

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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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: Bokutō Kidan (漣東綺譚)

Author: Nagai Kafū (永井荷風)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)

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

Original Japanese text available at:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001341/card52016.html>

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Nagai Kafū, *A Strange Tale from East of the River [Bokutō Kidan]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

I have almost never gone to see moving pictures. When I try to remember the first time, my mind goes back many years, to the late Meiji time. In Kanda Nishiki-cho, at a place called Kinkikan, I once saw pictures of the streets of San Francisco. People may use another word now, but I still like the old word, because it sits more easily on my tongue. I am slow to follow fashion, and I do not mind that.

After the Great Earthquake, a young writer who often came to my house once took me by force to a movie house in Tameike. He said I was behind the times and had to see what everyone was talking about. The film was said to be very famous, but when I watched it, I saw that it had been made from a short story by Maupassant. “Then I would rather read the story,” I told him. “The book must be better.” Since that day, my opinion has not changed very much.

Still, I know that movies are now loved by all kinds of people, young and old. Since they talk about them every day, I feel that I should at least know what sort of things are being shown. For that reason, when I pass a movie house, I look closely at the painted sign outside. If I see the title and the picture, I can often guess the story without entering. I can also tell what kind of scene the public likes best. That small habit has become a kind of game for me.

The best place for such a game is Asakusa Park. There, many theaters stand close together, and I can look at one sign after another. On evenings when I happen to walk toward Shitaya or Asakusa, I often remember this and enter the park. One evening, when the air had at last grown warm after many cold days, I did exactly that. I slowly looked at every sign I could find, then came out of the far end of the park and stepped toward Senzoku-cho. I had not yet chosen whether I would go right toward Kototoi Bridge or left toward Iriya.

As I was walking and thinking, a man in an old Western coat suddenly came up

beside me. He looked about forty, and he spoke as if we were already friends. “Sir, let me introduce you,” he said. “How about it?” I answered, “No, thank you,” and made my steps a little faster. But he followed me and said in a low voice, “It is a perfect chance, sir. Very exciting.”

I did not know whether such men were called touts or by some other name, and I did not care to learn. I only wanted to drive him away. So I said the first thing that came into my mouth. “I am going to Yoshiwara,” I told him. The lie was useful, because he soon gave up. Yet the strange thing was that my path, which had been uncertain a moment before, now seemed to choose itself. As I walked on, I remembered an old secondhand bookshop in a back street below the embankment.

The shop stood in a dark lane near the place where the water of the Sanya Canal went underground. The lane ran beside the canal, and on the other side were only the backs of houses above a stone wall. On this side stood stores that sold pipes, roof tiles, clay, and wood, though farther on the houses grew poorer and smaller. At night the lights from a few bridges shone weakly on the road, and after the canal ended, people too seemed to vanish. Only two places in that area kept their lamps burning late: the bookshop and a poor little store that sold tobacco and daily goods. That lonely feeling, more than the books, always drew me there.

I never learned the name of the shop, but I knew the kind of things piled up inside. If one found an early issue of an old magazine or a forgotten newspaper extra, that would already be a fine discovery. Yet I did not go there for rare books alone. I went for the shopkeeper himself and for the feeling of the back street outside the pleasure quarter. The old owner was a small man with a clean-shaved head, certainly over sixty. His face, his voice, the way he sat, the way he wore his clothes, all still held the shape of old downtown Tokyo, and to me that was more precious than any rare volume.

Whenever I slid open the glass door, I always found him in nearly the same way. He sat properly near the paper screen inside, his round back turned a little toward the street, his glasses low on his nose, reading something in silence. When he heard the door, he lifted only his head at first and said, “Oh, welcome,” before

taking off his glasses. Then he would brush the dust from a cushion, spread it out for me, and speak in the same polite voice as always. "As usual, I have nothing worth showing you," he said that evening. "But perhaps this old magazine may interest you. It has the first issue, though not the full set." "Is it a magazine by Tamenaga Shunko?" I asked. "Yes, sir," he answered, and searched through a stack by the wall.

He handed me several bound volumes after brushing away the dust with both hands. I opened one and looked at the old print with quiet pleasure. "It says it was registered in Meiji twelve," I said. "When I read things from this time, I feel as if my life grows longer." The old man smiled and asked whether I already owned another old journal. I told him that I did. We were still speaking when the glass door opened again and another old man came in, poor-looking, bald, and thin in the face, carrying a dirty striped cloth bundle.

