

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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Publication webpage:

https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated_graded_readers.html

Publication date: March 22, 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: Takekurabe (たけくらべ)

Author: Higuchi Ichiyō (樋口一葉)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)

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

Original Japanese text available at:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000064/card389.html>

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Higuchi Ichiyō, *Takekurabe (Comparing Heights)* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

When people turned around the Great Gate and looked back, they saw the long willow tree and the bright lights of the pleasure quarter. At night the lamps shone in the dark water of the ditch, and the upper floors were full of noise and movement. Carriages came and went from morning to night, so even a stranger could feel that this place was still rich and busy. The name Daionji-mae sounded like the name of a temple street, but the town itself was warm, lively, and full of human voices. People said that it was not a holy place at all. It was a place where trade, pleasure, gossip, and daily life were all mixed together.

After one turned the corner by Mishima Shrine, there were no great houses to admire. Instead there were long, leaning rows of small homes, and many of them looked old and tired. Some shops kept their shutters half closed because business was never very good, yet the people inside were always at work. In one house, then another, then many more, paper was cut into strange shapes and covered with white powder and bright paint. Sticks were tied behind them, and the pieces stood in the sun in the morning and were put away again in the evening. These were parts for festival rakes for the November fair at the shrine. The whole family worked on them, hoping that the god of good fortune would bless both the buyers and the makers.

Even so, few truly rich people lived there. Many of the men belonged in one way or another to the quarter, and many of the women lived close to its customs. Girls ran errands with lanterns in their hands, learned to speak and move like older women, and watched the world before they were old enough to understand it. Older women walked quickly in neat clothes, carrying small bundles and doing sewing or other work for the houses inside the quarter. Younger girls copied what they saw and liked wide belts, smart looks, and playful manners. Children here learned adult habits early. In autumn, when the festival season came, even small

boys and girls could copy songs, dances, and gestures with surprising skill.

Not far away stood a private school called Ikueisha. It was crowded, noisy, and famous in the district, and nearly a thousand children studied there. Boys from many kinds of homes went through its narrow rooms, and each child brought his family world with him. Some were sons of workmen, some of officials, some of moneylenders, and some of people connected to the quarter. A boy could learn reading and writing there, but he also learned very quickly who everyone's father was, how much money each family had, and what sort of life waited for him outside the school gate. Among those many children there was one boy people noticed at once. He was Shinnyo, whose ordinary name was Fujimoto Nobuyuki, the son of Ryūgeji Temple.

Shinnyo was fifteen years old. He was not tall, and his round, close-cut head made him look plain at first sight, yet there was something different about him. His black hair was still the hair of a boy, but people already felt that one day he would wear the dark robe of a priest. He was quiet by nature and had always been more serious than the other boys. When he was younger, the rougher children had teased him badly and had thrown cruel jokes at him, even dead animals, because they knew he disliked noise and dirt. But those days had mostly passed. He studied hard, did well in school, and had become someone few boys now dared to laugh at openly.

Still, Shinnyo was not loved in the easy way that cheerful boys were loved. He was correct, proud, and a little distant, though perhaps he did not mean to be so. He did not join foolish games, and he seldom smiled without reason. The boys around him felt both respect and discomfort. They saw that he belonged to their school, but they also felt that he stood a little apart from them, as if he already lived with one foot in another world. Even his name, though he used the family name Fujimoto like the others, seemed to carry a quiet smell of the temple. People noticed that without saying it.

As August moved on, the whole district began to think of the coming festival at Senzoku Shrine. On the twentieth day there would be floats, lanterns, shouting, songs, and the proud showing off of each neighborhood group. Boys took this

almost as seriously as men did. They planned matching summer clothes, special decorations, and ways to make their own street look better than the next one. Among the boys of Yokochō, the leader was Chōkichi. He was sixteen, broad in body, loud in speech, and very proud of his own importance. Ever since he had once taken a public part in a local performance, he had begun to carry himself like a chief.

Chōkichi especially hated one boy from Omotemachi. That boy was Shōta, the son of Tanakaya. Shōta was younger than he was, but he was liked by many people because he had money at home and a sweet, friendly way with others. Year after year Omotemachi seemed to do better at festival time, and grown men sometimes supported their side as well. Chōkichi could not bear it. He thought that even when his own side was stronger, Shōta escaped trouble because people smiled at him, forgave him, and gathered around him. He felt that his own boys were slowly turning away from him, and this made his anger burn even more.

The festival was only two days away, and Chōkichi could not rest. If Yokochō lost again, he thought, people would laugh at him and say that his big talk was empty. He imagined breaking through the order of the festival, starting a fight, and paying Shōta back for every old shame. He named possible helpers in his mind and counted which rough boys might stand with him. Yet he also knew that force alone might not be enough. There was one boy whose learning and presence could give weight to Yokochō even without blows. Thinking that, Chōkichi turned toward Ryūgeji Temple in the evening and went slowly through the trees to Shinnyo's room.

He pushed aside the insects that troubled his face and called inside, "Shin-san, are you there?" In his heart he was already full of old anger, last year's insults, and this year's fear of defeat. He wanted someone to stand behind him, someone who would make the others think twice before laughing at Yokochō again. Shinnyo, quiet and serious, was not the kind of friend who loved fighting. But that was exactly why Chōkichi had come. If even Shinnyo joined their side, then the coming festival night might become something very different.

Part 2

Shinnyo was in his room when Chōkichi came to the temple. The evening air was still warm, and mosquitoes moved around the paper screen and the dark leaves outside. Chōkichi stepped in with the heavy, loose movement of a boy who wished to look strong even when he was asking a favor. His wide belt sat low on his body, and his sandals made a rough sound on the floor. Shinnyo looked up from his desk and saw at once that this was not a simple visit. Chōkichi's face was already full of anger before he even began to speak.

“People say I am violent,” Chōkichi said. “Maybe I am. But I have my reasons, and I want you to hear them.” Once he started, he could not stop. He spoke of the festival the year before, when boys from Omotemachi had broken the smaller lanterns of his side and had laughed at Yokochō in front of everyone. He remembered each insult as if it had been spoken only an hour ago. He repeated the cruel words, the laughter, and the shame, and each one seemed to make his chest rise higher.

He told Shinnyo that he had wanted to strike back at once, but his father had stopped him and scolded him until he had to swallow his anger. That memory still burned in him. Then he moved to the year before that and spoke of another insult at the paper shop, where the older boys of Omotemachi had gathered. “They spoke as if they were better than us,” he said. “They acted as if our street had no style, no pride, no place at all.” To Chōkichi these were not small matters. In his heart, they had become a long account that had not yet been paid.

Then he came to the name that hurt him most. “Shōta,” he said, almost biting the word. “He has money at home, and he smiles at people, and so everyone takes his side. He stands there looking soft and kind, and the others hide behind that face.” Chōkichi said that even the grown young men of Omotemachi pushed from behind and helped Shōta's side win. If this year ended the same way, he said, his own name would become a joke. Boys would stop following him. Men would laugh. He would not be Chōkichi, leader of Yokochō, but only a loud fool.

