end, I was still only a woman, and the wish for love or beauty rose in me whether I respected it or not.

Then the streets filled with red flags for the spring sales, and a letter came from my old school friend Natsu in Kyoto. She wrote with such warmth that I could almost smell the sweet, clean scent of her paper. She had not married, and she still helped her painter father at home. Reading her words, I felt how far our lives had gone apart, yet the old nearness between us returned at once. I wanted to throw everything down and go to her, to sit beside someone who knew me from before so much dust had settled over my life.

I asked for a day off and left for Kyoto in the cold wind. Natsu met me at the station in a black shawl, her pale face half hidden in it. We stood there for a moment asking each other only, "Did you know me?" and "Yes," like children who do not yet trust their own joy. Hand in hand, we walked through the misty streets and talked without much order. In Kyogoku we found an udon shop in a side street and sat together under a bright lamp. Because I was poor and she too had little spending money, we showed each other our purses and laughed before ordering simple fox udon and even taking seconds like happy schoolgirls.

After that we walked by the fountain in Maruyama Park, leaning close like young lovers. We remembered old days, fallen leaves, and the time we had visited a grave together in another season. When I said at once that we should go there again, Natsu opened her eyes wide and answered, "That is why you suffer so much." Kyoto was full of night mist, bird calls, and temple bells. At her house in Shimogamo, a police box stood in front with a red light burning, and when she went downstairs to fetch a light for me, I leaned on the window and let out one long, tired yawn. In that quiet room, for the first time in many days, silence itself felt kind.

## Part 16

After that quiet night in Kyoto, another season came, and the memory of one old poem would not leave me. It was a poem about a single old pine tree standing on a hill under a very blue sky. When I remembered it, I became lonely at once and began to walk without aim through dark green trees. For the first time in a long while, I had no apron on my chest, and only a thin little face powder lay on my skin. Turning my parasol as I walked, I thought of my old home, the hill, and that pine tree standing alone in the light.

When I came back to the boarding house, I saw at once that something had changed in the man's room. A large bookcase had been brought in and set there proudly. The sight of it made my heart turn cold. "So he can buy a thing like this," I thought, "while his wife goes out to work in a café." As usual, I left about twenty yen under his manuscript paper, and because no one was there, I felt free enough to look through the closet at the dirty things piled inside.

Then the maid of the house came and said, "A letter for you." It was a thick letter from a woman, with a six-sen stamp on it, and before I even opened it, my chest began to beat hard. With a strange feeling of fear and shame, I searched farther and found a whole bundle of thick letters hidden away. I stood there reading the sweet words in them and feeling my teeth almost ache. Some spoke of hot springs, some ended with "Your Sawako," and some spoke of a night spent together with foolish softness.

I wanted to scatter all those letters over the room. One of them even said that she too would prepare money for a trip if only he would make a little on his side. Reading that, I felt anger rise so fast that I could hardly breathe. This was the same man who told me again and again that I was cold, that my poems hurt him, that he was sick and half-mad and needed my pity. Under a lantern I had once sung to him as if I had thrown away all my life for his sake. Now, with those women's letters in my hands, I saw again how cheap and false that whole play had been.

I took the twenty yen from under the paper and went out at once. Evening had

grown cool, and as I walked through Wakamatsu-cho, I no longer felt any wish to go back to the café in Shinjuku. My mind was full of broken words and bitter thoughts. I remembered an old saying about spending everything and being left with only a tiny coin, and it seemed to fit my whole life. Anger, drink, love, work, shame, hope, all of it ended the same way, with almost nothing left in the hand.

That night I was very drunk when I spoke to Toki-chan. She looked at me with lonely eyes while I sat there unsteady and bright with drink. “Will you go to a hot spring with me?” I asked her suddenly. It was the kind of question one asks not because there is money or reason, but because the heart wants to run away somewhere warm and foolish. Toki-chan only kept looking at me, and I knew that she understood more than she said.

Another day came, and a letter of apology arrived from the man. I read it and felt almost nothing. By night, Toki-chan’s mother came to the back door and asked to borrow five yen from her daughter. The whole world seemed tasteless to me, like chewing gum after all the sweetness has gone. I found myself thinking that perhaps I should save a little money and go home at last to see my mother’s face again. On the way to the kitchen, I stole a little whisky and drank it because I had no patience left for sober thinking.

One morning I woke in the women’s room and looked around at the four of us sleeping there. We lay like white liquid spilled and then left to harden, each woman resting with all strength gone out of her. I lit a cigarette at my pillow and watched Toki-chan’s arm thrown carelessly across the bedding. She was only seventeen, and her skin was still pink and young. Her mother kept an ice business in Zoshiki, and because her father was ill, she came every few days by the back door to take money from her daughter’s hands.

Looking at the blue sky in the window glass, I saw the red flag of the Western-Chinese eating house swelling in the wind like a foolish tongue. Since I had started working in cafés, my old dreams about men had almost fully vanished. Men no longer seemed mysterious or noble to me. They had all fallen together into one cheap pile, like goods priced by the bundle. And since I no longer needed to earn money for that sick and pitiful man, I began once more to think of my old home

and the salty wind of the sea.

Even so, pity for him still remained in some corner of me, and that too made me angry. I knew then that a woman can see the truth and still fail to cut the cord in one blow. Work, habit, memory, and weakness all knot together. Sometimes I thought that I should sell myself completely, make money fast, and then go home with enough to make everyone glad. But even that was only one more wild idea thrown up by hunger and shame. No one was waiting in the street to buy me and save me from choice.

