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About This Edition

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

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

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

Source Text

Original work: Kōya Hijiri (高野聖)
Author: Izumi Kyōka (泉鏡花)

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Izumi Kyōka, *The Holy Man of Mount Kōya [Kōya Hijiri]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

The monk who later told me this strange story was a man I met by chance on a train. I first noticed him after we left Kakegawa. He sat very still in the corner of the car, with his head bent down, and he looked so quiet that no one paid much attention to him. He seemed like a man who wished to be forgotten. Even when I looked at him, I felt that he was not really in the same noisy world as the rest of us.

By the time we reached Owari, all the other passengers had gone. Then only the monk and I were left in the car together. The train had left Shinbashi the night before, and it was going on toward Tsuruga. At noon, when we stopped at Nagoya, I bought a box of sushi for my meal. The monk also bought one, and when he opened it, he looked inside with great hope for only a moment.

Then he cried out, “Ah, nothing but carrot and dried gourd!” His voice was so sudden and so honest that I looked up at once. He saw my face, and he could not help laughing. I laughed too, and that was how we first became friendly. It was a small thing, but travel is like that. A stranger may become a companion because of one foolish moment over a poor meal.

After that we began to talk. He told me that he belonged to Koyasan and that he was going to Echizen to visit someone at Eiheiji, though he was of a different sect. He would stay one night in Tsuruga on the way. I told him that I was going back to Wakasa and that I also had to spend the night there. So we agreed to go into town together after we arrived. It made me glad, because I do not enjoy entering a strange town alone in the evening.

The monk said little, but I studied him while we rode on. He looked about forty-five or forty-six years old, and his face was soft and calm. There was nothing wild or proud about him. He wore a warm coat with sleeves, a white wool scarf, a Turkish cap, wool gloves, white tabi, and light wooden clogs. At first sight he did

not look like the kind of monk who lives apart from the world. He looked more like a quiet man of taste who had seen many roads and many seasons.

He asked me, “Where were you planning to stay?” I gave a long sigh before I answered. I told him that a night alone at an inn often makes me miserable. The maid grows sleepy while carrying the tray, the clerk speaks empty polite words, and when supper is over they quickly change the bright light for a dim lamp and tell you to go to bed. But I cannot sleep early, especially in winter when the night is long. I said, “If it causes you no trouble, I would be glad to stay where you stay.”

He nodded at once and said that whenever he traveled in that part of the country, he rested at a place called Katoriya. It had once been a regular inn, but it no longer kept a public sign. An old man and his wife still took in old friends and cared for them in a simple, quiet way. Then he stopped, put his meal box down, and laughed again. “But the feast,” he said, “may still be nothing but carrot and dried gourd.”

The weather changed as we went north. In Gifu the sky had still been blue, but later the clouds grew thick. At Maibara and Nagahama the air turned cold, and then rain came. Before long, white flakes began to mix with the rain outside the window. “It is snowing,” I said. “Yes,” he answered. That was all. Even when I pointed out famous places along the way, he only nodded and did not raise his eyes to the sky.

We reached Tsuruga at last, and there the worst trouble began. Men from inns rushed at the passengers as soon as we stepped down from the train. They crowded the station exit with lanterns and umbrellas and loud voices. Some tried to grab baggage before a traveler could even think. I hate that kind of welcome more than I can say. But the monk walked slowly through them with his head bent, calm and steady, and not one of them dared pull at his sleeve. I stayed close behind him and escaped with relief.

Snow fell lightly but without stopping. The streets of Tsuruga were already quiet, and many houses had shut their doors for the night. The town looked pale and still under the white dust of snow. We walked some distance through that cold silence until we reached a house standing under a deep roof. This was Katoriya. It did not look rich, but it looked strong and old, like a house that knew how to

stand against winter.

Inside, there were no fancy decorations, yet everything had weight and dignity. The pillars were thick, the floor mats were firm, and the great hearth in the room gave out a deep, steady warmth. In the kitchen I saw huge iron pots hanging over the fire, large enough, it seemed, to cook for a crowd. The old master of the house was a large, quiet man who kept his hands tucked into his sleeves even while he sat before the brazier. His wife, unlike him, was cheerful and quick with kind words. When the monk spoke of carrot and dried gourd, she smiled and brought us a simple but very welcome supper of small fish, dried flatfish, and miso soup with shredded kelp.

Because they clearly knew the monk well, I also felt at ease. It is a great comfort to be kindly received in a strange place on a snowy night. After supper they made beds for us upstairs. The room had a low ceiling and huge beams of dark wood. It felt so solid that even an avalanche from the mountain behind the house, I thought, would not break it. A kotatsu had been prepared, and I gladly slipped into its warmth.

Another bed had been laid there beside mine, but the monk did not take it. Instead, he lay down on a colder bed nearby. He did not untie his sash, and he did not remove his clothes. He curled himself forward and lay face down, as if he had long ago taught his body never to rest in an easy way. He placed the quilt over his shoulders and settled himself with his face toward the pillow, not upward like other men. Even then I thought there was something unusual about him.

Soon the room grew still. The snow whispered outside, and the old house gave a soft sound now and then as the wind touched it. It looked as if the monk would fall asleep at once, but I remembered what I had told him on the train. I could not sleep early, and I dreaded the long dark hours of wakefulness. So I spoke to him like a child asking a favor. I said, “Please stay awake a little longer with me, and tell me something from your travels.”

He gave a small nod. “From middle age onward,” he said, “I have had the habit of never lying on my back. Even when I sleep, I sleep like this. But my eyes are still wide awake. You and I are alike tonight. And what a monk says is not always

teaching, warning, or a sermon." Then he added, "You are young. Listen." Much later I learned that he was a famous preacher of his sect, the great priest Shucho of Rokuminji. But that night he was simply my companion in a snowbound inn, and then, in that low room under the old beams, he began his story.

Part 2

"I thought there was no need to open that map again," the monk said. "But the road was so cruel, and the heat was so strong, that I could not trust my memory alone." He stayed lying face down as he spoke, his fists under his forehead, as if he were looking once more at that terrible road. "I pulled the folded map out from inside my robe. I was on a narrow mountain path between Hida and Shinshu, and there was not even one tree under which I could stop and rest. There were only mountains to the right and left, and more mountains piled behind them, so that even the shape of a cloud could not be seen."

He went on slowly, and I could almost feel that white summer light pressing down on him. It was about noon, he said, and the sun was so bright that it seemed to have lost all color. He had a thin cypress travel hat on his head, but even under it he felt the fierce heat. There was no shade, no sound of human life, and no movement except his own. "Between the road and the sky," he said, "there was only myself."

That morning he had left his last lodging very early. He wished to cross as much road as possible before the worst heat began, and so he hurried on with more strength than wisdom. By the time he came to a little tea house at the foot of the real mountain road, his throat was dry and his whole body wanted water. He asked for tea at once, but the woman there said the water was not yet hot. So he turned to a small stream that ran before the bench outside and bent to fill a dipper.

Then he stopped himself. In the villages below, a bad sickness had been going around, and he had already seen places covered with lime where people feared disease. So he asked the woman, in a careful voice, whether the water came from a well. "No," she said, "it is river water." That answer troubled him. He asked

whether the stream might be coming from the direction of the sick village, and she said, with no great concern, that it did not.

There was another traveler resting there, a young medicine seller from Toyama. The monk described him with open dislike, and he did not try to hide it from me. The man wore the usual things of his trade and at first looked neat, steady, and practical, like someone who knew the road well and could manage himself anywhere. But the monk said such men often changed at night. “When they reach an inn,” he said, “they spread their belts, sip their drink little by little, and begin saying dirty things to the women of the house.”