Shinnyo listened without answering. He was used to hearing rough voices from

boys like Chōkichi, yet this felt different. Chōkichi was not boasting now. He was begging in the only way his pride allowed. He leaned forward and said, “You know I do not ask because you love fighting. I know you hate it. But stand with us. Just stand with us.” His rough face changed for a moment, and a strange softness came into it. “Help me,” he said. “If you help, I can bear the rest.”

Shinnyo answered in a quiet voice. “But I am weak,” he said. “I cannot swing a lantern in a fight.” Chōkichi quickly shook his head. “You do not need to do that,” he said. “You do not have to hit anyone. You only have to be on our side.” He spoke faster now, because he felt the answer moving a little toward him. “When you are with us, people will think differently. You study well. You know things. If they laugh at us with hard words, you can answer them with hard words of your own. That alone will give us strength.”

To Chōkichi, this was plain truth. He knew he was not clever. He knew that his own loud voice and rough hands could lead boys into a fight, but could not make the town respect him. Shinnyo had the learning and the calm face that Chōkichi lacked. Even if he only stood there, he would make Yokochō look stronger. Chōkichi said this again and again, almost with wonder, as if he himself could already see the change. “If you say yes,” he cried, “it will be like having a thousand men.”

Shinnyo felt uneasy. Chōkichi was often foolish, often cruel, and never easy to like. Yet he had been born at the temple gate, and the chief priest and his wife had shown him favor since he was small. He was also a boy from the same private school, and Shinnyo knew well how boys from the public school spoke with pride, as if the private-school boys were lower. He did not truly share Chōkichi’s hatred, but he did feel the sting of such things. And because Chōkichi was so bad at winning affection, his loneliness showed even through his rough speech. Shinnyo saw that, and pity worked on him more strongly than anger did.

At last he gave way. “Then I will be in your group,” he said. “If I say I will, I will not lie. But it is better not to fight if it can be avoided.” Chōkichi’s face opened like a child’s at New Year. He laughed, thanked him, and moved nearer, full of relief and sudden hope. Shinnyo added, “If the other side starts trouble, that

is different. But we should not begin it.” Chōkichi agreed at once, though he agreed too quickly, and the quickness itself showed how little his promise was worth.

After that, their talk became stranger, because the two boys were so different. One was the son of a workman, broad, noisy, and tied to the street. The other sat in a light brown coat with a soft belt like a temple boy and kept his voice even when he was troubled. Yet for a short time they felt almost close. Chōkichi, carried away by his own joy, began to boast again, and Shinnyo, forgetting his own weakness, let himself be drawn a little by the feeling of siding with someone. He opened a desk drawer and took out a small knife that had come from Kyoto as a gift.

The blade shone in the room’s dim light. It was only a small thing, but it looked sharp enough to cut more than paper or string. Chōkichi bent over it at once and said, “That cuts well, does it not?” There was a dangerous brightness in his eyes as he looked. In that instant the evening seemed darker, and the festival no longer felt like a game of boys. Shinnyo put the knife away again, but the uneasy feeling remained. Chōkichi left the room with new life in his step, and the temple garden swallowed his heavy figure. Behind him the warm night stood still, as if it were waiting for trouble.

Part 3

If one looked at Midori from a distance, one first saw her hair. It was thick and long enough to reach her feet if it were let down, yet it was pulled up hard and arranged in a large, heavy style that made her look older than a schoolgirl. People said that even daughters from good houses now wore their hair in that way because it was the fashion. Her skin was fair, her nose was straight, and though her mouth was not especially small, it was firm and well shaped. None of these things alone made her a perfect beauty, but when they came together with her clear voice, her bright eyes, and her quick, living movements, she became someone very hard to forget.

She often wore a large summer robe in warm colors, with birds or butterflies on it, and she carried herself as if she had been born to be looked at. Her belt was tied high and boldly, and on her feet were tall wooden clogs of a kind not often seen on ordinary girls nearby. Men coming back from the quarter after the morning bath sometimes stopped and watched her white neck and easy step. Some even said that they wanted to see what she would look like three years later, when she would be older still. Midori belonged to Daikokuya, and her home country was Kii. Even the slight country sound in her speech made her seem sweeter, not less charming.

More than her face, people liked her spirit. She was open, quick, and full of force, and she separated one thing from another with a clean sharpness that made others respect her. She carried a purse heavier than a child should carry, and there was a reason for that. Her older sister was in great favor in the quarter, and the gifts that flowed toward the sister often reached Midori as well. When the older women around that house wanted to please the sister, they pressed coins and toys into Midori's hands as if such gifts were nothing at all.

Midori spent money in a way that amazed other children. She once gave matching rubber balls to a whole group of girls at school, and she also bought toys from the paper shop and shared them around as if she were a rich young lady. Yet a girl of her age could not truly afford such spending by herself, and the adults around her did not explain clearly where all this freedom came from. Her parents were alive and near her, yet they did not scold her harshly, and the master of the house treated her with a care that made people wonder. She was not an adopted daughter, and she was no blood relative of the house. The story, as people told it, was that when her older sister had first been sold, the owner of the house had drawn the whole family toward this place, and so the parents and child had come there together.

From that time on, their lives had changed. Her mother now did sewing for the women of the quarter, and her father had become a clerk connected with one of the smaller gate houses. Midori herself was sent to a school where girls learned arts and handwork, and outside that she lived almost as she pleased. Half the day

she might spend in her sister's room, and half she might spend playing in the streets. What she saw and heard around her were songs on the shamisen, drum sounds, bright robes, and the polished ways of women who lived by being admired. Such a world taught her quickly.

At first she had made mistakes. Once she wore a pale purple collar over her clothes because she thought it looked fine, and the girls of the neighborhood had laughed and called her a country child. She had felt the shame so deeply that she cried for three days and nights. But that time had passed. Now she was often the one who laughed first and called other girls plain, slow, or clumsy in dress. No one liked her cruel words, yet few could answer back, because her money, beauty, and place in the town gave her power even among children.

As the twentieth day of the month came near, the boys and girls around her begged her to think of something delightful for the festival. Midori liked pleasure as much as any of them, and she answered in her usual generous way. "Let us do something really good," she said. "Each of you may think of a plan. If money is needed, I will pay." At once the children gathered around her more warmly than before. Her gifts always worked quickly, and among the younger children she was treated almost like a little queen.

Ideas flew about in every direction. One child wanted a comic play, set up in some borrowed shop where people on the street could stop and watch. A boy with a twisted festival headband said that they should make a real portable shrine like the splendid one in a merchant's back room and carry it through the street, no matter how heavy it was. The girls did not like a plan that would leave them only standing by and watching the boys shout, and they pressed Midori to choose something in which she too could take pleasure. Then Shōta, with his pretty eyes moving quickly as they always did when he grew eager, offered another idea. He suggested a magic-lantern show at the paper shop, using some picture slides from his own home and buying whatever else was needed.

Midori liked the idea at once. When Shōta added that Sangorō could speak the funny words during the show, everyone laughed, because Sangorō's face alone was enough to make half the street smile. The plan was settled there and then.