"I nearly got killed by a car today," the newcomer said as he set the bundle on top of a stack of books. The shopkeeper shook his head and answered, "Things that are cheap, easy, and always safe do not often exist in this world. But you were not hurt, were you?" The man untied his bundle and said he had been to a market at Hatogaya and had bought something curious. From the cloth he took out women's clothes, an old light kimono and a long under-robe. They were not treasures from some ancient age, yet I thought the cloth and color might still be useful in other ways. So, on a sudden wish, I bought the long under-robe while I paid for the old magazines.

The priest-like old bookseller wrapped the robe and the magazines together in paper for me. I took the parcel in my arms and stepped back into the dim lane. Behind me, the shop still held its faint light, its dust, and its old voices, as if another age had gone on living there while the rest of Tokyo changed. In front of me, the night road stretched away toward Nihonzutsumi and the dark places beyond. I had not planned anything when I left home, yet now I carried old paper in one arm and a woman's old robe in the other. With those odd things in my hands, I went on into the night.

Part 2

I meant to take a bus that ran along Nihonzutsumi, and for a while I stood at the stop near the great gate. But the empty taxis kept slowing down beside me, and their drivers called out so often that I grew tired of answering. At last I turned away from the main road and went back into the dark side street by which I had come. I chose lanes where no streetcar ran and no taxi wished to go. After a little while, through the trees ahead of me, I saw the lights of Kototoi Bridge shining in the distance.

I had heard that the park by the river was not a safe place at night, so I did not go down to the water itself. Instead, I followed a narrow path where the electric lamps were bright enough to see the ground. There was a place with chains hung along the edge, and there I sat for a moment. On my way to that district I had bought bread and canned food and had tied them in my cloth. Now I thought it would be better to carry fewer bundles, so I spread the cloth open on the grass and began to arrange the things again.

The work was more troublesome than I had expected. The cloth was a little too small, and hard things and soft things do not sit well together. The old magazines made sharp corners, while the woman's robe sank and folded like a living thing. At last I put only the cans into the inner pocket of my coat and tried to tie the magazines and the robe into one parcel. I bent over it, testing first one shape and then another, when a voice suddenly burst out from the dark behind me.

"Hey, what are you doing there?" the voice said. At the same time I heard the sound of a sword and heavy steps, and a policeman came out from the shadow of a tree. He stretched out his long arm and gripped my shoulder before I had even turned around. I did not answer at once. I quietly fixed the knot of the cloth and stood up, but he was already impatient and pushed me from behind with his hand. "This way," he said. "Move."

He drove me along the little path and took me straight to the police box by the bridge. There he handed me over to another officer who was standing on duty, and then, as if he had some other matter to attend to, he hurried off into the night again.

The officer inside stayed at the entrance and began to question me without asking me to sit down. "Where have you come from at this hour?" he asked. "From over there," I said. "What do you mean by over there?" "From the canal side," I answered. "What canal?" he asked, and his tone already showed that he did not like my way of speaking.

"The canal below Matsuchiyama," I told him. "The one called Sanya Canal." Then he asked my name. "Oe Tadasu," I said, and as he took out a notebook, I added, perhaps unwisely, "The Tadasu is written with the character used in an old Chinese phrase about setting the world in order." He looked at me with cold eyes, as if to say that I should keep such learning to myself. Then, without another word, he reached out, opened my overcoat, and turned back the lining to look for a mark. After that he tried to examine the inside of my jacket as well.

"What kind of mark are you looking for?" I asked. I put my bundle down and opened both my coat and waistcoat wide to show him. He ignored the question and asked for my address. I gave him one in Azabu. Then he asked my work, and I said, "Nothing at all." He asked my age. "A year of the rabbit," I answered. "How old?" he repeated. I told him the year of my birth and then, fearing silence might make me look more suspicious, added plainly, "Fifty-eight." He looked at my face and said, "You seem young for that." I laughed a little. It was not a brave laugh, only the kind a man makes when he does not know what else to do.

He asked my name again, though I had just told him. He asked how many people were in my family. In truth I lived alone, but from past experience I knew that the plain truth often invites more doubt than a simple lie, so I said, "Three." He at once helped me by deciding who the three must be. "Your wife and who else?" he asked. "My old mother," I said. Then he asked my wife's age. For a moment I was troubled, but I remembered a woman with whom I had once had a connection some years before and gave an age that belonged to her. I was ready, if needed, to invent a name from one of my own stories, but he did not go that far.

Instead, he pressed the outside of my coat and jacket pockets one by one. "What is this?" he asked. "A pipe and spectacles." "And this?" "A can." "And this must be your wallet. Take it out." I warned him that it contained money. He asked how

much. I answered, "Perhaps twenty or thirty yen." He pulled it from my pocket, but he did not open it at once. He merely laid it on the table under the telephone and pointed at my parcel. "What is in that bundle?" he said. "Come in here and untie it."