This one did even worse. He looked at the monk’s shaved head and mocked him, asking in a nasty joking voice whether a monk still wanted life and pleasure after giving up women. Then he laughed with the tea-house woman as if they were old friends sharing a joke at the monk’s expense. The monk told me plainly that he was still young then, and the shame rushed straight into his face. He could neither drink the water nor answer back. He only stood there, burning with anger, while the man struck the woman on the back and boasted that if the monk got sick he would gladly sell him medicine.

At last the monk left the place as fast as he could. He said that even now, many years later, he could still remember the feel of that moment. It was not only the insult that hurt him. It was the vulgar laughter, the dirtiness of the fellow’s mind, and the way the peaceful mountain morning had been spoiled. “I ran from him,” he said, “but I carried his voice with me.” So, instead of finding relief on the road, he began his climb with anger in his heart.

The path first went over open land near the fields. After about half a town’s length, the road suddenly rose in a high curve, like a bow laid against the hillside. As he began to climb it, he heard quick steps behind him. The medicine seller had caught up with him. They did not greet one another. The man passed him with a sideways look, went ahead in a rude and proud way, and soon stood at the far end of the rise with his umbrella in hand like a guard watching two worlds.

When the monk reached the top, he saw the reason the man had stopped. The broad road ahead, the one he had believed to be the main road, had been cut by

flood water. A huge cypress stood there, its roots torn bare like giant eels twisting in the air. Water streamed from those roots and ran over the road. What had once been an easy way forward had become a shallow, rough current filled with loose stones. Far ahead it looked almost like a river crossing the fields.

There were stepping stones, and a person might cross with care, but it was no road for horses or carts now. The monk stood looking at it, and while he was still judging the matter, the medicine seller suddenly turned aside and began climbing a steeper path to the right. That upper path was narrow and grass-grown, and it passed behind rocks and trees. From above, the man called down, “Hey, the road to Matsumoto is this way.” Then, with a cruel laugh, he added, “Stand there too long and even in daylight the mountain spirits may carry you off.”

Soon he vanished into the grass above the rocks. The monk was still wondering what to do when a peasant came across the flooded road, stepping from stone to stone with the easy balance of a man born there. He carried a shoulder pole and wore a mat at his waist. The monk asked him politely whether the broad road ahead was still the proper way. The peasant answered that it was indeed the main road. He explained that the recent rains had torn the ground open and left water there, but the flooded place was short and beyond it the road continued as before toward the mountain.

Then the monk asked about the other path, the old one that the medicine seller had taken. The peasant’s answer was clear and serious. He said that long ago people had used that old road to go toward Shinshu, and that in distance it was shorter, but no one should take it now. The way was broken, wild, and dangerous. He even told of pilgrims who had mistaken it for the right road the year before and had to be brought back by policemen and villagers after a hard search.

The peasant went on speaking with country kindness. He said that once there had been a village there, and even a doctor’s large house, but years before a terrible flood had destroyed the place and left only ruined ground. He told the monk to keep to the safe road, to say prayers as he walked, and not to let weariness tempt him into foolishness. Then he went on his way and was soon lost from sight. The monk stood alone again between the two roads. The right choice was plain,

yet his mind would not rest.

He could not forget the medicine seller. If the peasant had spoken true, then the man had gone into real danger. The monk said that if the fellow had simply been a stranger, he might have let him go. But because the man had mocked him, dirtied him with laughter, and then gone on ahead, to leave him there now felt almost like secret revenge. “That would not do for one in my robe,” he said. So he looked once toward the safe road, once toward the steep old path, and at last said to himself, “Very well.” Then he turned and began to climb after the man.

Part 3

“So I took the old road,” the monk said. “I went behind the great cypress, climbed past the rocks, and entered a narrow path buried in deep grass.” He still spoke without raising his head from the pillow, but his voice had become heavier, as if the mountain air of that day had filled the room. “I kept going on and on. Soon the hill I had first climbed was behind me, and another mountain came close before my face.”

For a while the land opened out in a strange way. The path there was wider than the main road below, smooth and broad enough, he said, for a line of men with spears to pass in old times. It almost seemed as if two great roads once ran side by side, one to the west and one to the east, with a mountain standing between them. But the emptiness only made the place more fearful. In such a wide place, with no house, no voice, and no moving human figure, a man feels smaller than on a narrow road.

He searched the whole open ground with his eyes, hoping to see the medicine seller somewhere ahead. Yet there was nothing. Not even a figure as small as a grain of dust moved on the road. Only little insects crossed the white heat of the sky, and even they seemed far away. He said that if he had seen the man’s umbrella even once, his heart would have grown easier.

Still, he did not turn back. He had chosen the road, and so he went forward with all the stubborn strength he had. The mountains slowly drew in again from both

sides, and the wide road became a close and rising path. He knew then that he was truly nearing the famous pass of Amou. The heat was still fierce, and before the worst climb he stopped to pull tight the cords of his straw sandals.

He told me that later in life he had heard talk of a wind hole somewhere near that upper slope, a place where cold air blew out from deep inside the mountain. But on that day he neither saw nor felt anything wonderful. He cared nothing for scenery, and nothing for local marvels. He only bent his head and climbed, putting one foot before the other with all the force left in his body.

"And now," he said, "comes the true heart of the matter." The road itself was bad enough, rough and lonely and little used, but there was something worse than stones or heat. It was snakes. They lay across the path with their heads lost in one bank of grass and their tails in the other, as if the mountain had thrown live ropes down to stop him. When he first saw one like that, he froze where he stood.

He had his hat low over his eyes and his bamboo staff in hand, but in that instant his whole body failed him. He bent his knees and almost sat down on the path. "I have always hated them," he said. "No, hate is too weak a word. I fear them." The snake slid away slowly, dragging its long body through the grass, and only after it vanished could he rise again.

A little farther on he met another. Then another. One of them lay so thick across the path that he could not even see where its head or tail ended. It was too large to wait for, and he believed that if he stood there watching, five full minutes might pass before the tail had left the way. So, trembling and sick with disgust, he forced himself to step over it.

The moment he did so, he felt a dreadful tightening in his lower body, as if every hair on him had turned to scales. He shut his eyes and thought that his own face must have changed color and become like that of the snake. Cold sweat came over him as if he had been squeezed under water. Even after he had crossed, his legs shook so badly that he could hardly keep moving. Yet to stand still was worse, so he hurried on in terror.

Then he saw another thing still more horrible. On the road before him lay what seemed to be only half a snake, a cut body from the middle down to the tail. The

cut end was bluish, and a yellow wetness seemed to come from it. It moved. At that sight he lost all control of himself and ran backward in panic. But when he stopped, the great snake he had just stepped over was somewhere behind him, and he would rather die than cross that place again.

He said the sun beat down on him without mercy while he stood there between one horror and another. Tears came into his eyes. He even cried out that if the peasant, by some mistake, had only warned him that the old road was full of snakes, he would never have entered it, not even if hell itself had lain on the other side. Yet there was no one there to hear him, and no help was near. So at last he hardened his heart and chose to go forward.

First he ran far around the dead half-snake through the grass. Even then he felt as if the missing part might spring up and wind itself around his legs. His courage broke again, and because he was already weak, he stumbled on a stone and fell. In that fall he injured his knee, though he did not understand it at once. When he rose, the joint shook under him, and walking became painful. But he told himself that if he lay down there, the heat alone would kill him.