In truth, I moved from café to café like a pig sniffing for scraps. The smell of men, food, old beer, and smoke clung to everything. Love, family, the world, even the word husband, all seemed very far away from me then. My brain felt half rotten with weariness, and I had no brave voice left in me. I did not even have enough force to truly want death. I only went on because the body keeps asking for food even when the heart has become weak.

Sometimes I thought of a man I had heard say that after seeing a moving picture and eating one bowl of eel rice for fifty sen, he could die content. Remembering those words, I suddenly wept with no control at all. People make such little wishes when life has grown too hard. A bowl of rice, a train ticket home, a warm bath, a letter not full of lies, any one of these can begin to look like salvation. It is a cruel thing when even such small hopes do not come easily.

The women around me laughed, borrowed money, painted their faces, and went on living as if this were natural. Perhaps for them it already was. But for me, each day still felt like something half broken that I was trying to hold together with both hands. I could sing, drink, smile, and serve, yet beneath all of that was only one raw fact. I was tired of feeding other people's needs while my own life kept running out like water through split fingers.

By then the thought of home had become stronger than all the rest. I wanted to see my mother, to breathe the sharp, salty air again, and to stand somewhere that was not filled with false words from men. The sea of my old places had always been poor, but it had not lied to me. It had blown cold on my face and that was all. In the city, even kindness often came twisted together with use and deceit.

So I kept telling myself that I would go back soon, that I would leave the cafés, the boarding houses, the letters, the drink, and the whole bad circle behind me for a while. Yet even that decision did not come cleanly or all at once. I was still caught inside the life that was wearing me down. Still, the wish had become clear at last. I wanted to return to my old home, to the sea wind, and to my mother, before the little warmth left in me was used up completely.

## Part 17

My mother said that she wanted to go back to the country. I could not blame her. I too wanted to leave the city, breathe clear country air again, and stand somewhere under a wide sky that did not smell of smoke, beer, and cheap rooms. But wanting and doing were not the same thing. While I was still earning only small coins in a bitter way, there was no easy road back for either of us.

After she left, the room felt larger and poorer at the same time. For two days I lived quietly, almost like a little creature hidden under a stone. Morning fog, dirty streets, cold breath, and thin light all seemed to say the same thing, that the world was made of hard things and weak bodies. I felt as if I were no more than one grain in a great muddy flow. Even so, I told myself again that I did not want to die, and that somehow I must go on living.

The sound around me was a mixed sound of all kinds of people and all kinds of lives. There was no clean line between good and bad, rich and poor, hope and ruin. Everything touched everything else and made one rough dark noise. I walked through it and kept my thoughts close to my chest. Sometimes I asked God silent questions, but the city gave no answer.

Then a postcard came from Nomura. He wrote that he had moved, that he had somehow found a little more energy in life, and that I should come if I could. He also thanked me for my earlier letter and for the money I had sent. The words were simple, but they struck me sharply. My heart, which had been sitting still like a tired dog, suddenly jumped up and began to run.

I did not think long. I only followed the address as if it were a string tied to my

hand. I got off the tram in Ushigome, walked toward the post office, turned by the bank, and then went past a shop that sold awamori. There, just where the road narrowed and the houses leaned close together, stood a small apartment painted in a dull red color. It looked poor and narrow, but to me it shone like a sign that one road had not yet closed.

I stopped before going in. A woman who has lived too long among uncertainty grows afraid even of a simple door. If I climbed those stairs, perhaps I would find only another bad room, another poor man, another weak promise, and another fall. Yet if I turned away, I would return to the same lonely wandering with nothing added and nothing learned. So I stood there a moment, took one breath, and went inside.

The hall was small and smelled of dust, old wood, and cheap cooking. Somewhere above, I heard movement, a chair dragged lightly, and then silence. That silence was worse than noise, because it made me listen to my own heart. I thought of all the men I had already trusted too far, all the letters, all the room keys, all the poor meals and poorer hopes. Even so, I climbed.

When I saw him again, he did in fact look more alive than before. His face was still tired, but there was more force in it, and his eyes had returned a little from that far place where weak men often lose themselves. He thanked me for the money in a way that tried to be casual, yet I could hear the truth under it. Poverty strips all grand speech away sooner or later. In the end, even poets must speak plainly when they have been saved by a few coins.

We sat in his little room, and I looked around with careful eyes. The place was not rich, not clean in any grand way, and not bright with comfort. Still, it had the feeling of someone trying to begin again rather than someone waiting only to sink. That difference was small, but I knew by then that small differences often decide whether a life rises a little or drops all at once. I felt both hope and caution sitting side by side inside me.

“You came quickly,” he said. I answered, “My heart came faster than my feet.” It was the kind of line that might sound foolish to another person, but it was true enough. When one lives by scraps of feeling, a postcard can become stronger than

a meal. He smiled a little, and for a moment I almost forgot how many times hope had made a fool of me.

Yet the old tiredness did not leave me. I had sent my mother away, and the room where I slept was still poor, and the city outside was still a hard place for a woman without steady work. One man's new address could not change all that. I knew very well that revived energy in a poor man is not the same thing as safety. Still, I wanted to sit there for a while inside that small breathing space and believe in it.

We spoke of letters, money, and where each of us had been thrown by the wind. Such talk is plain when poor people speak it. There is no point in pretending that food, rent, and train fare are small matters. Even affection must sit down beside them at the same table. Perhaps that is why I felt calmer there than in rooms where men tried to speak only of art, love, or sorrow.