Shōta ran here and there in the heat, buying what was lacking and working as if the whole matter rested on him, which perhaps it did. The talk of their plan spread so quickly that by the next day even Yokochō had heard of it. And when such news reached ears already full of anger, it could not remain harmless for long.

Part 4

Festival time changed the whole town. There was always music in that district, but on this day the sound seemed larger, faster, and more proud. One shrine did not want to lose to the next, and one street did not want to look weaker than another. Boys and girls wore matching cotton clothes with their street names on them, and even the smallest children carried toys, bells, or little decorations as if they too had an important place in the show. Some ran barefoot, some in split-toe socks, and all of them moved with noisy excitement. The air itself seemed full of dust, drum sounds, and color.

Shōta stood a little apart from the roughest of the boys. He wore a short festival coat with red lines, a dark apron at his waist, and a pale blue belt that had clearly cost more than most boys' clothes. A flower for the festival cart was tied at the back of his headband, and his white neck showed clean and bright against the dark cloth. He was dressed for the day, yet he was not happily shouting in the middle of the foolish music like the others. He was waiting. Again and again he went to the gate of the paper shop and looked out into the street, because Midori had not yet come.

Twelve children had gathered there, but without her the room felt unfinished. Shōta tried to hide his worry by giving orders. "Go call her," he said to Sangorō. "You have never been to the Daikokuya house, have you? Stand in the yard and call her name. She will hear." He spoke quickly, almost sharply, because waiting had begun to hurt him. Sangorō answered in his usual easy way and offered to go at once, telling Shōta to watch the great lantern and make sure no one stole the candle.

The girls laughed as Sangorō ran off. He was short and thick, with a round body

that moved in a comic way even when he was trying to be fast. His forehead pushed forward, his nose was large, his teeth showed badly when he smiled, and yet no one truly disliked his face. His eyes were full of play, and deep dimples came into his cheeks whenever he laughed, which was often. Even his poor clothes could not hide his good-humored nature. He was one of those children whom everyone teased and everyone kept near.

His life was not easy. His father pulled a cart and raised many children, and Sangorō himself had tried one small job after another without staying long in any of them. He had helped at a print shop, had done little winter work at home, and in summer had called out for an ice seller because his funny voice could bring customers. He was useful, but not steady. The Tanaka house had lent money to his family, and so he could never easily refuse Shōta's calls. At the same time, he had been born in Yokochō, lived on temple land, and belonged under the eye of Chōkichi's people. That made his place an uneasy one.

While they waited, Shōta sat at the front of the paper shop and sang softly under his breath. It was the kind of love song that older boys liked to copy, and the paper-shop wife laughed and warned him not to be too bold. Shōta's ears turned red at once, and he ran outside with the others to hide his shame. But before the mood could grow warm again, his grandmother came in person to fetch him home. She spoke politely to the shop wife and to the children, yet there was no refusing her. Shōta had missed his meal, and he was taken away at once, leaving the room duller than before.

After he left, the children still made noise, but the center seemed gone. Even some of the grown women standing outside said so. They gossiped in low voices about Shōta's grandmother, about her money, her age, her careful ways, and the power that money gave her even over people who laughed at her behind her back. The children heard little of this and cared less, but the feeling in the shop changed. It was no longer only a place of games. It had become a waiting place, and everyone felt it.

At last Midori came. She had bathed away the day's heat, and her mother had dressed her slowly and with care. Her thin summer robe was cool in color, and her

broad belt shone softly in the evening light. When she stepped out at last, Sangorō caught her sleeve and hurried her along so fast that she became angry. “If you run like that, go by yourself,” she said. So they reached the paper shop separately, Sangorō first and Midori after him, still carrying the slight displeasure of being rushed. When she found that Shōta was gone and was only then eating his supper at home, her face changed at once.

“This is no fun at all,” she said. “If he does not come, I do not even want to begin the magic-lantern show.” The paper-shop wife tried to calm her, and the girls took scissors and began cutting shapes from paper to pass the time. The boys gathered around Sangorō and made him repeat bits of comic theater from past festival years. His memory was strong, his gestures were foolish, and soon voices were rising again in laughter and imitation. People from the street stopped at the gate to see what was happening. Then, from among that small crowd, a boy’s voice called urgently, “Is Sangorō here? Come out for a moment. It is important.” Sangorō jumped up at once and ran toward the door, not knowing that the night had already turned against them.

Part 5

Sangorō did not even stop to wonder why Bunji was calling him. He laughed, answered at once, and jumped lightly over the shop threshold, ready to run some small errand and hurry back. But the moment his feet touched the ground outside, the trap closed around him. “You two-faced fool, be ready!” a voice shouted, and before he could turn properly, Chōkichi struck him hard across the cheekbone. Sangorō cried out in shock and tried to run back into the shop, but rough hands caught him by the collar and dragged him out again into the dark, crowded front of the house.

Then the whole street seemed to burst open. Boys from Yokochō rushed forward in a wave, some with twisted headbands, some carrying their great festival lanterns, all shouting at once. “Beat Sangorō to death!” one cried. “Drag Shōta out!” shouted another. “Do not let that weak coward hide!” The hanging

lantern at the paper shop was knocked down in a moment, and the boys stormed up to the very front of the store in muddy sandals, wild with anger and festival heat.

The paper-shop wife shouted that there must be no fighting in front of her shop, but no one listened. There were fourteen or fifteen of them, and their strength was in their number as much as in their fists. Because they could not find the one they had really come for, they turned all their force on Sangorō. “Where is he?” they shouted. “Where have you hidden him?” Each time Sangorō tried to protect his face, another blow or kick came from the side. The children inside drew back in fear, and even the grown women outside could do little but stare.

Midori could not bear it. She pushed aside the hands that tried to hold her back and rushed forward with her face burning. “What has Sangorō done to you?” she cried. “If you want to fight Shōta, then fight Shōta. He is not hiding here. He is not here at all.” Her voice rang through the noise, thin but sharp, and for a moment even the rough boys heard it. “This is my place to play,” she shouted. “None of you have the right to touch it. If you want an enemy, take me.”

She was almost shaking with anger. “Chōkichi, I hate you,” she cried. “Why do you hit Sangorō? There, you have thrown him down again. If you have any grudge, strike me.” She struggled so fiercely that the paper-shop wife tried to catch her from behind, but Midori would not stop. Then, from behind the others, Chōkichi shouted back in a harsh, ugly voice. “You little girl of the quarter,” he yelled. “Beggar who will follow your sister. This suits you well enough.”

With that he grabbed a muddy straw sandal and threw it. It flew straight through the air and struck Midori near the hairline on her forehead. The wet mud hit her skin at once, and she sprang up with a changed face, as if she would throw herself on them all. The paper-shop wife caught and held her just in time, afraid she would be truly hurt. Chōkichi, pleased with his own cruelty, shouted one more boast over the noise. “Ryūgeji’s Fujimoto is on our side,” he cried. “Come and answer us whenever you like. We will wait for you in the dark streets.”