I opened the cloth before him. First there was the paper-wrapped bread. Then the old magazines. Up to that point everything looked harmless enough. But when the soft sleeve of the old under-robe slipped out and hung down over the edge of the table, his face changed at once. His voice, too, grew harder. "You are carrying something strange," he said. I could not help laughing, though my laughter came out thin and foolish. "That is women's clothing," he said, lifting the sleeve with two fingers and holding it up toward the light. Then he stared at my face. "Where did you get it?"

"From an old-clothes dealer," I said. "How?" "I paid for it." "Where?" "Near the great gate of Yoshiwara." "How much?" "Three yen and seventy sen." He dropped the robe back on the table and kept looking at me in silence. At that moment I no longer felt like joking with him. It seemed quite possible that he would send me to the station house and throw me into a cell for the night. I stood there watching him, and he watched me, until at last he turned his eyes away and began to examine my wallet.

Inside he found several papers that I had carelessly left there: a temporary fire insurance paper with broken folds, a copy of a family register, a certificate for my seal, and the seal itself. He spread each paper out slowly under the lamp and read them with tiresome care. He even held the seal up close to the light and studied the carved letters on it. While he did this, I looked out toward the road. In front of the police box the street divided into two slanting lines, one toward Minami-Senju and one toward Shirahige Bridge, and another broad road crossed them on its way over Kototoi Bridge. Even so late, traffic still moved often enough, yet not one passerby stopped to wonder why I was being questioned.

Across the street, in a shirt shop on the corner, a woman who seemed to be the owner's wife and a shop boy were both looking in our direction. But they showed no surprise and soon began to close the shop for the night. At last the policeman

said, "All right. Put it away." "I have no great need for these things," I muttered, though of course I carefully put the papers back into my wallet and tied my cloth bundle again. "Is that all?" I asked. "That is all," he said. So I lit one of my cigarettes, drew on it, and blew the smoke into the little room as if to leave behind at least its smell. Then I walked away toward Kototoi Bridge without hurrying.

Later, when I thought about it calmly, I understood how near I had come to spending the night in a cell. If those papers and the seal had not been in my wallet, I would almost certainly have been taken in. Old clothes are unpleasant things. They carry with them some shadow that does not belong to the new owner. That woman's robe, which I had bought on a passing whim, had almost brought bad luck down on my head. It had tried to curse me and had failed only by a narrow margin.

Part 3

A new story plan had begun to grow in my mind. Its title was "Disappearance." I had not written it yet, but I already felt a certain faith in it. If I could finish it in the right way, I thought, it might not be a bad piece of work. At least, it would not be a careless one. It had already taken hold of me strongly enough that I was living with it day and night.

The most important man in this new story was called Taneda Junpei. He was more than fifty years old and taught English at a private middle school. Long ago he had lost the wife he had loved in his first marriage. After three or four lonely years, he married again. His second wife was named Mitsuko, and with her began the long trouble of his later life.

Before that marriage, Mitsuko had worked in the house of a famous politician. She served the politician's wife, but the master of the house deceived her, and she became pregnant. After that, the house arranged everything in a cold and practical way. A man named Endo, who worked for them, took charge of the matter. The promise was simple and cruel: if the child was safely born, money would be sent every month for the child's support, but the great house would never admit any

connection to the child.

Mitsuko was taken into Endo's care, gave birth to a boy, and before much time had passed she was married to Taneda. At that time she was nineteen, and Taneda was thirty. Taneda had already lost hope in life after the death of his first wife. His pay was small, his future looked dark, and he had become like a man made of shadow. Yet when his old friend Endo urged him on, and when the question of money stood before him, he gave in and married Mitsuko.

The first boy entered Taneda's home together with the mother, and later, on the family record, everything looked proper and orderly. But the truth under that order was twisted from the start. After two years, a girl was born, and after that another boy. The older son, Tameotoshi, grew up as if he were Taneda's own first child, though in truth he was not. As the children grew older, the hidden money from the real father stopped, and the weight of daily life fell more and more on Taneda alone.

The family became noisy in every way that Taneda hated. The son, while still in a private university, threw himself into sports and dreamed of going abroad. The daughter Yoshiko finished school and became a popular film actress. Mitsuko, once round-faced and pretty, grew fat and loud and gave herself over to religion and religious groups. Their house was sometimes like a prayer meeting, sometimes like a place for actors to gather, and sometimes like a training ground for games and exercise.