I thought of my mother then, already back in the country, and I felt a quick pain in my chest. I had sent her away because I could do nothing better. I remained in Tokyo because I could do nothing wiser. That was the ugly shape of the truth. A person may talk grandly about freedom, but often she is only standing where poverty has left her.

Even so, that visit stirred me. The city no longer looked exactly the same when I stepped outside again. The roads were still narrow, the air still rough, and my purse still light, but I felt my mind moving instead of lying flat in despair. There was another room now in the city where I might knock and be known. For a woman who had been drifting from place to place, even that little fact had weight.

By the time I walked back through the fading light, I was tired, but I was not empty in the same way as before. I had not found rescue, and I had not found peace, and I had not solved anything at all. But I had followed one call of the heart and found a living face at the end of it. In such a life as mine, that was already enough to keep me walking a little farther.

## Part 18

Two days after I had sent my mother back to the country, I was living in a

strange quiet way, like one small living thing hidden among many sounds. Good and bad, high and low, rich and poor, all kinds of noise moved around me, and I felt like a tiny creature floating inside it. I told myself that I had already come far enough and that I must now live in a smaller, calmer way. I did not want to die. That feeling was clear. But the wish to go on living, even when life had become ugly, was also a hard and hungry thing.

Then a postcard came from Nomura. He wrote that he had moved, that he had somehow found a little life in himself again, and that I should come and see him. He thanked me for my earlier letter and for the money I had sent. The moment I read it, only my heart began to run ahead of me. I got off the tram at Ushigome, walked toward the post office, turned by the bank, and went past a shop that sold awamori. There stood a small red-painted apartment house, and I climbed to room number seven on the second floor.

The room was almost empty. Nomura was standing there with his hat already on, as if he had been about to go out, and when he saw me, he smiled in a loose, easy way. I laughed too, without knowing why. "You have moved to a fine place," I said, and he answered that he had brought out a book of poems and that life would surely grow better from now on. But the room around him was bare, and his good words did not match the emptiness of the place. Then he asked, as if it were nothing, whether I could lend him fifty sen because he was going out to eat.

We went outside together. An old man in a padded coat had fallen drunk in front of the liquor shop, and inside the rope curtain there was such a crowd that it looked more like a bathhouse than a drinking place. We walked all the way to Iidabashi and went into a place called the Shochiku Dining Hall. The tables were dusty, and the meal was plain, a bowl of rice, shell soup, and boiled mackerel, but sitting there with him made me feel strangely as if we had become man and wife again for a little while. I knew very well that being with him squeezed the heart, yet I still found myself brightening and answering him cheerfully.

He said that poetry paid a little better now than before. He told me that one company gave as much as six yen for a single poem, and that sounded to me like a rich and distant story. On the way back to Ushigome, he stopped and bowed

carefully to a thick, dark-bearded man near the post office. He said the man worked for the publisher. Watching that careful greeting, I felt a deep bell of loneliness sound inside me. "Writing is a miserable thing," I thought, because even six yen once in a long while could not feed a person.

When I said so aloud, Nomura turned sour at once and spat into the wind. Outside the apartment, I told him goodbye, but he paid no attention and went up the stairs ahead of me. I stood there not knowing what to do. Then old memories rose in me, the poor mornings, the shared kitchens, the narrow life we had once lived together, and I went up after him with my clogs in my hand. He was sitting there reading with his hat still on, and I could no longer tell whether I truly loved him or hated him.

I sat there in silence, and all at once I wanted desperately to go back to the café. "I should go now," I said at last. "I will come again another time." The moment I stood up, he threw a small knife at me. It stuck into the mat, and I let out only a breath inside my chest. This was one of his old habits. He had thrown knives before in the house at Seta, and I knew well that if I rose too quickly or answered too sharply, he might kick me with his foot next.

The sky outside had turned dull and wet, and I sat very still. Then someone knocked at the door. I opened it and saw a young man I did not know standing there, and in that moment I thought of him as a god of rescue. "Please come in," I said quickly, and while the two men turned toward each other, I slipped out with my clogs and hurried down the hall. Nomura called something after me, but I had already gone outside. By the time I reached the street, my head hurt badly, and I felt as if I had caught cold in the heart.

Walking through the narrow street at Yokodera-cho, I suddenly thought of Yoshitsune in Asakusa, the man who had once spoken of a love that asked for nothing dirty or heavy. That kind of feeling seemed kinder to me now than the rough pull that still bound me to Nomura. When a woman is alone too long, she grows coarse, I thought. That night, while I was singing in the café, Nomura came in without warning. I closed my mouth at once. It was not even my turn to sing, but I already knew he had no money, and the inside of my chest turned sour.

One of the girls carried him sake, and I felt my legs turning soft below the waist. I called Katsumi quietly to the back door and told her that he was someone I knew and that he had no money, so she should be careful. Then I went outside and walked toward the pleasure quarter. On the way I met Mr. Kan from the tatami shop, and when he asked where I was going, I lied and said I was buying cigarettes. He laughed and took me to a street-side sushi stand instead. He could sing old songs well, and there were rumors that he kept a mistress over a Western laundry, but that night he was gentle and did not pry.

When I came back much later, Nomura was still there. I went over and spoke with him. He had been drinking, he had eaten fried rice, and his face looked peaceful, almost soft. Seeing him like that, I thought that I would accept any sacrifice if only things could become quiet between us. He left around ten. But after he was gone, I felt only as if I were sinking into the earth. I suddenly understood that there might be no such thing as love in this matter after all.