Then the attack ended almost as suddenly as it had begun. Someone heard the sound of boots and guessed that word had reached the police box. Chōkichi called

sharply to his boys, and at once Bunji, Ushimatsu, and the others scattered in all directions, slipping into side streets and back alleys with quick, practiced feet. What they left behind was a wreck of dust, broken order, and shame. Sangorō lay in the dirt of the earthen floor, his sleeves torn, his back and waist covered with sand, tears pouring down his face as he shouted through sobs, “Chōkichi, Bunji, Ushimatsu! Why did you not kill me? I will not die so easily. Even as a ghost I will come back and kill you.”

The children around him were too frightened to touch him at first. At last the paper-shop wife ran forward, lifted him up as well as she could, brushed the dirt from his clothes, and stroked his back like a mother. “Bear it, bear it,” she said. “They were many, and we were all weak ones here. Even grown people could hardly step in.” She told him that the important thing was that he did not seem badly wounded, but she was still afraid of an attack on the road home. A policeman arrived, heard the story, and kindly offered to take Sangorō safely to his door. Sangorō shrank with shame and whispered that his father would scold him, and that Chōkichi’s family were the owners of the house where he lived, but the policeman smiled, took him by the hand, and led him away while the neighbors watched with relief. Yet when they reached the corner of Yokochō, Sangorō suddenly pulled free and ran off by himself like an arrow, swallowed at once by the dark street.

Part 6

The next morning, Midori would not go to school. This was so unusual that even the women in her house spoke of it with surprise. Her mother touched her forehead and said that she did not seem to have a fever, and perhaps she was only tired from the festival and the heat. Someone suggested better food, and someone else said that the morning visit to pray at the little shrine could be left to another person that day. But Midori refused at once. She said that she had made the prayer for her sister’s success herself, and so she must go herself.

She took the offering money and ran out before anyone could stop her. At the

small Inari shrine in the middle of the fields, she rang the bell, bowed her head, and put her hands together. No one there could know what she asked for. Her lips did not move, and when she turned back toward home, she kept her eyes down and walked along the narrow path between the rice fields as if she wished not to see anyone. The bright morning was clear around her, but inside she still carried the shame of the muddy sandal and the cruel words of the night before.

Shōta had been watching for her. He had heard where she had gone, and the moment he saw her from a distance he ran toward her without care for dust or heat. When he reached her, he caught the edge of her sleeve and said at once, “Midori, forgive me for last night.” He spoke so suddenly that she could only look at him. “There is nothing for you to ask pardon for,” she said. “You did not throw the sandal.” But Shōta shook his head and went on as if the blame were truly his own.

“They hate me,” he said. “I was the one they wanted, and because of me Sangorō was beaten. If Grandmother had not come and dragged me home, I would not have left. I would never have let them strike him so badly.” His voice shook with real pain, and he hurried on before she could answer. He told her that he had gone early that morning to see Sangorō, and that Sangorō had cried again from shame and anger. Then he looked up at Midori’s forehead and lowered his voice. “They say Chōkichi threw the sandal at your face. That was too cruel. Please forgive it all. Please forgive me.”

Midori gave a small smile then, though it was not the open smile she usually showed in play. “It was not enough to wound me,” she said. “So do not make too much of it.” Then she added, more seriously, “But, Shōta, you must not tell people that I was struck with a sandal. If my mother hears of it, I will be scolded. Even my parents do not strike me on the head, and if others hear that a boy threw a muddy sandal there, it will be like saying I was stepped on.” As she turned her face a little away, she looked at once proud and hurt, and Shōta felt more sorrow than before.

He apologized again and again until at last she began to walk beside him without anger. By then they had nearly reached the back of his own house. “Come

in for a little while,” he said. “No one is there. Grandmother has gone out to collect money, I think, and I am alone. I will show you the old colored prints I told you about.” He held her sleeve again, not roughly, but with such simple earnestness that she could not easily refuse. After a moment she nodded and followed him through the poor-looking folding gate into the yard.

The house did not look grand from outside, though everyone in the town knew that the Tanaka family had money. Inside the small yard there were flower pots set in a pleasant order, and a hanging green plant moved lightly under the eaves. Shōta led her to a place where the wind passed well and told her to sit there while he fanned the air toward her with a round fan. He was only a boy of thirteen, yet he was already trying with all his heart to please her. Then he brought out one old picture after another, proud as if he were showing treasures from a lord’s storehouse.

Midori looked with real interest, and Shōta, happy to see that, spoke more freely than usual. He showed her an old battledore and said that his mother had once received it when she had been in service at a great house. Then, without warning, he began to speak of his mother herself. She had died when he was three, he said, and though his father still lived, he had gone back to the family home in the country, so now only his grandmother remained with him. Midori told him not to let the pictures get wet when she saw tears rise in his eyes, but that only made him smile sadly and speak still more.

He said that sometimes, especially on cold moonlit nights when he went out to collect payments in the streets, strange thoughts came over him and he wanted to cry, though he did not know why. He said that people called his grandmother hard and greedy, yet she saved and worked for his sake, hoping one day to bring back the Tanaka pawnshop name, even if only in a smaller form. When he went about collecting money, he often saw poor people in pain, and then he felt ashamed of taking from them. That morning, he said, when he saw Sangorō trying to work as if nothing had happened, though his body still hurt, he had not known what to say. “I am weak,” he said. “That is why those wild boys laugh at me.” Then he looked up at Midori, embarrassed by his own softness.

But Midori did not laugh. She looked straight back at him, and there was kindness in her eyes. Shōta brightened under that look and changed the subject, as boys do when they have gone too near their own hearts. He praised her festival clothes and said she had looked finer than anyone else the night before. She answered that she had envied his festival dress too and had thought it must be pleasant to be a boy and wear such things. This pleased him so much that he praised her again and again, even saying that people thought her more beautiful than her older sister. Then, carried away by his own fancy, he asked whether they should have a photograph taken together one day, dressed beautifully, just to make Shinnyo jealous. Midori burst into laughter at that, and her clear voice rang through the room. At last, as the morning turned hot, she rose to go and invited him to come later to her place so they could float lanterns and chase fish now that the little bridge by the pond had been repaired. Shōta watched her leave with a face full of joy, thinking only how beautiful she was.

Part 7

Shinnyo of Ryūgeji Temple and Midori of Daikokuya both went to Ikueisha. In late April, when the cherry blossoms were gone and the fresh green leaves were already thick, the school held its great spring sports day in the wide field by the water. There were tug-of-war games, ball throwing, rope jumping, and other contests, and the children forgot how long the day had become because they were so busy shouting and running. At some point, Shinnyo lost his usual calm. He stumbled over a pine root near the pond and fell forward on the red earth. His sleeve was marked with dirt, and he looked so troubled that Midori, who happened to be near him, quickly took out her red silk handkerchief and offered it to him.

“Please wipe your sleeve with this,” she said in the natural way she spoke to anyone she wished to help. Shinnyo took it and thanked her, but before the moment could pass, other children saw them. They were quick to laugh, because children in groups are often cruel before they understand what they are doing. “Fujimoto is a temple boy, but he likes girls,” one said. “Maybe Midori will be

the temple wife,” said another. They laughed harder because the idea sounded both foolish and exciting to them.