Taneda was weak in spirit from the first and never liked much company. As he grew older, the noise of his own house became harder and harder for him to bear. Everything his wife and children liked was exactly what he disliked. Since he had no strength to fight them openly, he chose another kind of revenge. He trained himself to look at his own family with cold eyes and to care as little as possible. That was the small, bitter freedom left to him.

Then, in the spring of his fifty-first year, he lost his teaching post. On the very day he received his retirement money, he did not return home. He simply vanished. Before that, by chance, he had once met a woman named Sumiko on a streetcar. She had formerly worked as a servant in his house, and now she was employed at

a café in Komagata. He had visited her there once or twice and had drunk beer with her, and on the night of his disappearance, with his retirement money in his pocket, he went to the room she rented and told her everything.

That was as far as the story had clearly formed itself in my head. Beyond that point, I still did not know how to end it. His family could report him missing. A detective might catch him and speak to him like a schoolmaster. He might be dragged back in shame, or he might sink lower and lower in some late and foolish pleasure. A man who learns such pleasures in middle age can easily be driven into a sad end, and I kept turning over many such paths in my mind.

While thinking about Taneda, I saw again how useful my own small adventure with the policeman had been. The fear of being stopped, the shame of being questioned, the helpless look of a grown man made foolish under a bright lamp, all this could be given to Taneda. When I make up a story, what excites me most is not only the person, but the place where that person moves. Sometimes I have cared more for the setting than for the heart of the man himself. This may be a fault, but it is also my habit, and I know it too well to deny it.

For Taneda's hiding place, I wanted a district where old Tokyo had already been broken and changed after the earthquake, yet where some shadow of the past still clung to the ground. I thought of Honjo, or Fukagawa, or the edge of Asakusa, or perhaps some poor quarter just beyond the old city line. I had walked from time to time through Sunamachi, Kameido, Komatsugawa, and Terajima, and I believed I knew them fairly well. But when I sat down to write, I suddenly felt that my knowledge was too thin. A writer who wishes to describe a place truly must not forget the season, the weather, the smell of the evening, the sound of the streets, or even the shape of the sky before rain.

So one evening near the end of June, when the rainy season had not yet passed but the day itself had been bright and clear from morning, I went out at once after supper. The light still remained in the sky, and I meant to go wherever my feet led me, perhaps toward Senju, perhaps toward Kameido. I rode a streetcar as far as Kaminarimon, and there, as if by chance prepared in advance, a bus stood waiting with "Terajima Tamanoi" written on it. I got on, crossed Azuma Bridge, passed

Genmori Bridge, and rode on until the bus stopped at a railway crossing. When I got down, I found a wide road crossing another wide road, empty lots with grass, low houses, and only a few poor children playing in the fading light. Every direction looked almost the same, and the whole place had a lonely air, as if the evening had already forgotten it.

Part 4

I stood for a little while at that crossing and looked in every direction. The broad roads cut across one another like lines drawn by a ruler, but because the houses were low and open lots lay between them, the place did not feel strong or clear. It felt uncertain. Grass grew in patches where other parts of Tokyo would already have put up walls and shops, and the evening air moved over the empty ground without meeting much resistance. The district seemed new and unfinished, as if it had been built too quickly and then forgotten.

That feeling pleased me more than it troubled me. If Taneda Junpei were to hide himself after leaving his family, I thought, such a place might serve him well. It was near enough to Tamanoi, with its night life and its bad name, yet not so close that a man could not still pretend to be respectable. A writer must think of such practical matters. A man in flight needs not only a room and a woman, but also streets through which he can come and go without fixing himself too sharply in anyone's memory.

With this in mind, I left the broad road and turned into a narrow side lane. It bent after every few steps, so that one could not see far ahead at any point. A bicycle carrying a parcel at its side could hardly have passed another coming the other way. Yet the lane was not dirty in the worst way. Small rental houses stood on both sides with neat little gates, and office workers in Western clothes, men and women together, walked home quietly in twos and ones.

Even the dogs I saw there wore license tags on their collars, and that small sign of order amused me. I had expected the outskirts to be rougher and poorer. Instead, there was a curious mixture of meanness and decency. The houses were modest,

but they were not ashamed of themselves. The people moved as if they belonged to the place, and the place itself gave no sign that it wished to welcome or refuse a stranger. Before long, by following one turn after another, I suddenly found myself beside Tamanoi Station on the Tobu line.