On another day in February I had to carry the rent money to the landlord's house in Okubo. I did not know how much was in the thick envelope, but as I held it, I thought that with such money one might live silently for one or two months. The landlord kept a large nursery, and after I got the receipt stamp, he kindly offered me a cup of tea. When I came back through Shinjuku, the streets were almost empty, and flower shops were full of violets, hyacinths, and roses. Flowers seemed very happy to me that day.

I wandered through the sleeping pleasure quarter and saw paper cherry blossoms hanging from the eaves in the thin light of February. I bought two cheap notebooks at a general shop because the small squared manuscript paper filled me with disgust. It reminded me too much of Nomura and his habits of mind. I stood in bookstores, turning pages at random and thinking, "I too could write something like this," but the moment I stepped outside again, my courage froze. That was always the way. Inside the bookshop I felt light, and outside it I felt only how helpless I was.

Then I went to Ushigome again. Nomura was not there, so I drifted around Kagurazaka, stood reading in another secondhand bookshop, and once more felt

my spirit rise and fall with every doorway. By the time I got back to the café, the cleaning was finished, and three medical students were drinking tea. I went upstairs, threw myself face down on the mat, and felt as if I wanted to pull endless threads out from deep inside my mouth. Tears came though I was not even clearly sad. They simply came because something in me had worn too thin.

On a wet day soon after, I went again to see Nomura after my bath. He scolded me because I had put powder on the back of my neck and said it made me look like a café girl. “Of course I look like a café girl,” I answered. “That is what I am.” I said he must stop coming to the place where I worked, because no one else would feed me if I did not work there. At that he picked up an ashtray and threw it at my chest. Ash flew into my eyes and mouth, and it felt as if a bone in my chest had cracked.

I tried to run to the door, but he caught my hair, threw me down, and kicked me in the stomach more than once. I lay there and thought that perhaps I should pretend to be dead. At last, when evening came, I woke to find him sitting with his back toward me, writing at the desk as if nothing had happened. A towel in the metal basin had gone stiff with cold. I slowly fixed my hair, and later that night, because I could not rise, I gave him money and asked him to bring back two bowls of curry noodles. We ate together in silence and then slept side by side.

The next morning cold rain was still falling. I looked at his red lips as he slept and thought of illness, anger, and all the reasons I should leave him forever. He told me that I could simply come and go and that we might live half together like that, but I knew in my heart that I did not want it. I had already spent too long making the face of a fool for someone who beat me. By noon I had gone back to the café. I bought plasters at a drugstore and stuck them to my temples and over my aching chest, then sat there with my meal of cold rice and stewed bean curd, telling myself that whatever happened next, I had to go on living inside my own damaged body.

On the next days, with plasters on my temples and over my aching chest, I kept thinking of a song I wished I could make. In my mind there were purple flowers, a body floating on the sea, my mother bent low with fatigue, and the tired sun over an ordinary day. I wanted to turn all that into music and let it rise out of me in one clear sound. But I could not make music, and so the feeling stayed shut inside my ribs. It was another one of those times when I felt too full of life to endure silence, yet too poor in power to change anything.

Then came a bright day in March, soft and mild, and because it was my day off, I thought of Yoshitsune and went alone to Asakusa. There was no real plan in it. I only wanted to walk somewhere full of noise and old memories, somewhere I had once known in another mood. The weather was warm enough to loosen the heart a little, and the thought of Asakusa pulled me like a hand. So I went there by myself, as I had gone to many places in my life, with no companion except my own unsettled mind.

The little amusements, the signs, and the smells of the district all felt strangely dear to me. I looked at the dark Sumida River and saw orange peels, scraps of wood, and even the swollen body of a dead cat moving with the current. Across the water, a big chimney sent up smoke in thick gray bands. Near Komagata Bridge I passed the Holiness church, but I did not go in. I kept walking, carrying my loneliness through the noon light as if it were an ordinary parcel under my arm.

At last I went into a loach restaurant and took the black wooden shoe tag in my hand. Inside, long low tables stood in rows over woven mats, and the thin flat cushions looked worn from many bodies. I ordered loach cooked in a pan, a bowl of catfish miso soup, pickles, rice, and one bottle of sake. It was not a grand feast, but in that hour it felt like something close to freedom. I drank in the middle of the day, and I knew well enough that people would think it strange, but I no longer cared what they thought.

A man in a bird-hunting cap sat beside me and looked over with surprise. "You look pleased with life," he said in a half-joking way. I smiled back at him, because there are times when a woman has no wish to explain herself to a stranger. There

were reasons for my drinking, but no stranger would have understood them. The shop was filling with customers, smoke was beginning to hang under the ceiling, and my body grew warm from the sake. When I stepped back out into the broad road, I felt that happy loose sway that comes after only a little drink when the heart is already tired.

I wandered toward Nitenmon and watched the crowds. At one stall, naked dolls were on sale, and I stood looking at them for a long time. The pretty ones always disappeared first, just as prettier women are always taken first in the world of men. Even the neon signs, still pale under the daytime sky, seemed to speak of buying, choosing, and being chosen. The whole district was noisy, dusty, and alive, yet beneath that life I felt a hard dryness. It seemed to me that everything in the world had its price, except peace.