So he dragged himself upward, lifting his own body as if it belonged to another man. The smell of hot grass grew thick and ugly. Strange round things like the eggs of great birds seemed to lie among the roots and leaves. The road twisted like a giant snake itself, turning around rocks, climbing through the mountain's breast, and crossing thick roots that caught at his sandals. After another long stretch, he grew so confused and doubtful that he pulled out his army map again.

But the map was useless. It showed only a red line across a mound of land. It said nothing of burning slopes, nothing of snakes, nothing of crawling things, nothing of the heavy smell of grass. So he folded it and put it away. Then he pressed the holy name deep into his chest, straightened himself, and prepared to move on with prayer instead of knowledge. Yet before he had even taken his breath, another snake crossed the road before him.

At that point, he said, he gave up all pride. He thought, "This must be the spirit of the mountain." He threw down his staff, bent both knees, and set both hands on the hot ground. Then he begged the creature to let him pass. He asked pardon for

disturbing its noon rest and said that, as it could see, he had even cast away his stick. In that moment he was no brave traveler and no holy man, only a frightened human being asking leave to live.

When he lifted his head again, there came a great rushing sound. The grass moved first in one place, then in another, then in a widening line, as if some enormous body were passing through it. For an instant he believed it was a giant serpent, three feet, four feet, five feet long and more, rushing toward the ravine below. The very ridges seemed to shake together. Then he understood. It was a strong mountain wind.

Yet to him it felt like an answer. From far within the hills there rose a deep echoing sound, as if the wind had found a hole in the mountain and was blowing out from some hidden mouth of the earth. The snakes were gone. The heat eased. He felt coolness enter him so sharply that it almost hurt, and with that coolness his courage also returned. He went on faster than before, grateful even for that rough mercy.

But soon he understood why the air had changed. Ahead of him stood a vast forest. People said, he told me, that at Amou Pass rain falls even under a blue sky, and that from the age of the gods no woodcutter had truly touched the deepest trees there. Until then there had been too little shade. Now there was too much. He stepped toward it with cold feet, as if crabs might now take the place of snakes beneath the dark leaves.

The light dropped at once. He could make out cedar, pine, and hackberry only here and there, and in far places thin beams of sun entered and painted the earth black, blue, or red in folded strips. Wet threads of water ran down from high branches and caught at the tips of his sandals. Old leaves fell from trees he could not name. Some struck his cypress hat with a dry sound, and others fell behind him, as if they had been resting on the branches for years and had only then found the earth.

Part 4

He said there was no end to the road, and because there was no end, he forced his heart to become hard. He would not go back. The dead half of the snake still lay somewhere behind him, and he had no wish to see it again. So he ran wide through the grass to avoid it, but his fear made his legs stiff, and he struck a stone and fell. It was then, he believed, that he hurt his knee. After that, each step became less steady, and yet he told himself that if he fell and stayed where he was, the heat alone would cook him alive on the mountain.

So he lifted himself and went on, almost as if one hand were pulling his own neck from above. The smell of hot grass was thick and foul around him. Strange round things lay near his feet like the eggs of giant birds, half hidden in the wild growth. The road bent and bent again, twisting through the mountain like a huge snake, turning around stone corners, crossing thick roots, and pressing into the deep body of the hill. Once more he took out his map, but the map was useless. It showed a clean red line where in truth there were heat, stench, rocks, fear, and crawling life.

He folded it up with anger and pushed it back into his robe. Then he stood still, pressed the holy name into his chest, and tried to gather his mind. But before he had even finished that effort, another snake crossed the road before him. He said that at last he understood that will alone would not save him there. He threw away his staff, bent both knees, and placed both hands on the burning earth. “Please let me pass,” he begged. “I will go softly. I have even thrown away my stick. I do not wish to trouble your sleep.”

When he raised his head, a great rushing sound struck the mountain. The grass moved in a wide line. For one wild instant he thought some giant serpent was fleeing down into the ravine, so broad was the stirring and so sudden the sound. Then all at once the ridges around him trembled together, and cool air hit his face. It was only a mountain wind, but to him it felt like a sign that his prayer had been heard. From that same moment the snakes were gone, the worst of the heat broke, and he found enough courage to move again.

Soon he understood the reason for the cold air. A vast forest stood before him, dark and deep, as if the mountain had opened its mouth. He stepped under the first

branches and at once the light changed. Behind him the world had been all white heat and hard edges. Here the earth was black, damp, and soft, and far shafts of light entered only in thin broken strips, making patches of blue, red, and green where they fell. Water ran along high branches and dropped in clear threads that caught at the front of his sandals, while old leaves, perhaps loosened after years, came down one by one onto his hat and shoulders.

There was no need for him to explain how lonely he felt there. Yet he said that, coward though it may sound, the darkness of the forest gave him a little peace. In such a place, where the world seems already far from ordinary life, a man can at least accept his fear. The coolness helped his body, and because the pain in his knee had dulled for a while, he made faster progress than before. He believed that perhaps seven tenths of the forest already lay behind him. It was then, just when hope was beginning to return, that something heavy dropped from a branch onto the top of his hat.

It sat there with the weight of lead. He thought at first it might be some fruit or hard seed, and he shook his head two or three times to throw it off. But it clung fast. Without thinking, he reached up with one hand and seized it. The thing felt smooth, cold, and alive. He tried to fling it away, but it slid down and stuck to the tip of his finger, and when it came free, bright blood at once ran down from the place where it had held him.

Startled, he lifted his hand to his face, and there, hanging from his bent elbow, he saw another creature of the same kind. It was broad and long, dark and wet, with no face that seemed fit for any animal, and yet horribly alive. As he stared, the lower part drew in, while the middle swelled fatter and fatter with his blood. Its black skin showed brown stripes, and the whole thing looked like some evil cucumber from a nightmare. “A leech,” he said. “That was when I knew.” He tore it off at last, but it had bitten deeply, and even then it did not wish to let go.

He threw it down hard, but the soil of that forest was too soft to crush it. At once a crawling feeling came to the back of his neck. He passed his hand over the place and felt another leech slide under his palm. Then one was under his robe near his chest. Another was hidden in the fold of his sash. Another lay along his

shoulder like a black cord. He sprang up in horror and ran out from beneath that branch, tearing away the few he could remember while he ran, but when he turned to look behind him, he understood something even worse.

It was not one branch. It was all the branches. Right, left, and overhead, everywhere he looked, there hung those black, thin, striped bodies. And as he cried out, they began to fall. He said he could see them clearly then, dropping from above like a rain of dark living threads. They struck his shoulders, his sleeves, his chest, and even the tops of his sandaled feet. Some landed one over another. Some attached themselves beside those already feeding. He looked down and could hardly see his own toes. It seemed to him that every one of them beat like a pulse as it drank.

Then his mind began to fail in that dreadful place. He thought that these mountain leeches had waited there since the age of the gods, gathering in silence for human blood. He thought that after drinking enough from enough travelers, they would one day spit all that blood back upon the ground, and the whole mountain would melt into a great swamp of blood and mud. He thought the dark trees themselves would break apart and turn into leeches, until no forest remained at all. These were the thoughts of a man near death, he said, and at last he knew them for what they were. “I understood,” he told me, “that I had reached the edge of my own life.”

After that, something in him changed. If he must die, he thought, then he would at least die moving forward. So he no longer cared whether the things were ugly or not. He tore them away with both hands, pulled them from his sleeves, struck at his neck and chest, and stumbled on in a kind of mad dance, arms flying and feet stamping. At first he felt so swollen from their bites that he seemed larger than before. Later he felt the opposite, as though all his flesh had shrunk away from his bones. Pain, itching, and a strange sick tickling mixed together until he could no longer separate one from another.