There the scene changed again. On both sides of the railway stood what looked like old villas or country houses with large grounds, buried in heavy growth. Since crossing Azuma Bridge, I had not seen any place where old trees still stood so thickly. The bamboo drooped under the weight of climbing vines, and hedges by the ditches held pale moonflowers that had opened in the evening. Because no one seemed to have trimmed or cared for the place in a long time, it had a neglected beauty that at once caught my eye and held back my steps.

When one used to hear, in earlier days, that this region near Shirahige belonged to Terajima Village, one would at once think of the villas and quiet pleasures of another age. Standing there now, before those old trees and half-lost gardens, I could not help remembering the taste of a former Tokyo, one that had not yet been cut up and brightened and sold piece by piece. Such feelings are of no use to most people. But to a writer they are dangerous, because they make him forgive much for the sake of atmosphere. I felt that danger, yet I did not wish to escape it.

Along the railway there spread a broad grassy field with signs offering land for sale or lease. It reached all the way to the embankment beneath the iron bridge. I learned that this had once been the track of another electric line, which had run until the year before. On the broken stone steps above the grass, the remains of an old station had been left to weeds and summer plants, and from where I stood it looked almost like the ruins of a small castle. Such exaggerations come naturally when one is alone at evening in an unknown district, and I did not resist them.

I parted the high summer grass with my cane and climbed up the embankment. From there, nothing stood in front of my eyes. The roads by which I had come, the open lots, and the newly built quarter all lay below me in a low spread. But on the other side of the embankment, the view changed sharply. Rough tin-roofed houses stood without order and without end, crowded together in a confused mass, and from among them rose the tall chimney of a bathhouse. Above its top hung

the young evening moon, perhaps six or seven days old.

One side of the sky still kept a little pale color from sunset, but the moon had already taken on the harder brightness of night. Between the roofs, I began to catch the glow of neon lights, and with them came the mixed sound of radios from many rooms at once. That sound, half music and half noise, drifted upward in broken waves. It was the true voice of the new city, and I have never been able to love it. Yet because I dislike it, I listen all the more closely, as a man with weak teeth cannot help touching them with his tongue.

I sat down on a stone and remained there until darkness gathered around my feet. Little by little, lamps came on in the houses below. As the rooms brightened, the upper stories of the poor houses could be seen clearly from above, stripped of all privacy. I could look straight into their second floors, into cheap lampshades, hanging clothes, bare walls, and the tired movement of people beginning their evening meals. The sight was ugly, but it was alive. It gave me exactly the kind of background I had wanted for Taneda's story: a district where a man might vanish, not into grandeur, but into endless human closeness.

For a while I forgot the invented man and thought only of the place itself. If I gave Taneda a room here, he could sit at night by a poor window, hear the radios from every side, smell food from neighboring kitchens, and feel that he had escaped nothing at all. He would have thrown away his house and family only to sink into another form of crowding. That irony pleased me. A story needs not only sorrow, but also the right form of sorrow, and the place often decides that before the character himself understands it.

At last the dark deepened enough that the details below were harder to see. A few windows shone more brightly, and the uneven roofs became only black shapes. I rose from the stone, looked once more across the embankment and the low town beyond, and then turned back. In the grass there remained the faint marks of other feet, and by following those traces I made my way down the slope. I had not yet decided where I would go next, but the district had already fixed itself in my mind.

Part 5

After I had walked for some time through that district, I stopped at a tobacco shop at the mouth of a lane where a post box stood. I bought cigarettes and waited for the change from a five-yen note. At that very moment a man in a white short coat ran across the street and cried, "It is coming down." Then a woman in a work apron and several people who had been passing by all began to run as well. Before I could fully understand what was happening, a strong wind struck the street, light screens and loose things banged and shook, and bits of paper and dust raced along the ground like living creatures.

A flash of lightning cut the sky, and after it came a slow roll of thunder. Then large drops of rain began to fall, first one by one, and then more quickly. The evening had been bright and clear only a short while before, yet now the weather had changed completely. Because of a habit formed over many years, I almost never leave home in the rainy season without an umbrella, no matter how fine the sky may be. So I was not greatly troubled, and I calmly opened my umbrella and began to walk on, watching both the sky and the suddenly disturbed street.

At that instant a woman came up from behind me and pushed her white neck beneath my umbrella. "Sir, let me in as far as the next place," she said at once. Her hair had just been dressed, and I could smell the oil from it. She wore a large old-fashioned style, and a long silver thread had been laid across it. Then I remembered that, a little earlier, I had passed a women's hairdresser's shop with its glass door standing open to the street.