From there I drifted into the park. No one there knew me, and I knew no one. That kind of walking has its own strange sweetness, because the heart can open a little in complete loneliness. I passed the small pond near Awashima and stopped on the bridge. Pigeons moved about in little groups, and the smell of incense came from a nearby stall, soft and bitter in the warm air.

On a stone in the pond, a turtle was crawling slowly with its shell already dry in the sun. I stood watching it for a long time. Then, like a fool, I began to speak to it in my heart. "Please think of me too," I said. "Let something good happen to me at least once." In answer, I imagined the turtle asking what I wanted, and I answered at once, "Money. I want enough money to eat every day without fear."

Then I imagined it asking, "Do you want a man?" and I answered, "No. Not now. Men are troublesome things, and they hurt too much to keep beside me." That little private talk amused me so much that I could almost laugh. I asked what I should do with my life, and the turtle, in my own foolish play, would tell me nothing. I picked up a small stone and threw it into the dirty pond. The turtle pulled in its neck at once, and something about that timid shrinking made me laugh for real.

Yet even while I laughed, I thought how lonely both of us were there, the turtle and I. It had its shell, and I had my body, but neither of us truly belonged to the

place. Anger rose in me at the great temple nearby, at gods, at fate, at all the huge silent things people bow before when their little lives are in pain. I went stomping into the Kannon hall almost with anger in my feet. Deep inside, the lamps moved in the darkness like fishing lights far away at sea. The place was holy, perhaps, but it did not answer me any more than the turtle had.

By evening I came back to Shinjuku. I had nowhere else to go, so I returned to the shop. Upstairs, Katsu-chan was singing a loud old ballad in the half-dark, and her voice was so rough and unhappy that it made the whole house feel sick. The mistress and her husband had gone to Narita with their child, and the old mother was keeping watch. The cook, an old man we called Dai-san, was making a mixed rice meal for us. I lay down under a blanket and felt at once that life might go on like this forever if nothing broke it open.

“Is there not one bright thing waiting somewhere?” I thought. “Will nothing burst at last?” The blanket smelled strongly of human bodies, and from outside a man’s voice called to some woman, “Pretty one,” in the dark. The sound only made me feel more tired. It seemed that the whole world was busy with its small hungers, and I had mine like all the rest. I lay there asking heaven for some kind of explosion, not of death, but of change.

Then Katsu-chan came up with a bottle of whisky she had stolen from downstairs. The room was still dim, and we drank straight from the mouth of the bottle like bad girls hiding in a corner of the world. It was not a civilized way to drink, and I knew that perfectly well. But the first burn of the whisky made my body feel one arm’s length taller, as if something inside me had suddenly stood up. In such poor lives as ours, even stolen drink could look like a kind of freedom.

We passed the bottle between us in the dark and said foolish things. The whisky was sharp, and it made me bold in the quick wild way that drink sometimes does. I felt as if blood had rushed back into all the places that had gone numb. For a little while I was no longer the beaten woman with plasters under her clothes, no longer the café girl, no longer the poor writer waiting in cold entryways. I was simply a living body full of fire.

Yet even that boldness was a poor boldness, a thing made of darkness, hunger,

and stolen liquor. I knew that when morning came, the same world would still be there. The rent, the work, the men, the shame, the unwritten pages, and the long city roads would all return unchanged. But that night, in the dim room with Katsuchan and the whisky bottle, I let myself feel brave for a moment. Sometimes one moment of false courage is all a person has to keep the next day from swallowing her whole.

## Part 20

Later, in June, I found myself thinking about the moon as if it had been stolen from the sky. I imagined people looking up, first in surprise and then in loud foolish talk, each one saying something different, yet none of them truly understanding what had gone missing. It seemed to me that happiness was like that moon. It shone over everyone for a while, but when it slipped away, people simply stared, shouted, and then went back to their lives. The poor did not even own the light that fell on their faces. That thought stayed in me and made the whole world feel mean and badly arranged.

I had been reading books that argued about the self, about philosophy, about love letters, and about how people should live. But all those books only made me feel more bitter. Fine words were often just a way of putting a pretty cloth over a rough truth. People said labor was noble, but I thought that was a phrase rich people used when they wanted the poor to bow their heads and keep working. The poor were pushed into rules, fences, offices, and waiting rooms until they began to look like children born outside all rightful walls. Meanwhile, happiness ran past them like a carriage that never stopped.

Around that time, the small gathering place called Nantendo was full of men who talked loudly, drank badly, and carried literature on their backs like a half-broken flag. One man boasted of the lipstick on his bald head as if it were a medal from the opera quarter. Others shouted about tea kettles of gold, sang songs with narrowed eyes, or laughed in the loose, reckless way that comes when money is gone and pride is still refusing to die. I sat among them and read aloud one of my

poems about the Buddha. When people are driven into a corner, even despair can flash like colored light.

I looked at those men and thought that none of this noise would truly change the country. Books might sell, translations might appear, and names might rise for a while, but the hard frame around life remained in place. Still, there was pleasure in the moment. To sit among restless young writers and actors and feel language moving in the room was better than sitting alone in a dark rented space listening only to one's own hunger. That was why I kept going. One can hate a circle and still need its warmth.

After one of those nights, I went with the others to the house of Wakatsuki Shiran. The talk there turned to the theater and to a play by Tetsuteki Togi. A woman named Teruko Kishi was there in black clothes, and I liked her voice at once. It had a full sound, calm and deep, and it made me think that acting might also be a road, another way of stepping out of narrow life for an hour. I had no real skill I could prove, but I was willing to read aloud, to copy tones, to try. When I practiced lines from *Jochanaan* or *Ophelia*, even in clumsy imitation, I felt the strange happiness of becoming someone larger than myself.