He went on in that half-mad way until his eyes dimmed and the world before him began to blur. Then, like a man coming through a tunnel and seeing one poor weak moon far away, he suddenly caught sight of open sky. He had reached the

far side of the leech forest. The moment he came out, he threw himself down sideways upon the road and rubbed his body against the ground as if stones and sand were medicine. He turned over leeches by the dozen, tore them off, flung them aside, and then leaped away from the place, shuddering from head to foot. All around him, the evening insects were crying in the hills, and the day had already begun to lean toward night.

The road sloped down, and he fled along it with what strength remained, thinking that even a wolf would be kinder than those worms, for a wolf at least would kill quickly. He was still burning and stinging all over, but now that he had escaped the forest, joy began to mix with the pain. He said that if the torment had been only a little less, he might have sung a wild prayer aloud and danced there on the mountain road. At last he heard running water and found a rough earthen bridge over a stream. He crossed it without caring whether it held or broke, and on the far side, just as the next slope rose before him, there came through the evening air the clear cry of a horse. Then, lifting his head, he saw ahead of him a single mountain house.

Part 5

"When I heard the stream below," the monk said, "I had only one thought left. I wanted to throw all those swollen leeches into the cold water and wash my body clean." He said the bridge was only a rough earthen thing, perhaps one ken long, thrown across the current in a careless way. It shook a little when he stepped on it, but he did not care. If it had broken under him and sent him down into the stream, he almost felt that even that would have been a kind of mercy.

On the far side the road rose again, and he was sure that his strength would fail on that next climb. But then, from somewhere ahead, there came the sharp cry of a horse. The sound echoed back from the hills. Since he had parted from the peasant that morning, he had seen no true sign of human life, and now, because of that one cry, his heart rose as if someone had lit a lamp in a dark room. If there was a horse, then there must be people. If there were people, then he might yet

live through the night.

He forced himself up the slope and soon reached a single house standing alone in the mountains. It was summer, and the shutters were open. There was no gate, no fence, and no clear front entrance, only a broken wooden edge and a yard that seemed to have no proper shape. He said he had lost all shame by then. He stumbled forward and called out, “Please help me. Please.” He was ready to catch at the house itself if it would hold him up.

The first person he saw did not answer. A young man, or rather a large foolish-looking boy, stood there in a loose way that was more frightening than anger. His neck bent to one side, his face hung open, and his eyes, dull yet fixed, stared at the monk as if moving them cost him effort. He wore a short child-like coat tied in front, though his body was that of a grown man, thick and swollen around the belly. One hand hung strangely in the air, and with the other he played without shame with his own body as if he were alone in the world.

The monk told me that he had never seen such a figure. The fellow looked twenty-two or twenty-three, yet his mouth, nose, and forehead seemed unfinished, like the face of a creature not yet fully made human. His hair, badly cut and grown out, rose in front like a cock’s comb and fell over his ears behind. “Mute, fool, or something half-turned from another shape,” the monk said. Even in his own misery he drew back in surprise. Still, he called again, more politely, “Please, someone, is anyone here?”

The youth did not answer. He only let his heavy head fall the other way, as if changing the side on which he lay in sleep. The monk feared that if he came too close, the creature might seize him suddenly without warning. So he stepped back once, then raised his voice. At that very moment he heard again, from what must have been the back of the house, the cry of the horse. And then, from inside, a woman’s voice answered, “Who is there?”

He said that even before she appeared, that voice saved him. It was clear, soft, and young. Then she herself came out, and when he saw her, he could only bow his head and say, “Yes.” She was small and beautifully made, with a fresh and gentle face, and nothing in her voice or manner matched the wild loneliness of

that house. She knelt lightly and looked up at him in the evening dimness, studying his form as if trying to see through his exhaustion. Then she asked, “What do you need?”

The monk answered at once, because he felt that if he delayed, he might never find courage again. He said he was crossing the mountains toward Shinshu and wanted to know how far it was to the next inn. She told him, “A little more than eight ri.” When he asked whether there was any other house that might let him stay, she said simply, “There is none.” He then bowed low and told her the truth. “I cannot walk another step. Any corner will do for me. A store room, a shed, even the edge of a stable. I beg you.”

She looked at him in silence for a short time with those cool clear eyes. Then she turned aside, took a cloth bag, and poured rice from it into the tub beside her knee, letting it fall with a dry soft sound. She looked down at what she had, thought a little, and then said, “Very well. You may stay. I have just enough rice to cook for you, and in summer a mountain house is not too hard at night. Come in.” With that, he said, he nearly dropped to the floor from relief before he had even crossed the threshold.

But when she came near to lead him in, she stopped and spoke in a more careful tone. “There is one thing,” she said. “I must ask it clearly.” He grew afraid again at once and answered, “Yes, yes.” She said, “I have a bad habit. I love to hear news of the city. Even if you keep your lips shut, I may still ask and ask. But you must not tell me. However much I beg, however much I press, you must refuse. Promise me that.” The monk found this request strange beyond words, but as it cost him nothing, he said only, “I will obey.”

Then her manner softened at once. She told him to come in and rest and asked whether she should wash his feet for him. He refused, ashamed, and asked only for a rag, saying that he had suffered something dreadful on the road and wished to wipe his back. She listened and said that no hot water could be offered there, but below the house, under the back cliff, a beautiful stream ran. “It is better than hot water on a night like this,” she said. “Come. I will show you.” At the sound of water, he said, he was ready to follow her anywhere.

She tucked the rice tub under her arm and stepped out through the veranda, then bent and pulled out an old pair of wooden clogs from beneath the floor. She struck them together to shake off the dust and set them before him. “Wear these,” she said. “Leave your sandals here.” When he thanked her, she answered with easy kindness, “Once I have taken you in, we have a bond from another life. Do not be shy.” The monk told me that from the mouth of a woman in such a place, the words sounded even stranger than the request she had made before.

She stood ready with the tub in one arm and a towel tucked into her narrow belt. Her hair was thick and dark, gathered up with a comb and hairpin, and the beauty of that simple figure was more dangerous, he said, than jewels or paint. He changed from his straw sandals into the clogs, and as he rose he glanced once more at the foolish youth. The fellow looked at him with loose restless eyes and muttered in a dull childish voice, “Sister, sister, this one, this one.” The woman answered him with two or three bright nods, and he sank again into his stupid game as if nothing mattered.

Just then an old man came out from behind the house, near a clump of hydrangeas. He wore straw sandals, carried himself like one long used to the mountain, and had a pipe in his mouth. The woman called him “uncle” and asked how matters had gone. The old man laughed and answered in a sly, ugly way that he would soon bring “that fool” properly under control and carry him in like a bridegroom. The monk understood little, but he felt the coarseness behind the words. Still, the woman only smiled, and when the old man told her not to let the young monk fall into the river, she turned to the monk and said, “Come. From here we must go down, and the path is very bad, so step carefully.”

Part 6

“She told me to follow her,” the monk said, “and she stood there with the rice tub in one arm and a towel tucked into her narrow belt.” Even now, lying face down in the dark room, he seemed to see her before him. Her hair was thick and dark, gathered up and fixed with a comb and pin. There was nothing rich in her

dress, yet the shape of her body and the ease of her movements were enough to trouble any man. He said that even before he went down to the water, he already felt that he was not walking in an ordinary place.

He changed quickly into the old wooden clogs and rose from the veranda. Then he glanced once more at the foolish youth. The fellow looked at him with dull, wandering eyes and muttered in his childish broken voice, “Sister, sister, this one, this one.” The woman turned and nodded brightly two or three times, as if speaking to a child. At once the youth bent again over his own body and returned to his foolish play, and the monk lowered his eyes in shame and pity.