The wind and rain were beating fiercely on her, and the silver thread across her fresh hair was already coming loose. Seeing that, I felt sorry for her. I held the umbrella farther toward her and said, "I am wearing Western clothes, so I do not mind getting wet." The truth is that the bright shop lights had made me a little ashamed of standing there under one umbrella with a strange woman. "Then all right," she said. "It is very near." She caught the handle, lifted the hem of her light summer robe with one hand, and hurried forward.

Lightning flashed again, and thunder sounded more loudly this time. The woman cried out, though rather too neatly, as if she were acting the fear a little.

Then she reached back, caught my hand, and said, "Come on. Quickly." I answered, "Go ahead. I will follow." But when we entered the narrow lane, she turned and looked back at me at every corner, making sure I did not lose the way, until at last she crossed a little bridge over a ditch and stopped before a house whose eaves were shaded with reed screens.

"Oh, you are terribly wet," she said, closing the umbrella. Before she wiped herself, she brushed the drops from my coat with her hand. "Is this your house?" I asked. "Come in and let me dry you," she said. I told her again that I was in Western clothes and did not need such care, but she answered, "I want to thank you. Please come in." By then the thunder had moved farther away, but the rain had grown even harder, falling with such force that the spray leaped up under the eaves. I had no time left for refusal, and I stepped inside.

There was a rough wooden inner screen, and from it hung a bead curtain tied with ribbon and little bells. I sat on the raised step and took off my shoes. The woman wiped my feet with a cloth, left the hem of her robe still raised, turned on the light in the lower room, and said, "No one is here. Please come up." When I asked whether she lived alone, she said that until the night before another woman had lived there too, but she had moved away. Then I asked whether she was the mistress of the house, and she explained that the owner lived elsewhere, behind a place called Tamanoi-kan, and came every night at midnight to inspect the account book.

"Then you live rather freely," I said as I sat beside the long brazier where she had guided me. She began to prepare tea, kneeling with one knee raised, and as I watched her more closely, I judged that she must be twenty-four or twenty-five. She was quite good-looking. Her round face had been darkened a little by powder and sun, but the line of her nose was clear, the roots of her hair still full and young, and her dark eyes had not yet lost their brightness. Even the color of her lips and gums showed that her health, though no doubt worn, was not yet deeply broken.

Before drinking the tea, I asked in a casual way whether the water there came from a well or from the water pipes. If she had answered that it was well water, I had already decided that I would only pretend to drink. I have always feared

infectious disease more than the other illnesses men usually fear in such places. My body may already be on its downward path, but my mind had become tired long before my flesh did, and it is quick fevers and dirtied water that trouble me most. "Are you going to wash your face?" she asked easily. "If you want water from the pipe, it is there."

She told me to take off my coat because it was soaked, but I only answered, "It is raining hard." "I hate lightning more than thunder," she said. "With weather like this I cannot even go to the bath." Then she added, "Stay a little longer. I will wash my face and finish my make-up." She stood before the washbasin beyond the curtain and, through the hanging ribbons, I could see her bare both shoulders and bend forward to wash. The skin of her body was whiter than the skin of her face, and from the shape of her breasts I guessed that she had never had a child.

Looking around the room, I said, "Sitting here like this, I feel almost like a husband. There is a chest of drawers, a shelf, and everything in order." She laughed and told me to open the drawers if I wanted to see whether there were sweets or potatoes inside. I praised the room for being well kept, even the ashes in the brazier. "I may live in a place like this," she said, "but I am good at running a household." When I asked whether she had been there long, she said, "Only a little more than a year." When I guessed that she must have lived elsewhere before, perhaps as a geisha, she at first pretended not to hear, then admitted only that she had worked far from Tokyo, in Utsunomiya.

Soon she changed her clothes. She put on a light robe with a decorated hem and tied a red sash in front of her body. With the silver thread in her large old hair, she looked to me not like a woman of the present day, but rather like one from the late Meiji years, as if she had stepped out of an older and simpler kind of pleasure quarter. She sat down beside me, took up a packet of cigarettes, lit one, handed it to me, and said with a smile, "As a lucky meeting, please give me only the small gift." Since I knew something of the customs of that district, I asked, "Fifty sen, then, for sharing the umbrella?" She said yes, that it was the fixed rule, and even after she said so she kept her hand stretched out, waiting.

I gave her the money and joked that, since I had paid, I should at least decide

on an hour. When I leaned close and whispered something at her ear, she widened her eyes, called me a fool, and struck my shoulder with her hand. Here I ought to add a word, because a reader may think her manner too familiar for a woman she had only just met. But I have changed nothing. I am writing only what happened. Some may also laugh and say that a storm, lightning, and a sudden meeting under one umbrella are old tricks in fiction, yet the truth is that it happened in exactly that ready-made way, and that very old-fashioned quality is part of what made me wish to write the scene at all.