At such times, I wanted everything. I wanted to be a poet, an actor, and a painter all at once. Around me were young people who moved toward art without fear, as if instinct itself were carrying them forward like wind in a sail. I did not know whether any of them would become truly great. But while I sat among them, I felt as though I had reached the gate of happiness and was standing just outside it. The moment I stepped back into the street, that feeling thinned, yet while it lasted, it was real enough to keep me alive.

One night, after a talk on Strindberg's *The Thunderstorm*, I walked home late through the dark, all the way as far as Hakusan. Fireflies moved above a wide grassy place near Kagomachi, and their weak green light made the night feel softer than it really was. But when I reached my room, softness ended at once. My lodging then was a four-and-a-half-mat room over a charcoal seller's shop, and the rent was four yen. Charcoal was cheap there, so I had fuel enough, but the whole air of the place smelled black and dry.

I sat down at the little desk I had made from an orange crate and turned again to children's stories. I kept writing one after another, fairy-tale-like pieces, fables, little moral stories, hopeful stories, sad stories, and still nothing happened. No one answered in a way that mattered. The pages piled up, but rice did not appear because of them. My room smelled of charcoal so strongly that I sometimes thought even my thoughts were being smoked and blackened by it.

Then I began to speak to God in the rough, childish way I often did when I was alone. I asked what shape such a being could possibly have. Was God round and soft, or sharp and cruel, or full of white feathers and silence? Was God only empty air pretending to be someone who listened? I did not know. Yet even while I said that I could not see God anywhere near me, I still found myself folding my hands and praying into the dark.

My prayers were not noble. I did not ask for wisdom, or purity, or grand salvation. I asked that one of my little stories might somehow become tomorrow's food. I asked that a certain editor might be pushed, squeezed, or frightened into buying what I had written instead of making me wait in narrow gloomy entranceways for hours while he sat inside with his pipe pretending importance. I knew my prayers were half anger and half begging. But such prayers are common among poor people. Hunger makes the tongue plain.

Editors seemed especially cruel to me then. They printed weak things of their own and still looked down on work brought by people like me. They wore their comfort like armor and made a show of slow judgment, while the one who waited outside was counting train fare, meal money, and the last coins in her sleeve. I wanted to seize one of them by the throat and ask whether he understood what a delay of two hours meant to a person who had not yet eaten. Of course I never did such a thing. I only went on writing and waiting.

In that little room above the charcoal shop, my anger and my hope lived side by side. I cursed editors, doubted God, envied actors, admired poets, and still put my head down again over the next page. I thought sometimes that I was ridiculous, a woman with no fixed home, no strong patron, no stable job, and yet full of plans that would not leave her alone. But even ridicule can become fuel. When one has

little else, stubbornness begins to look like a kind of talent.

So I stayed there and kept working. The room was poor, the air was black with charcoal smell, and my stories still brought almost nothing back. Yet the act of writing itself would not let go of me. I did not know whether literature would ever feed me, or whether acting, painting, or anything else would open a real road. I only knew that if I stopped trying, I would sink at once into a life even narrower than the one I already had. That was why, even in anger, even in prayer, even in foolish hope, I kept my hand moving over the page.

## Part 21

One June morning I went out again with a heavy head and the old weak hope that some editor might at last take pity on me. On the tram road I met the man with the nightcap, and though I had no wish to smile, I bowed and greeted him carefully. He was walking toward the office with a little book open in his hand, reading as he went, as if he were far above the needs of ordinary people. I followed the same road and stood again in the dark dirt-floored entrance, preparing myself for another long wait. By then I knew that waiting itself was part of the work for poor writers, and perhaps the cruelest part.

A small girl came out, looked at me with open dislike, and then slipped back inside. I unfolded a manuscript called "Red Shoes" and pretended to read it, though I had already gone over the same lines so often that the words no longer moved. There was nothing more to fix, yet I could not simply stand staring at the wall like a beggar. So I kept my eyes on the paper and let time pass over me. At last I thought, with sudden force, that perhaps I should stop this whole foolish struggle and go into the theater instead.

The clock struck twelve. I had already waited more than two hours, and my legs had grown weak from standing out of the way while other people passed in and out. I stepped outside because I could bear the entrance no longer. I could not understand what pleasure such men found in making powerless people wait, unless cruelty itself was their only amusement. My pride had been rubbed thin by

then, and the day felt wide, hot, and empty before me.

From there I walked to Hagiwara Kyojiro's place behind Nezu Shrine. Setsu was washing clothes, and the little boy ran at me so suddenly that I almost fell over when he pushed against my knees. I had eaten nothing since morning, and my whole body felt hollow, as if the air had been let out of me. Hagiwara himself had gone to Maebashi to search for money, and there was not even one sen in the house. I stayed only a little while, because hunger makes even friendship heavy when no one has anything to share.

Then I walked all the way to Takiyama-cho in Ginza. I had heard that a magazine called *Boys and Girls*, put out by the Jiji newspaper company, was not a bad place, so I went there and left my manuscript because no one was available to see me. When I stepped back outside, the whole street seemed made of smell. Fresh food, warm bread, sauce, sweets, and all the rich odors of the city rose around me and pressed on my empty stomach. In front of Kimuraya, newly baked sweet buns had turned the glass white with steam, and I stood there wondering whose stomachs would receive such kind warm bread.