As they were leaving, the old man came out again from behind the hydrangeas. He wore straw sandals, carried himself like one used to rough mountain paths, and still had his pipe in his mouth. The woman asked him how his errand had gone, and he answered in that rough, ugly tone of his that he would manage matters well and bring some fool there before long like a bridegroom brought to a wedding. The monk said he did not understand the whole meaning, but he disliked the sound of it. Still, the woman only smiled, and the old man laughed and told her not to fall into the river with the young monk.

Then she said, “Please stay here until I return. We have had two guests already, and perhaps another may come. Jiro alone would trouble any traveler.” The old man agreed, then moved close to the foolish youth and struck him hard across the back with his fist. The swollen body shook, the youth made a strange face, and then gave a weak foolish smile. The monk said that he turned away in disgust, but the woman acted as if nothing at all had happened. Then she said softly, “Come, from here we must go down. The path is very bad, so step carefully.”

They passed the horse shed first, and he could hear the horse kicking the boards in the fading light. Beyond that, the ground dropped sharply. Tall thin pine trees rose above them, straight and bare for a great height, and through their tops the moon looked white and distant. The woman went ahead so quickly that for a moment he lost sight of her. When he held to a trunk and looked down, he saw that she was standing only a short way below, looking up at him.

“Be careful,” she called. “The ground falls suddenly here. Were those wooden

clogs a foolish thing to give you? I can change them for sandals if you like." He answered that if they were no good, he would go barefoot, and that he did not wish to trouble her. Then he called her "young lady" without thinking, because he had heard the old man use such words. She laughed at that, raised her voice a little, and said, "Young lady? Why, I am old enough to be your aunt. But come quickly. Bare feet are dangerous here. The ground is wet, and thorns may go into your skin."

As she said this, she lifted one side of her robe and moved on down the path. In the dim light, her white leg flashed and vanished again, like frost melting under a step. They went lower and lower. Now and then great toads came heavily out of the grass, and when one crossed near them, she cried out, "What a hateful thing. Do you not see we have a guest?" Then she scolded the creature as if it were a naughty child and said that such beasts should be content with insects and not trouble human feet. The monk said that in such a place even this foolish talk seemed strangely sweet.

Soon she led him onto the trunk of a fallen tree. "Walk here," she said. "The earth is too soft and will break under you." The tree was so thick that even in clogs he could cross it without much fear. They walked on and on over that rough wooden bridge, and all the while the sound of water grew louder in his ears. By then the pine tree above was no longer in sight, and the moon, though lower in the sky, shone more clearly than before from the top of the mountain they had descended. It felt to him as though they had gone down out of one world and were entering another below it.

At last he saw the stream. Water had spread over a broad rock and made a still shining pool there before rushing on again into the dark. The stream itself was not wide, perhaps only a little more than a man's height across, and where they stood the sound was not so violent. Yet farther away the water struck the rocks with a terrible cry. On the other side rose another mountain, all stone from top to bottom, with great rocks and little rocks of every shape under the moonlight, some like shells, some like cut blocks, some like blades, and some like balls lying together.

The woman stepped lightly onto a flat stone and said, "The water is high today,

so we need not go in. Here is enough." Her bare feet were white on the wet stone, and she bent her toes against the surface to keep her balance. Then she spoke of the stream and said that its source was a waterfall far within the mountains. She asked whether he had heard the great sound while walking through the woods, and he answered that he had. She then told him that many travelers heard that sound and thought it was only wind, though it was the distant voice of the fall itself.

She went on to say that thirteen years before, a terrible flood had come when that waterfall raged, and that the mountain, the village below, the houses, and the people had all been swept away. There had once been twenty houses even above that place, she said, but after the flood only rocks remained. While she spoke, she finished washing the rice, and her dress had loosened at the neck so that the upper curve of her breast could almost be seen. She stood with her body bent back a little, looking upward toward the mountain with dreamy eyes, and at last she said, "Even now, when I look at it, I feel afraid." Then she bent again to wash her arms.

The monk, in his modesty, tried to wash himself without wetting his robe, but she would not allow it. "That will never do," she said. "Your sleeves will be soaked. Take everything off, all of it, and wash properly. I will pour the water for you." Before he could stop her, she reached from behind and pulled at his belt. He twisted with shame, but she was quick and bold, and in a moment she had stripped off his outer robe. He said that his teacher had been severe, that he was a man trained for scripture and prayer, and that he had almost never shown even his skin to another person. There before her he crouched like a snail turned out of its shell.

She hung his robe on a branch and said, "We shall keep this here. Now give me your back. Be still. You called me young lady, so let your aunt care for you." Then she laid her smooth round arm against his back, looked closely, and cried out in surprise. His whole back was marked dark from the leeches. When he said this was what had happened in the forest, she answered at once that he must have passed straight through the nest of the mountain leeches, and that horses and cattle could even be sucked to death there. Then she touched him more softly and said that rubbing with a cloth might tear his skin.

After that she washed him with her hands. She poured water over his shoulders, his sides, and his back, and then rubbed him gently. He told me that the water did not feel cold in any painful way. Perhaps, he said, his own blood was still hot from fear and fever, or perhaps warmth passed from her body into the stream. Whatever the reason, the water seemed to enter him with a sweetness he had never known, and the pain of the bites began to fade. The smell of the mountain, or the smell of the woman herself, rose around him, and he felt as though he were wrapped in warm flower petals and falling into sleep.

Then suddenly he slipped and dropped backward onto the rock, throwing his feet into the water. At once her arm came over his shoulder and pressed against his chest to hold him up. “Do I smell of sweat?” she asked quietly. “I am a woman who feels heat too strongly. Even when I sit still, I become like this.” He caught the hand on his chest in shock, sprang to his feet, and then saw what froze him. While he had sat there in that half-dream, she had also taken off her clothes. Her whole body stood bare before him in the moonlight, soft and shining like fine silk, and she spoke as calmly as if nothing in the world were strange.

She said, “I had to tend the horse before, and its wet hot breath touched me all over. I feel so unclean. This is why I come here two or three times every day in summer. Without this water, what could I do?” Then she wrung out the towel and handed it to him, telling him to wipe his feet. He realized that while he had lost himself, she had already dried most of his body. She too wiped herself, lifting one arm to hold back her black hair while she rubbed under it with the cloth. Her skin, he said, looked as if snow itself had been washed in holy water, and if such a woman’s sweat ran red, he would not have been surprised.

She passed a comb through her hair and laughed. “What if a woman behaves so wildly that she falls into the river? If I were washed downstream, what would the people in the village say when they saw me?” He answered without thought, “They would think a white peach flower was floating by.” At that, she looked full into his face, smiled with sudden joy, and for a moment seemed seven or eight years younger, like a shy girl. He turned his eyes away, but he still saw her reflected on the great dark wet rock across the stream, pale and clear under the

moon and the spray. Then something fluttered between them. Great bats were coming and going near a hole in the rock.

“No, that will not do,” she cried. “We have a guest here.” A moment later she gave a startled twist, and when he asked what was wrong, she only turned her back in embarrassment. Then a small gray creature, no bigger than a little dog, came leaping from the cliff side and clung to her naked back. She shouted angrily, struck at it, and it flew off to the branch where his robe hung. There it swung for an instant, then turned and ran upward through the tree. Only then did he understand. It was a monkey. The woman dressed again with an offended air, like a young mother angered by a child’s foolish play, and the monk stood there silent, feeling smaller than ever.

Part 7

“The woman looked almost annoyed,” the monk said. “She dressed herself as if this foolish attack had happened many times before.” She said, in the tone of a young mother tired of naughty children, that first the toad had troubled her, then the bat, and now the monkey. Hearing that, I did not dare ask another question. I had already seen too much, and I felt that one wrong word might make her turn cold toward me.