Shinnyo hated such talk more than most boys would have hated it. Even when gossip was about someone else, it made him uncomfortable, and now it had fallen on his own head. From that day on, whenever he heard Midori’s name, he felt a tight pain in his chest. He feared that the same joke would begin again, and his mind would grow dark before a single word was spoken. He tried not to show it. He would turn his face aside, act as if nothing mattered, and pass through the moment with a hard expression.

But that coldness hurt Midori more than he knew. At first she had continued to speak to him in her usual open way. On the road home from school, if she found a pretty flower on a high branch, she would stop and wait for him. “Shin-san, please break that branch for me,” she would say. “It is too high for me, but you are tall enough.” Shinnyo could not simply refuse and walk away, yet he hated to do anything that might make the others laugh again. So he would pull down the nearest branch roughly, snap it without care, toss it toward her as if he were throwing away something worthless, and hurry on without another word.

Midori saw this happen again and again. At first she was only surprised. Then she grew annoyed. She noticed that he was not so short with other people, and so she began to feel that he was choosing to be unkind only to her. If she asked him a question, he answered little or not at all. If she came near, he seemed to wish to escape. If she spoke warmly, he looked troubled, almost angry. At last she thought, “If he does not wish to be my friend, then I do not need to speak to him either,” and from that time the easy path between them was closed.

Then came the festival night and the sandal thrown at her forehead. From the very next day, Midori stopped going to school. The mud could be washed away from her skin, but not from her memory. She could not bear the thought of sitting in the same room with children from both Omotemachi and Yokochō, all watching her, all perhaps knowing what had happened. To her, the insult was not a small street quarrel. She felt that she had been shamed in front of the whole world of children, and she could not forgive it.

In her anger she put much of the blame on Shinnyo. Chōkichi was known to be rough and foolish, so his violence seemed almost natural to her. But Shinnyo was different. He was educated, quiet, and proud of seeming better than rough boys. Therefore Midori decided that the attack could not have grown so bold without his support behind it. She thought that he must have been the hidden hand, pulling strings from the shadows while Chōkichi did the dirty work. Because of that, her anger against him became deeper than her anger against the others.

Her pride rose up to protect her wounded heart. She told herself that she was not some poor girl with no one to stand for her. Her sister was admired in Daikokuya, powerful men came to see her, and the whole house treated Midori with care because of that connection. Her father, mother, and the master of the house all valued her. Once she had even broken a large ornament in the guest room while playing, and the master had only laughed and called her too lively. Remembering such things, Midori thought that there was no reason for her to accept insults from temple people or street boys. The more she remembered her own place, the less willing she became to return quietly to school.

So she broke her slate pencils, threw aside ink and books, and let the abacus lie untouched. She spent her days in idleness and play with the friends she still liked, but the school path was closed in her mind. The wound was not only on her forehead. It was in her pride, in her shame, and in the new, difficult feeling she had toward Shinnyo, which she could neither name nor master. Without saying so aloud, she had already stepped a little away from the simple world of lessons and childish friendship. The distance between her and Shinnyo now seemed like a broad river, with no boat and no bridge allowed between its two banks.

Part 8

The district looked different again in the early morning, after the long night had ended. Carriages rolled away carrying sleepy men who hid their faces under hats or towels, and some still smiled foolishly at parting words or last playful blows from the women they had left behind. At the corner by Mishima Shrine, passersby

laughed at them without mercy and said that the road itself was a mad road where people lost good sense. Faces that had looked proud at dusk now looked loose and tired in the pale light. In this town, such scenes were common, and no one found them strange for long.

Girls born in these back streets were watched with special interest. People often said that now and then a girl from such a place would rise high and become admired far away, and examples were always ready on everyone's tongue. One girl who had once done simple work nearby was now famous elsewhere for her dancing. Another, once only a poor child of the same ground, now shone under a different name in another quarter. The town remembered such stories greedily, because success here seemed to belong more to women than to men. The young men of the district strutted about, but most of them looked useless beside even one girl who had truly risen.

Those young men had their own proud ways. Some called themselves town heroes and walked with loud voices, smart towels, and long lanterns, following local leaders and learning the rough customs of the streets. By day they helped at home or in shops, but by evening they bathed, changed clothes, and wandered toward the quarter with hair smoothed and sandals clicking. They talked of which new girl they had seen and which face was prettiest, as if such talk were serious business. They begged tobacco, borrowed paper, pushed one another, and thought such behavior manly. It was all rather empty, yet they believed in it with full hearts.

Midori was growing up in the middle of this world. Because she saw it every day, she did not tremble before men or think of courtesans only with fear or pity. Her older sister's success looked splendid to her, and she saw clearly how much comfort that success brought to her father and mother. The sorrow, pain, and loneliness in such a life were hidden from her young eyes. What reached her ears most often were stories of gifts, fine clothes, favored guests, and the power a beautiful woman could hold. So the quarter shone before her not as a prison, but as a bright and exciting stage.

She was still only about fourteen. If she held a doll to her cheek, her heart was no different from that of any rich man's daughter in a fine house. Yet what she had

truly learned each day was not moral teaching or home lessons, but the talk of lovers, the ways of guests, the rank of houses, and the difference between clothes that dazzled and clothes that looked poor. Her pride and quick temper then did the rest, running ahead and making cloud-like dreams for her. She did not reason deeply about life. She saw the flowers nearest her eyes and wanted their color at once.

When the morning traffic had passed and the street was freshly swept and watered, another sort of life began to move along Omotemachi. Small groups of entertainers came through from nearby areas, each carrying a different art. There were candy sellers, acrobats, puppet players, lion dancers, singers, and wandering musicians with old instruments. Some wore bright and careful clothes, while others looked tired and poor, yet all of them belonged to the same moving show that gave pleasure to the quarter. Their real customers were the women inside, who wanted music, laughter, and some change in the long sameness of their days. Even beggars passed by with unusual care, knowing that this was not an ordinary street.

Midori sat by the paper shop after her bath, watching the road with shining eyes. When a handsome performer passed hidden partly by a hat, the paper-shop wife clicked her tongue and said that it was a shame such a voice could not be heard in their street. Midori at once sprang up, pushed back the loose hair at her forehead with her comb, and ran after the woman without the least fear. Catching at her sleeve, she begged her to come in for just a moment. Then, with a boldness that made the gathered people stare, she asked for one favorite song and listened with her whole face alive.

The performer smiled, sang lightly, and passed on, but the small crowd that had gathered hardly looked at her in the end. Their eyes rested on Midori instead. She had stopped a passing artist as if it were the easiest thing in the world, and she had done it with such charm that no one could laugh at her. When she came back inside, pleased and excited, she leaned close to Shōta and whispered another daring thought. She said that one day she wanted to stop such performers here, make them sing, play, and dance at length, and do what other people would never dare

to do. Shōta stared at her in real surprise and could only answer, “I do not like such things. They are too much for me.”