In that district, I later learned, there were said to be seven or eight hundred women. Among them, those who still dressed their hair in the old style were very few. Most were half like café girls in Japanese clothes or else dressed in ways meant to imitate dancers. It was, therefore, another strange piece of chance that the woman whose house I entered belonged to that smaller and older kind. The rain still did not stop. At first it had fallen so hard that we had to raise our voices, but now the thunder was gone, and only the sound of rain beating on the metal roof and dripping outside remained.

After a while we heard girls outside in the lane crying that loaches were swimming through the flood water. The woman quickly looked through the curtain and said that if the ditch overflowed, water would run this way too. She urged me to stay and rest because a rain that begins early in the evening often ruins business for the whole night. Then she took out a bowl of pickles, a rice bowl, and a little metal pot of cooked sweet potatoes, while I remembered that I had bought some sheets of asakusa seaweed earlier and offered them to her. She asked whether they were for my wife, and when I told her that I lived alone and bought my own food, she laughed and said perhaps I lived in an apartment with a girl. I told her that if such a thing were true, no rain or thunder would keep me from running home at once.

She invited me to eat with her, but I said I had already had supper. She then asked me to turn my face away while she ate, and between small mouthfuls she explained that meals were brought from the owner's house at noon and again at midnight. She said it was a pleasure to eat while talking with someone, because

eating alone was miserable, and I agreed. She quickly finished two bowls of tea over rice, put away the dishes, and still seemed to be talking in a light, playful mood when voices and footsteps rose again outside. "It must have stopped," I said as I put on my coat. She came behind me, turned down my collar with her hands, rubbed her cheek against my shoulder, and said, "You will come again, won't you?"

I asked the name of the house. "I will give you a card," she said. While I put on my shoes, she found one beneath the little window and handed it to me. It was cut in the shape of a shamisen pick, and on it were written her address and name: Terajima Town, Seventh District, Number Sixty-One, Unit Two, at Ando Masa's place, Yukiko. I said goodbye. She answered, "Go straight home," and I stepped back out into the lane.

Part 6

About the middle of Azuma Bridge, leaning against the rail, Taneda Junpei kept looking first at the clock on the Matsuya building and then at every figure that came near him. He was waiting for Sumiko, the café girl, who had promised to come after the shop closed. The bridge was already quiet, because the streetcars and buses had stopped for the night, but it was not empty. Since the weather had suddenly turned hot only a few days earlier, some men still stood about in shirts, taking the night air, and women who looked like café workers were hurrying home with little parcels in their hands.

Taneda watched them without really seeing them. In his pocket he carried the retirement money he had received that day, and for him that money meant the end of one life and the uncertain start of another. He had already decided that he would not go home again, yet he had not clearly decided what shape his escape would take. He only knew that for twenty years he had given up his peace, his labor, and almost his whole life for his family, and that the memory of those twenty years had become bitter beyond bearing. Even before Sumiko arrived, anger was burning inside him like a slow fire that would not go out.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Sumiko said as she came toward him in a small quick run. “I had to come by a longer way. I am usually with Kaneko, and she talks too much.” Taneda looked down the track and said, “It seems the last streetcar is gone.” “That does not matter,” she answered. “It is only about three stops on foot. We can take a taxi from there.” “If there is an empty room, that will help,” he said. “And if there is not,” she replied lightly, “you can stay in my room for one night.”

He turned and looked at her more sharply. “Would that be safe?” he asked. “Why not?” she said. “I once saw something in the newspaper about people being caught in an apartment house.” Sumiko gave a little laugh and shook her head. “That depends on the place. Mine is easy. On one side there are café girls, on the other side there are kept women, and in the next room different men seem to come and go all the time.”

Before they had even crossed the whole bridge, a passing taxi agreed to take them as far as Akiba Shrine for thirty sen. When they got in, Taneda kept looking out through the window at the streets that slipped by in the summer night. “Everything has changed,” he said. “How far does the tram go now?” “To the end of Mukojima,” Sumiko answered. “In front of Akiba Shrine. If you take the bus, it goes straight on to Tamanoi.” “Tamanoi,” he repeated. “Was it in this direction?” “You know the place?” she asked. “I saw it once,” he said. “Only once, five or six years ago.”

“It is lively now,” Sumiko told him. “There are night stalls every evening, and little shows out on the open ground.” “Is that so,” he said, though his mind was somewhere else. The taxi moved quickly through the streets, and before long it stopped near the shrine. Sumiko paid the fare, slid the door open, and said, “This way. We should turn here. There is a police box over there.” She led him along the stone wall of the shrine, away from the brighter road, and soon they came to a darker corner where a square cement building stood with the lighted sign of Azuma Apartments above it.