Yet my fear was useless. In a moment her face softened again, and with a small smile she said, “You must have laughed at me.” Then she added, “It cannot be helped.” She tied her sash, picked up the rice tub, slipped her sandals on, and said, “Now let us go back to the house.” I answered that I understood the path better now, but when we began to climb, I saw that the way up was far steeper than I had thought on the way down.

Soon we came again to the fallen tree that crossed the deep place. In the moonlight it looked worse than before. The bark and ridges on it were like scales, and the whole trunk curved upward through the grass in such a way that it looked like the body of some giant snake lying still with its head and tail hidden. The memory of the mountain path came back into my legs at once, and I froze. She

turned and said kindly, “When you cross, do not look down. The valley below is very deep, and your head will swim.”

I tried to obey, but the moment I stepped onto the trunk, it seemed soft and moving under me. I gave a cry and dropped astride it like a child. The woman laughed, though not in an unkind way, and said, “You truly are helpless. Those clogs are no good for this. Put on these instead.” I had already begun to feel a strange respect for her, and whether that respect was good or bad, I no longer tried to judge. I did as she said, and when she took my hand and led me, I crossed easily and reached the back of the house almost without knowing how.

Just then the old man called out, “You are back sooner than I thought, and the young monk returns in his own body.” The woman asked how matters had gone, and he answered with another of his rough jokes, saying he had not yet talked some man into coming as he wished. Then he went off toward the stable, laughing to himself. The foolish youth was still where we had left him, in almost the same loose posture as before, as if the sun itself could not melt him. I remember thinking that even jelly would change shape in heat, yet he did not.

Then the horse cried out again, and the sound of its hoofs came around the back of the house. The old man led out a strong gray horse and said he would take it to market near Lake Suwa and cross the same mountain road I myself must take the next day. The youth suddenly came to the veranda and asked, “Where is that horse going?” The old man answered him, but the woman quickly turned to me and said, “You are not thinking of running away on that horse tonight, are you?” I told her no, of course not, and the old man added that the horse was no beast for carrying a man like me. He said I had escaped death already and should stay quietly inside her sleeves for one night.

But when he tried to lead the horse away, the animal would not move. It turned its head again and again toward the house and stared at us. The old man pulled the rope, struck it, shoved it, and even braced his whole body against its side, yet the creature planted its feet like roots in the ground. At last he called loudly to the woman. She stood up at once, hid herself for one moment behind a black post where the horse could not see her, and then came out slowly. Before that, she

asked me in a low voice, “Did you meet anyone on the road before you came here?” I answered, “Yes. I met a medicine seller from Toyama. He entered this mountain road before me.”

“Ah, I see,” she said, and laughed in a way that was almost too pleased. I asked whether the man had come to the house, but she said at once, “No, I know nothing of that.” Her manner changed so quickly after that answer that I dared not ask another question. Then, without shame or haste, she loosened the sash at her waist. The foolish youth reached out for it, and she handed it to him as if it were some treasure. Holding her robe closed beneath her breast, she stepped quietly toward the horse, and I could do nothing but stare.

She rose lightly on her toes, stroked the horse’s mane two or three times, and then stood before its face. In that instant she seemed taller than before. The soft, easy manner I had known in her was gone. She looked calm, fixed, and full of some deep power that I could not understand. Then she let one side of her robe fall from her shoulder, and under the moon she became no longer like a woman of an ordinary house, but like some spirit standing between the mountain and the stable yard. The horse trembled, sweated, and bent its head low until foam fell from its mouth. She threw the cloth over its eyes for one instant, slipped beneath its neck and side with the speed of a rabbit, and at that moment the old man pulled the rope. The horse moved at once and went away up the mountain road, while far off, after a little while, I heard a driver’s song in the night.

After that came supper. The meal was poor in one way, yet full of care. There were pickled ginger, boiled seaweed, and miso soup with salted mountain mushrooms. Hungry as I was, I thought it delicious, and the woman watched me eat with her cheek resting on her hand, looking pleased in a quiet way. Then the foolish youth dragged himself near us, looked at my tray, and pointed. She told him to wait because a guest was present, but he twisted his face and shook his head like a child ready to cry. She apologized to me, set another tray beside mine, and served him too.

Even in that small act she showed a strange grace. She moved like a good wife caring for her house, yet there was also something high and fine in her manner, as

if she had not been born in such a place. The youth looked over the dishes and then whined for something else. She told him he could eat such things any time and should be satisfied tonight, but he only grew more stubborn. I told her not to trouble herself on my account. At last, with a troubled look, she took something from a broken shelf and set it before him. I watched with dread, thinking it might be stewed snake, roasted monkey, or some dried mountain creature. But it was only a thick piece of old pickled radish, which he bit across with heavy dull pleasure. She turned red at my relief and hid her mouth with the end of her towel like a young girl.

When the meal was over, she asked whether I wished to sleep at once. I said that after washing in the stream, I no longer felt tired. Then she told me that the water there could cure almost anything. Even in winter, she said, when the whole mountain froze and the river and cliffs disappeared under snow, that one place still showed water and steam. A monkey with a gun wound, a heron with a broken leg, and many other creatures came there to bathe, she said, and their feet had made the path along the cliff. Then her voice changed, and she said, “If you are not too tired, please talk with me. I am ashamed to say it, but in this lonely place I almost forget how to speak.”

She went on gently, saying that no bell, no rooster, and no dog would disturb my sleep there. Of the foolish youth she said, “He was born in this mountain and knows nothing, but he has a good heart. He has only forgotten how to move and speak because no one has taught him for so long.” Then she leaned close to him and said, “Now bow to the holy gentleman.” He pushed himself up with both hands, bent forward all at once like a broken spring, and bowed. I bowed back before I could stop myself. She praised him warmly, supported him with great tenderness, and told me that no doctor and no holy water had ever cured his illness. Still, she said, he could sing one or two songs.

At first he refused and turned his head away. But after she begged and coaxed him, he began to sing while playing with his own body like a foolish child. The song was simple, about Mount Ontake being cold even in summer and sending lined clothes and tabi there. Yet the voice that came from him was clear, cool, and

beautiful beyond belief. It did not seem possible that such a sound could come from that swollen body and empty face. I lowered my head and listened to the end, and before I knew it, tears were falling from my eyes. She saw them at once and asked what was wrong. I said only, “Please ask me nothing, and I will ask you nothing.” The truth was plain. Seeing such a woman care so gently for such a broken creature had moved me more than I could bear. She understood at once. “You are truly kind,” she said. Then she looked at me with a deep strange light in her eyes, and I lowered my face again. The lamp grew dimmer just then, and I felt that the dark around us had become heavier. Then it began.

Part 8

The song ended, but its sound did not leave me. I sat with both hands on my knees and could not lift my face. It was not only that the voice had been beautiful. It was that such a clear, cool song had come from that swollen foolish body, as if some other soul were singing through him from far away. I felt shame, pity, fear, and something like joy all at once. Before I knew it, tears had begun to fall.

The woman saw them at once. “What is wrong?” she asked in a soft voice, leaning a little toward me. I could not explain myself, and even if I had tried, I do not think words would have done any good. So I only said, “There is nothing strange. I will not ask about you, and please do not ask about me.” In truth, I was thinking that a woman who should have worn rich hairpins and fine robes was living here in a lonely mountain house, giving her whole kindness to that poor broken creature before us. Thinking of that, I could bear no more.