Part 9

At Ryūgeji Temple, the sound of Buddhist words could be heard in the air, and one might think that all dust of the heart would be blown away there. Yet the temple was not as pure as such sounds suggested. Smoke from roasting fish drifted out from the kitchen, and baby clothes were sometimes hung to dry near the graveyard. None of this was a sin in itself, and much depended on the sect, but to those who believed monks should live far from such things, it felt unpleasant and worldly. Shinnyo saw all of it with sharp eyes, and because he was serious by nature, it troubled him more than it troubled others.

The head priest of Ryūgeji was a large and powerful man, prosperous in body as in fortune. His skin shone with health, and when he laughed, it was so loud and full that one almost feared the great Buddha in the main hall might shake upon the altar. His wife was still not very old, pale in skin, modest in dress, and careful in her manners with visitors. People did not speak badly of her in public, partly because her nature was not evil and partly because those around the temple received many small favors from her hand. But her past was known. She had once been a widow from a temple family, with nowhere firm to stand, and through service and dependence she had slowly become the wife of the priest.

Shinnyo and his older sister Ohana were children of that marriage. Ohana was pleasant to look at and had the kind of soft, bright face that drew men’s eyes, though she was not a great beauty. Because she could not simply be left in the temple like an ordinary girl, a neat tea shop had been arranged for her on the Tamachi street. There she sat behind the front lattice and smiled at customers, and young men came in without needing any strong reason. They talked, watched, and stayed too long, and the priest busied himself with money matters, visits, temple duties, and the care of that little shop as if all these things naturally belonged together. To Shinnyo, they did not belong together at all.

Worst of all, he himself was often used as a messenger in these matters. When his father wanted grilled eel or some other rich food, Shinnyo had to go through the street and bring it back, hearing the voices of children at the paper shop and feeling sure they must be laughing at him. He began to hate fish, not because of its taste, but because it seemed tied to everything in his home that shamed him. His father was not a timid man who feared gossip. If there was profit to be made, he was willing even to sell lucky hairpins at the festival market, and his wife would help him call out to buyers. Shinnyo had begged them not to do such things, but the priest had only laughed and told him to be quiet.

That was how the weakness in Shinnyo deepened. It was not that he lacked feeling. He felt too much, and because his wishes were never followed, he turned inward and became cold in manner. He judged his father, his mother, his sister's training, and almost all the ways of his own house, but he had not the courage to fight openly against them. If someone spoke ill of him, he could not step forward and answer with strength. He shut himself in his room and suffered alone. At school, this hidden softness was mistaken for pride or strange stubbornness, and so some boys disliked him without understanding him at all.

On the morning after the festival, Shinnyo learned what had happened at the paper shop. Since he had been sent to Tamachi that night and had returned home late, he had known nothing of the attack. When Ushimatsu, Bunji, and the others told the story in broken pieces, he was shocked by Chōkichi's violence and deeply troubled that his own name had been used to frighten people. Though he had not ordered any such thing, he felt as if the shame had fallen partly on him. A few days later Chōkichi came at last, red with embarrassment, and begged forgiveness. He said that the heat of the moment had carried him away, that he had only boasted because Shinnyo's support had made him feel strong, and that he could not bear to lose Shinnyo as the leader of Yokochō's side.

Shinnyo could not forgive gladly, but neither could he reject him completely. He told Chōkichi that weak people like Sangorō and Midori must never again be made targets, and that no one should begin a fight from their own side. Only if the other side truly attacked first, he said, would there be any excuse to answer. This

was less a brave command than a desperate wish to prevent further shame. Meanwhile poor Sangorō suffered in his own way. His body ached for days, yet because his father was humble before landlords and stronger men, no complaint could be made. In time the bruises faded, and Sangorō, simple and lively as always, returned to baby-minding, odd work, and foolish talk, though the insult had not truly disappeared from his heart.

Autumn then moved slowly over the district. The bright disorder of the festival was over, and the season turned thinner, sadder, and more clear. Red dragonflies crossed the fields, the sound of pounding grain came from work yards, and even the lamps of the quarter seemed to burn with a different loneliness. The songs from the tea houses still floated through the air, but now they carried something deeper than summer noise, and people who truly felt things began to come rather than those who only wished to show themselves. In the streets, there was little to excite gossip. Even the sad story of a blind young masseuse who had drowned herself for love passed quickly through the neighborhood and then sank away.

One rainy evening, when the sound of the falling water made everything outside seem farther than usual, Midori, Shōta, and two or three little children sat inside the paper shop and played with tiny shells. The wife of the shop had already shut the front boards because no customer would come on such a night. They were all close together under the warm light, and the talk was small and gentle. Then Midori suddenly lifted her head. “Someone is walking on the boards over the ditch,” she said. Shōta stopped his game and listened too, and both of them felt the same small thrill at once.

The footsteps came as far as the front of the paper shop and then stopped. After that there was no knock, no voice, and no sign of anyone entering. “Maybe one of our friends has come,” Shōta said, half hopeful, and he rose from his place. Outside, the rain still fell with that lonely autumn sound, and inside the others waited for the next moment without speaking. Whoever had come had reached the very front of their little world and then had hesitated there in silence.

Shōta slipped open the little lower door and thrust out his face with a playful “Baa,” expecting to surprise a friend. But the visitor was already gone from the front of the paper shop. A dark figure was moving away under the eaves two or three houses farther on, walking slowly through the rain. “Who is it? Come in,” Shōta called. Midori had already put on his wooden sandals, and she was about to run out after the person, not caring that the rain was falling hard.

Then Shōta understood. “Ah, it is him,” he said in a different voice. He turned back and added, “Even if you call him, he will not come. It is because of that old matter.” He rubbed the top of his own head in a foolish, round way as he spoke, and Midori at once answered, “Shinnyo, then?” She leaned out under the eaves and saw the figure more clearly in the gaslight some houses away, bent a little under the umbrella, still walking as if he wished not to be seen. For a long moment she watched him go.

“What an unpleasant temple boy he is,” she said at last, coming back in. “He must have come to buy paper or something, but when he saw us here he stood and listened, then ran away. If he had come in, I would have teased him until he could not answer.” Her voice grew sharper as she spoke. She called him crooked-hearted, mean, twisted, and false, as if the rain itself had brought back all her old anger. Yet when Shōta touched her lightly on the back and asked, “What is it, Midori?” she only said, “Nothing,” and bent over the little shells again.

Even while she counted them, she kept speaking of Shinnyo with heated dislike. “People who are rough and open are at least honest,” she said. “But the quiet ones who seem gentle are often the worst. My mother says so. A man who looks mild and keeps everything hidden inside is sure to have a bad heart.” Shōta half agreed, though he still tried to sound older and wiser than he was. Midori laughed at that and touched his cheek with one finger, saying that he was absurd when he copied grown men.

Then the talk turned, as it often did with children, toward the future. Shōta said that in time he would become a fine man, wear a proper coat like a merchant, carry a gold watch, put on rings, and smoke as men did. Midori laughed harder

and told him that with his short body and his serious face he would look like a walking medicine bottle. Everyone in the room laughed, including the paper-shop wife. Shōta alone stayed red and earnest, insisting that he would grow and that there was nothing funny in that at all.