The street itself had grown strangely quiet, because people said someone from the imperial family was passing. Policemen stood at attention, and everyone around me lowered their heads and stopped moving. I thought, not for the first time, that I did not know what such high people truly looked like, except that they seemed to travel through a world cut apart from ours. Then, near the Café Lion, I noticed a small tent with a sign for newspaper advertisement orders and, below it, a notice seeking a woman to receive advertisements. The place was no bigger than a stall, with one table and one chair inside, yet to me it looked almost like a doorway opened by chance.

I went close and asked not about placing an advertisement, but about the work itself. A middle-aged man looked surprised when I said I wanted the job. He told me to bring a record of my history, and when I answered honestly that I had no money even to buy the proper paper, he stared for a moment and then softened. He pushed forward a rough sheet and said, "Then write a simple one here. Come tomorrow and try." I wrote my history in pencil on that coarse paper, my hand a

little shaky from hunger and from sudden hope.

When the noble carriages had passed and the street breathed again, the same man told me that the pay would be eighty sen a day, and even the tram fare would be covered. To other people it might have sounded small, but to me it sounded almost grand. As I thanked him and turned to go, he came out from the tent and silently pressed a ten-sen coin into my hand. I bowed, and tears rose before I could stop them. For a moment I felt that God, who had so often seemed far away, had stepped just a little nearer to me.

That evening rain began to fall, and because I had no umbrella, I worried about the next morning. Even so, the fear did not fully cover my new happiness. I thought of the warm ten-sen coin and laughed to myself at the memory of having eaten rice bran mixed with hot water that very morning. Perhaps life did not change in great bright ways, but it sometimes shifted one small step at a time. I went to sleep with the feeling that the wind had at last turned in my direction, if only a little. When one has lived a long time with hunger, even a little turning of the wind is enough to make the heart rise.

By the fourth day at the tent, I had already learned the work well. The Café Lion stood in front of me, and next to it was a tiny necktie shop with ties hanging in rows like a colored curtain. People came all day to place three-line advertisements, and each line cost fifty sen. Some were for geisha positions, some for café girls, some for employment, rooms, medical help, or other hidden needs of the city. I took their words and pressed whole lives down into three short lines, and there was something both funny and cruel in that work.

Beautiful women passed under the hot June sun in bright clothes while I sat there in my washed old flannel. I told myself that one day I would at least buy a single summer robe, but for the moment such thoughts were only soft dreams. Across from me, the women of the café moved in and out like dolls, bright and careful, so lovely that they almost did not look real. It was plain to me that this loud rich street had little to do with literature. Money, not words, ruled the flow of that road.

Alone in the tent, I began to imagine impossible things. In the drawer of the

table, the big silver coins kept piling up in thick rows. I looked at them and thought how easy it would be to run away with such money. With that much, I could travel anywhere, perhaps even leave the country, or send enough home to shock my mother and stepfather into silence. I opened the drawer more than once and laid my palm over the coins, feeling their weight as if the very touch of them might carry me into another life.

Then I would imagine the crime itself. I would flee, be caught, be tied with rope, and sent to prison for stealing the money of advertisements. The whole thing frightened and excited me at once. Perhaps God himself was the one placing such wild ideas into my head, I thought bitterly, because temptation had a way of appearing most clearly to the hungry. Men came one after another with orders that all pointed in the same direction, women wanted, rooms wanted, beauty wanted, bodies wanted. My work was to shape all those desires into neat little lines while my own poems and stories slowly dried up inside me.

There were advertisements from midwives, hospitals, detectives, homes for the old, reform schools, police-related notices, and the hidden trade of sex all around the edges of the city. It felt as though the whole world were speaking through those slips of paper, and none of it was clean. An older writer had once said that if I wanted to stand at the very tail end of the thirty thousand who wished to become writers, then I should go on writing. I thought of that often while sitting in the hot tent, and I felt both ashamed and stubborn. I had no courage to remain only an advertisement girl all my life, but I had no road open before me either.

So each evening I took my eighty sen and walked all the way back toward Hongo. The work was not noble, and the heat inside the tent made me feel half cooked by the end of the day, yet the pay was true, and truth has its own value when one is poor. Sometimes, after work, I went alone to Asakusa, because the sound of the street music comforted me. I bought a cheap dish of scattered sushi, drank all the tea I could, stared for a while at store windows and photographs, and let the damp wind of the alleys move across my face. Then I returned to my room with the knowledge that eighty sen a day, poor as it was, still held me a little above the ground.

## Part 22

In July, when the sky was pale and the air hung low over the city, I felt that the four years I had spent in Tokyo were floating above me like dirty mist. Rain would stop in the afternoon, and the sound of cicadas would fill the spaces between houses like a net pulled tight. Even a hedge with wild roses in Nishikata seemed to catch the wind and hold it for a moment. I thought of myself as a small poet with no place to stand, a poet with no money, dancing only because she was driven into a corner. Sometimes I could almost hear music far away, but when I listened closely, it was only the city breathing.

In such days I wanted food, men, sleep, and words all at once, and none of them came in a clean form. My dreams were ugly and simple. I dreamed of eating, of being held, of being laughed at, and of running after something only to be turned away. Yet when I woke, the best thing was often only to look at shop displays, because looking cost nothing, and in looking I could still imagine I had the power to choose. A person who has very little begins to live partly by touch, smell, and sight, as if wanting itself were a kind of meal.