She understood more than I had said. At once her face changed, and a deep color came into her eyes. “You are truly a gentle man,” she said. Then she looked at me steadily, and I lowered my head. She too bent her face a little, and for a short time no one spoke. The lamp between us had grown dim, and the moonlight that entered from outside seemed almost stronger than the light inside the house.

Then the foolish youth moved. He gave a huge yawn toward the lamp, as if he wished to swallow it whole, and began to sway with sleep. “I want to sleep, I want

to sleep," he muttered in his clumsy voice, handling his own body and rocking where he sat. The woman asked whether he was sleepy and should be put to bed, and then she looked around as if suddenly remembering that a guest was present. The moon was bright outside, almost like day, and its light came into the open house in trembling white pieces. Even the blue hydrangeas by the veranda looked fresh and clear under it.

She turned to me and asked, "Will you also rest now?" I answered that I was already too much in her debt and would do as she wished. She told me that they themselves would lie down in the inner room, while I should sleep in the wider front room where the air was better in summer. Then she rose quickly and went down to the earthen floor, so lightly and so full of life that her black hair slipped loose and fell in a curve over the back of her neck. She caught it with one hand, looked out into the night, and said almost to herself, "Dear me, I must have dropped my comb in all that confusion."

I knew at once what confusion she meant. It must have fallen when she passed beneath the horse. That thought brought the whole strange scene back before my eyes, and once again I felt that I had stepped into some world where the ordinary rules of men no longer held. Yet I was too weary to sort one feeling from another. The woman spread out a place for me, the foolish youth was led away, and before long the house grew still. In that stillness, however, there was no peace.

At that very moment, in the inn at Tsuruga where he was telling me all this, a sound came from the lower corridor. Someone walked there in long quiet steps. A shutter was opened, a dipper struck the water basin, and the innkeeper's voice said, "Ah, it has piled up. The snow has really piled up." Then, half to himself, he added, "So the young merchant from Wakasa must have found some other place to stay. He must be having a pleasant dream somewhere." I, who had been listening with all my breath held, could not bear the interruption and said at once, "Please, after that. Go on."

The monk gave a small sign and continued. "The night grew deeper," he said. "As you can guess, no man could sleep easily in such a lonely house in the heart of those mountains. Besides, there had been something from the beginning that

had kept my mind from resting." He told me that he lay still with his eyes open, though his body was close to breaking from the long road and all that had happened since noon. His thoughts grew dull with weariness, yet one desire stayed sharp in him. He wanted the eastern sky to grow pale. He wanted morning with all his soul.

At first he listened for a temple bell and took comfort in the hope of it. "Now," he thought, "it will ring. Or now." But no bell came. Time passed, and then he remembered where he was. This was no place of villages and temple roofs. It was only a deep mountain hollow with one house in it, cut off from all common life. The moment he understood that fully, his loneliness became much worse.

Then the breathing of the foolish youth in the inner room stopped being clear, and another sound took its place. Something was moving outside the house. At first he tried to calm himself. Perhaps it was only a monkey, he thought, or a toad in the yard. But the sound did not behave like one small beast. It came closer to the outer door, not from far away, but as if creatures had already been waiting nearby in the dark.

One moment it sounded like a sheep crying near his pillow. Then, under the hydrangeas to the right, there was a sudden beating of wings. Something like a flying squirrel, he thought, ran up to the roof with a sharp cry. After that came a weight so large that he felt it before he understood it, as if some living thing as big as a hill had drawn near enough to press on his chest. Then came the cry of a cow, and after that the quick light steps of something that seemed to run on two legs wearing straw sandals. Soon the whole house felt ringed round by presences. There were breaths, wing sounds, low cries, and even whispering, as if twenty or thirty strange creatures had gathered in the moonlight.

He told me that it was like seeing, through one thin wooden wall, the world of beasts and spirits mixed together. The leaves outside gave a shaking sound, and the house itself seemed to tremble with them. Then, from the inner room, the woman gave a long troubled breath as if from a dream. After that she cried, "There is a guest here tonight. There is a guest." She said it once, then after a moment said it again in a clearer, calmer voice, and turned over in her bed. At once the

movement outside swelled, as if the dark things had all stirred together around the house. The monk said that in that instant he began to recite a holy spell with all his heart, not stopping for breath, and at last a wind rose, swept the leaves southward in one rush, and then all became still. Even the inner room fell silent.

Part 9

“After that,” the monk said, “the house became quiet.” He told me that neither the woman nor the foolish youth made another sound, and even the strange life outside the walls seemed to have sunk back into the mountain. Yet silence did not give him peace. His body was worn out, but his mind would not lie down. He remained awake for a long time, staring into the dark and waiting for the first change in the sky.

At some point in the night, after the foolish youth had been put fully to sleep, the woman came again to the place by the hearth. She spoke in a low voice and sat near him, and though the house was dark, he felt the warmth of her nearness. She told him that there was no need for him to go back into the hard world of labor and wandering. “Stay here,” she said. “In summer it is cool. In winter it is warm. Stay beside this stream with me.” The monk said that even now he did not know whether a spirit had entered her words or whether the weakness was only his own.

He admitted to me, very plainly, that his heart was already breaking its old form. He had spent years on the road, wearing his purple robe, entering temple halls, and hearing people honor him as a holy man. But suddenly all that seemed dry and empty. He thought, “What is there in famous halls or in men bowing before me? There is only heat, dust, and the smell of crowds.” Beside that mountain woman, all such things looked thin and foolish.

Yet it was not only desire that moved him. He said again and again that pity also held him fast. She lived in a lonely house deep in the mountains, caring day after day for that helpless youth, speaking with no one, and little by little, as she herself had said, forgetting even how to speak. The thought of such a life seemed

unbearable to him. He told himself that to remain there would not be falling, but kindness. In that way he gave his own weakness a noble name and let it sit comfortably in his heart.

At dawn he still meant to leave, but he left like a man tearing cloth with his own hands. The woman walked with him a little way and gave careful directions. She said that if he only followed the stream downward, no matter how long it took, he would surely reach the villages below. She told him that when he saw the water leap and fall into a true waterfall, he could know that houses were near. Then, with a face full of sorrow, she said, “We will never meet again. But if somewhere, in some river, you ever see white peach blossoms floating, think that my body has sunk into a valley stream and has been torn into pieces.”

He said that those words went into him like a hook. Even after the house had vanished from sight, he still felt her hand pointing the road and heard her voice behind him. The mountain that had terrified him the day before now seemed almost kind. There were no bridges of snakes before him and no forest of leeches. Yet he did not rejoice in his safety. At every step he grew more full of longing.

He began to imagine a whole life there, and he imagined it in small plain things. He saw himself gathering firewood while she hung the pot over the flame. He saw himself picking nuts or roots while she peeled them with her fine fingers. He saw the two of them speaking through a paper screen, laughing, or sitting by the stream at evening. And above all he remembered the water, the moonlight, and her body against his shoulder, and thought that if his life ended in that sweetness, he would not complain.

So, though he still walked toward the villages, he no longer wished to reach them. The closer he came to human houses, the less he wanted them. He thought only of old women with bitter tea, dull rooms, and the empty kindness of roadside people. Compared with the mountain house, all that seemed poor and dirty. He said that by then the strength had gone from his legs not because the road was hard, but because his heart had already turned back.

Around noon he came to a place near the villages where a waterfall fell beside the path. He sat on a stone there, his knee bent, his body leaning forward, and

looked down. Later he learned that the place was called the Husband and Wife Falls. A great black rock stood in the middle like the open jaw of some beast, and the stream struck it from above and divided in two. One broad fall crashed down in full force, while the other, thinner and more broken, slipped through stones in shining threads.