He became still more serious when marriage was mentioned. He said that when he was older, he would choose only a beautiful wife, and that if an ugly one were brought to him, he would send her away at once. The paper-shop wife laughed and asked whether he meant one of the pretty girls in the neighborhood, and then, by way of play, whether he had already chosen Midori herself. Shōta's face turned bright red, and he slipped back toward the wall, pretending to be angry. Midori, however, gathered the little shells and calmly said, "Come, let us begin again from the start," as if nothing at all had happened.

Some time after that, Shinnyo had to carry a package to his sister in Tamachi before school. It was a rainy day, and though he did not need to pass by Daikokuya, that road was the shortest, so he took it as usual. The wind blew hard around the corner, pulling at his umbrella and pushing rain against his face. Just as he came in front of Daikokuya's gate, his sandal strap broke loose. He stopped under the eaves, leaned his umbrella against the gate, and tried in awkward haste to fix it, but his fingers were clumsy and nothing went well.

The trouble only grew worse. He tore paper into cords, but the wind rolled away his umbrella, and when he reached after it, the package slipped from his knees and fell into the mud. Inside the house, Midori saw all this through the glass and felt first annoyance, then pity, then something much harder to name. She wished to call out, "That paper string will never hold. There is a better strip here," but the words would not come. Instead she took a small piece of bright crepe cloth from the sewing box, hurried out over the stepping-stones, and came near the gate with her heart beating so hard that she thought everyone in the house must hear it.

Shinnyo turned and saw her. At once cold sweat ran down his side, and he wanted to flee barefoot rather than stand there before her. Midori too forgot all the bold speeches she had once imagined saying to him. On other days she would have laughed at his poor skill, scolded him for the festival night, accused him of

helping Chōkichi, and forced an answer from him there at the gate. But now she could do none of these things. She only stood half hidden, wet in the rain, looking at him and hating the silence because she could not break it.

Her mother called from within the house, asking what she was doing outside in the rain and telling her to come in before she caught cold again. Midori answered loudly, “Yes, I am coming,” and felt even that voice was a shame, because Shinnyo had heard it. She could not openly offer the cloth, yet she could not go back and leave him in trouble. At last, through the bars of the gate, she threw the strip toward him without a word. He saw it, and still he pretended not to see, keeping his face turned away as if nothing had fallen near him. Midori’s eyes filled with hurt, and for one moment she almost cried from anger and shame together.

She turned and walked back over the stepping-stones, one quick step after another, though she wished not to leave. Only then did Shinnyo look after her fully. The bright piece of cloth, red-patterned like autumn leaves and wet with rain, lay near his feet, and the sight of it pulled at him strangely. Yet even then he did not pick it up. He took the long cord from his own coat, tied the broken sandal as badly as he could, and tried to walk on. At that very moment Chōkichi came along from the quarter, saw his awkward state, laughed once, and then, in a rough but real kindness, offered his own sandals. Shinnyo protested, but Chōkichi insisted, saying he was used to bare feet. So they changed sandals there in the rain, and the two boys went off in different directions, while the little strip of bright cloth remained behind at Daikokuya’s gate, unused and forgotten by everyone except the two who could not forget it at all.

Part 11

When the great market day for the god of good fortune came, the whole district shook with noise. This year there were three market days, and one had fallen between them, but the days before and after were clear and bright, so the crowds were larger than ever. Men poured in through the inspection gate and from the

bridges, laughing, shouting, and pushing as if the earth itself were moving under them. Boats cut across the water, boys cried out, and music rose from low shops and from the upper rooms of the great houses alike. Anyone who had once seen such a day would remember it for a long time.

Shōta did not go out to collect money that day, because he had been allowed to rest. He wandered from place to place instead, and at last he stopped by a small stall where one of his foolish friends was selling sweet drink. The boy complained at once that his pot was already running low and that he did not know what to do. Shōta looked at it and laughed, then said, “You are slow. Pour hot water around the pot, add more sugar, and no one in this crowd will notice the difference.” The boy’s half-blind mother stared at him with respect and said that Shōta was born to be a merchant, but Shōta only shrugged and said he had seen the same trick done elsewhere.

Then he asked the question that had been in his mind all morning. “Have you seen Midori?” he said. “I have looked for her since early today, but she has not come to the paper shop.” The boy wiped his nose and answered eagerly that he had seen her not long before. He said she had gone in through one of the bridges toward the quarter, and then he added something else in a voice full of wonder. “Today she had her hair done in a grown-up style,” he said, moving his hands in a foolish shape to show it. “She looked beautiful. Better even than her sister, I think.”

Shōta lowered his eyes at once. “She is beautiful,” he said quietly, “but if she becomes like the women there, it is sad.” His friend could not understand such a thought and only laughed. He said that if Midori became one of those splendid women, then he himself would make money, go to see her, and buy her favor like a great man. Shōta told him not to speak such nonsense and began to walk away. Yet as he left, he found himself singing in a strange, trembling voice a popular song about girls who were raised like flowers and butterflies and then sent into service. He did not sing loudly, but even those few words came from a place in him that felt suddenly cold.

At the corner of the quarter he saw her at last. She was walking beside one of

the women from her sister's house, and there was no mistake. Her hair had been arranged in a full, young woman's style, wide and shining, with thick soft padding and bright ornaments that moved in the light. Tortoiseshell pins gleamed there, and a flowered hairpin trembled as she walked. Shōta stopped as if he had been struck and could only stare. Midori looked less like the wild, laughing girl of the paper shop than like a fine doll made in Kyoto and placed behind glass for people to admire.

Yet the moment she saw him, she ran toward him in her old way. She told the older woman that they could part there and that she would go home with Shōta instead. The woman laughed and left them. Only then did Shōta find his voice. He caught Midori's sleeve gently and said, "It suits you so well. When did you have it done, this morning or yesterday? Why did you not show me sooner?" His words were full of praise and simple joy, but Midori bent her head at once and answered in a low voice, "My sister had it done for me this morning. I hate it. I hate it very much."

They walked together, but the road was no longer easy. Midori felt every eye upon her, and each glance from the passing crowd seemed to burn her face. Men and women turned to look at her hair, because it was pretty and new, but she thought they must be mocking her. When Shōta, still full of his childish affection, asked why she would not play with him that day, she could hardly answer. At the dumpling shop their foolish friend called out in an exaggerated voice, "What a fine pair you are," and that was enough. Midori's face changed at once, and she said almost as if she might cry, "Shōta, please do not come with me."

But Shōta did not understand. He followed her, asking whether she had been scolded, whether she had quarreled with someone, whether her sister had been unkind to her. Midori only walked faster. When she turned toward her own house instead of toward the festival, he said in hurt surprise, "Will you not come with me today? Why are you going home? That is too hard on me." She kept her head down and said only, "It is nothing," though everything in her voice showed that something had changed. Shōta followed her through the gate as he had done many times before, because to him that house was still a place where he was welcome.