Then August came in full heat. One day I went to Negishi in Shitaya to buy wind chimes, and they packed them into a round hat box that grew large and awkward on my back. The thin glass bells had silver inside them, and I bought them by the dozen for eighty-four sen. I was going to tie them under trailing grass and sell them with colored paper strips, and the whole plan felt both foolish and necessary. The sky was hard and bright, and the heat pressing down on my shoulders made me feel as if I were carrying a great holy man on my back instead of cheap glass goods.

That night my stepfather came to Tokyo with not one sen in his pocket. He said business was bad in both Hiroshima and Okayama, and I listened with no surprise left in me. By then I had begun to feel that if I stayed too close to my parents for too long, all three of us would rot together in one sticky sadness. Love remained, but it had turned heavy and hard to breathe under. In the deepest part of my mind,

I sometimes even felt the wild fear that I might become a criminal in thought before I ever became one in deed.

What I wanted was very small. I wanted enough daily food to let the heart grow quiet for a while. If I had money, I thought, I could live simply for a few years and ask for nothing unusual from the world. But money never came in that shape. Instead, I sat and tied wind chimes onto grass and imagined the faces of the people who would buy them because they looked cool and pretty in summer, while I myself sweated in the heat and read Hamsun's *Hunger* late into the night.

His hunger did not seem like mine. He could think and walk freely in a country that gave him room even in misery. I felt only that I was barely breathing inside a muddy whirlpool of want. Sometimes I wanted to carve on the wall with a knife, just to leave some mark of this life behind. And when I stepped out to walk by the river at night with my kimono tied up for ease, men moved away from me as if I were a madwoman. I would even walk toward them on purpose, smiling in a dry way, just to watch them hurry past.

The more hungry and tired I became, the more wild and low my own thoughts seemed to me. I was often shocked by how quickly I could imagine throwing myself away. It was not that I truly wished for ruin every hour. It was that ruin already lived so close beside me that one small push might have been enough. When I looked at warm windows, I wanted to throw stones. When I thought of Jesus or the Buddha, I felt no comfort at all, only distrust toward the grand figures people praised while ordinary lives choked in narrow rooms.

Another August day was said to be unlucky for business, so my mother and stepfather slept late and did not even go out. The flies swarmed over white bean-curd scraps in the cowshed across from us, and even that made me hungry. I could not bear staying in the house, so I took my goods and went out alone. I walked through Okubo, by the waterworks, past the tobacco office, and on toward Shinjuku under a burning sky. House after house refused even to look at my cheap summer shirts.

I drifted through Yocho-machi and Wakamatsu-cho with no real purpose left. My shadow on the ground looked short and thick like a turtle, and I laughed at it

once, then nearly cried from weakness. I sat for a moment on the stone steps before the house of a famous woman and thought how little she would guess that a hungry peddler had stopped there to rest. In truth, I was walking less for trade than for my own poor sadness. I did not want to be at home, looking at my parents, their need, and the whole tired shape of our life.

I wandered farther, half dreaming of a bath, cool hair, and clean skin, while sweat ran down my back and legs. At one point I thought of trying again at an employment office, of becoming once more one of those women with a pink work card who could earn thirty yen a month and perhaps write quietly at night. Then I laughed at myself. I wanted literature, dignity, comfort, drink, and food all at once, and in the real world there was barely enough money for one dish of rice cakes and weak tea. Still, I sat in a cheap place and ate a plate of bean cakes, because even that small food could hold a body together for another afternoon.

By evening I returned with not a single sale. We ate cabbage with sauce and barley rice. My stepfather was out selling grass decorations, my mother washed clothes in only her under-skirt, and I stripped naked too and poured well water over myself, trying to wash away not only the sweat but the whole day. Then I found a returned manuscript waiting for me. I opened it with my tongue and saw at once that the little miracle forest I had built in my mind had collapsed in the common way, folded and sent back like waste paper.

I lay on the mat with my hot body bare and thought about what was ahead. Mosquitoes came in waves. I read an old magazine, thought of writers who sold books and walked about with their wives in the evening eating good things, and felt the whole width of the world pressing down on my little name. I wanted to write mountains of pages, yet not one sheet of mine seemed able to buy bread. So I dreamed instead, foolishly and tenderly, of a future husband who would at least be hardworking enough to keep rice in the house every day, while I bore children and kept going.

But sleep did not come smoothly. The mosquitoes bit too hard, and my thoughts were too bright and scattered. I put my damp clothes back on and bent over paper again, though I knew very well that I had nothing clear to say. Words flashed in

my head anyway, one after another, the way stars might flash if a person were drowning and looking up through water. Then, because I could not bear the emptiness of the night, I began to write a poem. Its title came to me suddenly and simply: “The Two-Sen Copper Coin.”

Earlier I had found that old coin in front of the cowshed. It was large, heavy, and stained with blue-green mold, and when I touched it, I felt a childish happiness so strong that it almost made me ashamed. This one coin could buy a little sweet bun, or four hard candies, and that was enough to make it feel like treasure. I rubbed it with ash until it began to shine and laid it on my palm, staring at the mark that showed it had been made long before I was born. It looked, to my poor delighted eyes, almost like real gold.

I played with it in the dark as if it were a living friend. I used it as a paperweight, then put it on my bare stomach above my navel and laughed softly to myself. That tiny coin, old and worn and still useful, seemed kinder than most people I had known. So I wrote to it, and in writing to it, I felt for a moment that I was speaking to my whole life, poor, heavy, foolish, and shining a little when cleaned by hand. Then I stopped. There was nothing more to add.