As he watched, he began to think of them not as water, but as man and woman. The stronger fall looked proud and fierce, breaking stone and earth. The narrower one looked tender and unhappy, as if it longed to join the other and could not. He said that its fine broken lines seemed like a woman trembling and clinging to a man's knees in tears. The sight entered his blood. Then he remembered that this very water came from the same mountain stream where he had bathed with her.

After that, the fall changed before his eyes. In the thin white water of the weaker stream, he began to see her. First it was only a shape, then a face, then the curve of breast and shoulder, then the whole form, clear as a painted image and yet never still. She rose, vanished, broke into spray, came together again, and seemed to be drawn down and lifted up by the water at once. He said that her skin looked as if it had been broken into flower petals and scattered into a thousand shining drops. At that sight, he almost believed he had leaped into the fall itself and seized her in his arms.

When he came back to himself, the stronger fall was still thundering, the mountain was still shaking with sound, and he was still alone on the rock. Then another thought rose in him with terrible force. "Why die here," he thought, "or crawl on to the villages in shame? Better to turn back. Better to return to that house." He even told himself that if he saw her face once more and heard her voice again, he could lie beside that foolish youth himself and think nothing of it. In that madness he rose from the stone, fully ready to abandon his road and go back up the mountain.

Just as he did so, someone struck him once between the shoulders and said, "Well, Reverend?" The monk started violently and turned. It was not a spirit from the fall and not a messenger from hell. It was the old man from the house, returning after selling the horse. He had a small bundle over his shoulder and in

his hand he carried a great fresh carp, golden in the scales, hanging by the jaw on a straw cord.

The old man looked at him for a long moment and then smiled that thin ugly smile of his. “What are you doing here?” he said. “A holy man should have been farther down the road by now.” Then he narrowed his eyes and went on, “Do not hide it. You have fallen into desire for our young lady, have you not?” The monk said that because the time was what it was and his heart was what it was, those words struck him harder than a blow, and he stood speechless before the old man by the roaring falls.

Part 10

The old man stood there with the carp hanging from his hand, smiling in a way that made the monk feel colder than the waterfall had done. “What are you doing here?” he said. “From last night’s lodging to this place is only five ri. By now you should have been in the village, bowing before the roadside stone gods.” Then he looked harder into the monk’s face and added, “Do not hide it. You have fallen into desire for our young lady, have you not?”

The monk told me that he could not answer. His face, his heart, and even the place where he stood had all betrayed him already. The old man went on in a low rough voice. “Any ordinary man would not still be a man after her hand touched him and after he bathed in that water. He would have become something else by now. A horse, a cow, a monkey, a toad, a bat, something that runs or jumps or crawls. When I saw you come up from the stream with a human face, I was astonished.”

Then the old man pointed with his chin toward the carp. “And that medicine seller from Toyama,” he said, “did you not meet him on the mountain road?” The monk answered that he had. “Well then,” said the old man, “he became a horse long ago. I took that horse to market this morning, sold it, and what do you think the money turned into? This carp. Our young lady is fond of it, and tonight it will be her dish.” When the monk heard those words, he said, he felt as if the earth had

moved under his feet.

At that point, the monk said, I myself could no longer remain silent and cried, “Reverend, is that true?” He gave only a small nod and answered, “Listen first.” Then, still lying face down as before, he told me what the old man had said next. “That woman,” the old man had explained, “was once the daughter of the great doctor whose house stood near the flooded road below. The peasant who warned you spoke the truth. There really was once a village there, and there was once a doctor’s large house.”

She had been famous from childhood, the old man said. People called her a jewel of a girl. Her mother had been plain, even ugly, and for that reason people wondered all the more how so beautiful a daughter could have been born in that house. In old stories, they said, such a girl would be noticed by a lord while hunting or called away to a palace. Even before she grew up, people spoke of her as if she belonged to a world above their own.

Her father, however, was no wonder. He was proud, sharp-faced, and not especially skilled, though in that country even a poor doctor could thrive. When the daughter reached sixteen or seventeen, the crowds grew much larger. Men and women alike believed that relief came not only from the doctor’s medicines, but from the daughter’s touch. If she laid her hand on a sore arm, the pain seemed lighter. If she asked in her soft voice, “Does it still hurt?” a patient felt half cured before the medicine was opened.

The old man told many little tales of this strange power. A servant once boasted that if the young lady would hold his hand, he could thrust his arm into a hornets’ nest and not feel the stings, and people said it truly happened. Stories spread in every direction. Bit by bit, the girl herself also seems to have learned what power she had. What began as kindness, or perhaps only natural charm, grew into something darker, and after she came to that lonely mountain place, the power became stronger than before.

Then the old man spoke of the foolish youth. He had not always been what the monk saw now. As a child he had come from the mountains with his father and older brother to be treated for a terrible swelling in his leg. The doctor delayed

and delayed, feeding him eggs to give him strength, while the boy waited in fear for the cutting. Yet whenever the doctor's daughter touched him, changed his plaster, or stood near him, he grew quiet and bore the pain without complaint. At last, when the operation was done, something went wrong. The bleeding nearly killed him, and though his life was saved, his lower body failed, and he was left broken.

The boy clung to the doctor's daughter from that time on. He hid his face in her breast when he cried, and even the hard doctor had to turn away with a sigh. When the father at last came to take him home, the child would not leave the young lady. So, as an excuse to calm the family, the doctor sent his daughter to accompany the boy back to his village. That village, the old man said, was the very place of the lonely house. At that time it was not lonely at all. There were nearly twenty houses there.

But after she arrived, rain began and would not stop. For eight days the people stayed shut inside, calling to each other through the storm only to know that other human beings were still alive nearby. On the ninth night a great wind rose, and the whole place turned at once into a sea of mud. When it was over, almost all had perished. The doctor's house below was gone, the village was gone, and only three remained alive there in the mountains: the young lady, the child, and the old man who had been with the village people at the time.

Since then, he said, she had never left. For thirteen years she had cared for the broken youth without change, and the mountain stream itself had become an evil gift. "That water," the old man told him, "draws men in. When she is kind, they go to her. When she tires of them, they change. You saw the monkey, the toad, the bat, and all the other creatures around the house. They were men once. Even the night voices you heard were such lives circling back." The monk said that when he heard this, memory after memory struck his chest like blows: the monkey at the stream, the bats in the rock, the strange crowd around the house in the night, and the horse that would not go until the woman came.

Still the old man did not stop. He said, "You pity her now. You think of carrying wood for her, drawing water for her, staying beside her in kindness. But that too

is only desire wearing a better name. Leave this place while you still can. She has shown you special mercy, or you would not now stand before me as a human being. Practice your religion well, young monk. Do not return." Then he struck the monk once on the back, turned away with the carp still hanging from his hand, and climbed the mountain path without looking behind him.

The monk watched him go until he grew small and disappeared behind a ridge. Then clouds rose over the mountain, though the sky had been bright and hard a moment before, and thunder rolled heavily inside the hills. He stood empty for a while, as if his soul had left him and only just returned. Then, all at once, he gripped his staff, set his hat firmly on his head, and fled down toward the village with all the speed he had left. Before he reached the houses, rain broke over the mountain in a wild storm. He thought, as he ran, that the carp in the old man's hand might reach the lonely house still alive in that rain.

When the monk finished, he did not add a sermon or explain what lesson I was meant to take from it. He only fell silent. The old inn seemed deeper and quieter than before, and outside, the snow still came down through the dark. The next morning we parted, and I stood watching him begin his road through the snowy hills. He climbed the white slope little by little until his figure grew thin and high in the falling snow, and it seemed to me that he was riding upward into the clouds themselves.