Midori's mother saw him and smiled in a way he did not understand. "Ah, Shōta, you have come at a good time," she said. "Midori has been in a strange temper since morning, and none of us can manage her. Please play with her a little." Shōta asked seriously whether Midori was ill, and the mother answered that it was nothing of that sort and that she would soon be well again. In the small room beyond, Midori had already thrown off her outer robe and belt and had fallen face down onto a quilt. Shōta came near the pillow and asked softly, "What is wrong? Are you sick? Does your head hurt?" But Midori only hid her face deeper and began to cry.

Shōta was frightened by those tears. He knelt there and tried again and again to understand, saying that he had done nothing to anger her and that he only wanted to help. At last Midori raised her head a little and said, "I am not angry." But when he asked what then had made her weep, she could not answer him. She herself did not fully know. She only felt ashamed of her hair, ashamed of growing older, ashamed of the way people looked at her, and ashamed of being seen by Shōta at such a moment. In her heart she wanted to go back to the old days of dolls, little games, and simple talk, when no one expected anything of her and nothing in her body or mind had begun to change.

The more Shōta tried to stay near her, the more painful it became. She thought that if no one looked at her and no one spoke to her, perhaps the shame would pass, but his loving concern only made it sharper. At last she burst out, "Please go home, Shōta. Please go. If you stay here, I feel as if I shall die. When people speak to me, my head hurts, and when I answer, my eyes turn dark. I do not want anyone to come near me today. Please go." These were not the words of the Midori he knew, and Shōta stared at her in confusion and hurt.

"You are very strange," he said at last, and tears rose in his own eyes. But Midori could only repeat, "Please go home. Please go now." Her voice, which had once called him so easily to play, now pushed him away as if he were a stranger. Then Shōta stood up, gave a stiff little greeting to no one in particular, and ran out through the garden without even speaking to her mother. Midori remained where she was, her face hidden in the quilt, while outside the great market day still roared

and glittered. But for the two of them, something much more important than a day's pleasure had quietly come to an end.

Part 12

After that day, Midori changed so suddenly that people said she seemed to have become another person. If she had some reason to go to her older sister's rooms, she still went there, but she no longer wandered out to play in the town as before. When her friends came to call for her, she answered, "Soon, soon," and made one empty promise after another until they finally went away without her. Even with Shōta, who had once been closer to her than any of the others, she was no longer easy and open. At the paper shop no one now saw again the lively little dances, the quick laughter, and the fearless play that had once made the whole place brighter.

People in the neighborhood were puzzled. Some thought she must be ill, because her face often became red and she looked down whenever anyone spoke too directly to her. Others said it was only a passing mood and that the wild, sharp-tempered Midori would soon return. Her mother alone smiled in a quiet, knowing way and said words that the others did not fully understand. To some women Midori now seemed more modest and more womanly, and they praised her gentle behavior. Others complained that the most amusing girl in Omotemachi had been spoiled for no good reason and that the whole street had grown dull because of it.

And the street truly did grow dull. Omotemachi, which had once seemed full of brightness whenever Midori stepped out in her colored robe and high wooden clogs, now looked strangely empty. Shōta's pleasant singing voice was seldom heard. At night people sometimes saw only the round light of his bow-shaped lantern moving along the embankment while he went out to collect payments, and the sight of that small figure in the dark made the air feel colder than before. Often Sangorō went beside him, still joking in the same foolish tone as always, but even Sangorō's playful voice could not bring back the older warmth.

Shōta himself did not clearly understand what had been lost. He only knew that

the road to Daikokuya, once so easy to take, now felt difficult. If he met Midori by chance, she blushed, lowered her eyes, and could hardly answer him. When he sent word to ask whether she would come to the paper shop, the answer was always uncertain and soft, never a simple yes. He was hurt by this, but because he was kind by nature, he did not grow angry. Instead he withdrew into himself a little, sang less, smiled less, and carried his young sorrow as quietly as he could.

Midori, for her part, could not have explained her own heart even if someone had pressed her. The childish boldness that had once carried her forward in every game was still somewhere inside her, yet another feeling now lay over it like a cover. Everything seemed embarrassing to her. To walk in the street, to laugh loudly, to call after a friend, to be looked at, to be spoken to, even to answer kindly, all these things now made her feel as if heat rose suddenly from her neck to her cheeks. She kept the old pride of Daikokuya's Midori, but it no longer came out as open laughter and scorn. It had turned inward and made her silent.

During this time she heard nothing of Shinnyo's future. Or rather, such talk may have passed near her ears, but she did not take it into her heart. Rumor had begun to spread that he would soon leave home and enter a place of study for his sect, changing the color of his sleeves and stepping farther onto the path expected of him. Yet Midori, wrapped in her own shame, pride, and confusion, did not truly hear it. The stubborn feeling she had long kept against him remained sealed inside her just as it had been. She neither forgave him nor sought him, and her mind was too troubled to ask where his road might lead.

Then came a frosty morning. The cold had sharpened the air, and the whole town seemed quieter than usual, as if even the quarter beyond the gate had drawn a thin white breath and fallen still for a moment. Someone found that a flower had been left outside the lattice gate of Daikokuya. It was not a real flower, but a narcissus made by hand from paper, delicate and pale, clean in shape and touched with an art that gave it life beyond common playthings. No one knew who had placed it there, and when people spoke of it, they could only guess.

Midori saw the paper narcissus and felt at once, without knowing why, a deep and gentle pull in her heart. There was nothing written with it, and no name could

be found in it, yet it seemed to carry a feeling more clearly than many spoken words. She took it up with great care, as if afraid the cold morning air itself might break it. Then she placed it in the little single-flower vase on the staggered shelf inside the room and stood looking at it for a long time. Its lonely, clean beauty pleased her more than any bright toy or rich ornament could have done.

As she looked at it, many things that had no clear shape moved through her mind. She thought of rain on a gate, of a dropped strip of bright cloth, of quiet eyes that never spoke easily, of pride meeting pride and missing its chance. Nothing became a full thought, and she did not speak any of it aloud. Still, the paper narcissus seemed to gather all those scattered feelings into one silent form. It stood there modestly, neither joyful nor sad, and because of that it seemed nearer to her heart than the loud bright things of the quarter ever had.

Only afterward, by mere chance, did she hear what day it was. People said that the next morning, or perhaps that very day, Shinnyo of Ryūgeji was to leave for the place of Buddhist study where his life would turn more fully toward religion. The words reached her as common neighborhood talk, not as a message sent to her. Yet when she heard them, the paper narcissus before her seemed to change at once, though no hand had touched it. She still did not know for certain who had left it, and no proof would ever come. But a quiet feeling of nearness, mixed with loss and lateness, entered her heart and stayed there.

No confession was made. No promise was given. No one called the others back into the old world of games by the paper shop, festival plans, and foolish quarrels. Childhood simply fell away from them, and each was drawn silently toward a different shore. Midori remained looking at the narcissus in its vase, admiring its lonely purity, while outside the town went on with its ordinary noise, trade, gossip, and fading season. In that stillness, without grand words or visible tears, the days of their growing together came to an end.