Sumiko opened the sliding door and stepped inside. Near the entrance there were shoe boxes marked with room numbers, and she put away her sandals and

at once picked them up again. "Take them upstairs," she said. "They are too easy to see down here." Then she handed Taneda her slippers, lifted his shoes in one hand, and started up the stairs before him. From outside the building had looked Western, but inside it was light, thin, and Japanese, with narrow pillars and a stairway that made a dry creaking sound under every step.

At the corner of the upper hall there was a little cooking place. A woman wearing only a thin undergarment stood there with her short hair loose, heating water in a kettle. "Good evening," Sumiko said in a casual voice as if there were nothing at all unusual in her return with a man. Then she unlocked the second door from the far end on the right and let Taneda enter. The room was only about six mats in size, and it was far from clean, but it had the lived-in comfort of a place used by one person who had arranged it to suit herself.

On one side there was a closet. Against another wall stood a chest of drawers. Elsewhere a summer robe and a sleeping garment of thin cloth hung from pegs, and when Sumiko opened the window, the night air came in under them. "It is cooler here," she said, spreading a cushion below the window where underclothes and socks had been hung to dry. Taneda sat down and gave a small tired smile. "A person who lives alone like this must feel free," he said. "Enough to think marriage is a foolish trap." "People at home are always telling me to come back," Sumiko answered. "But I do not think I can."

"If only I had woken up earlier," Taneda said. "Now it is too late." Then, as if he had suddenly remembered why he had come, he asked, "Could you find out whether there is a vacant room?" Sumiko took the kettle and went out to ask. He sat alone for a moment, looking through the window into the dim summer sky and thinking how strange it was that his whole future seemed to depend on such a small question. When she returned, she said, "The room at the far end is empty, but the woman from the office is away tonight." "Then I cannot rent it properly," he said. "Not tonight."

"Why not stay here for a night or two?" Sumiko said. "If you do not mind, that is." He opened his eyes wide. "I do not mind. But what about you?" "I can sleep here," she said. "Or I can go next door to Kimi-chan's room, if her man is not

there tonight.” “No one comes here?” he asked. “Not at present,” she answered. “So it does not matter. Still, it would be wrong of me to tempt a teacher.” At that, Taneda made a strange face, half amused and half full of shame, but he did not speak.

“After all,” she went on, “you have a fine wife and a grown daughter.” “No,” he said at once. “That life is over. Even if it is late, I am going to begin a new one.” “You mean to live apart?” she asked. “More than that,” he answered. “I mean a break. A real one.” She looked at him closely and said, “But things are never so easy.” “That is why I am thinking,” he said. “No matter how rough it may be, I must disappear for a while. If I hide myself, perhaps that will create an opening. But if the talk about the other room cannot be settled, I should not trouble you any more tonight. I will sleep somewhere else. I may as well go and look at Tamanoi.”

“Teacher,” Sumiko said, and her voice changed a little. “I have things I want to tell you too. I have something that is troubling me very much. Could you not stay awake tonight and talk with me?” “The nights grow short at this time of year,” he said. “The other day I drove as far as Yokohama,” she answered. “By the time we came back, dawn had begun.” “If you tell me your whole life story,” he said, trying to laugh, “it will take more than one night. Even before you came to work in my house as a servant, there must have been plenty to tell. And after that, after becoming a café girl, there is still more.” “Perhaps one night would not be enough,” she said, and then he finally let out a real laugh, though it was brief and tired.

For a while the apartment floor had been quiet, but now voices of men and women began to rise from some room farther away. Water sounded again in the cooking place outside. Sumiko, who seemed truly ready to sit up all night, untied only her sash, folded it neatly, laid her socks on top of it, and put them away in the closet. Then she wiped the little table again, made tea with careful movements, and said, “What do you think brought me to this life?” “I would guess it was the city,” Taneda said. “A longing for the city.” “That too, of course,” she answered. “But even more than that, I hated my father’s work.” “What was it?” he asked. She lowered her voice before replying. “You would call him a gang leader, I suppose. Or a man of violence. In any case, he belonged to that kind of world.”

Part 7

When the rainy season ended and the true heat of summer began, new sounds rose from the houses around mine. Perhaps it was because every family slid open its doors and shutters at the same time, letting air pass through from front to back. Sounds that could not be heard in cooler months now came sharply through the evening. Of all those sounds, the one that tortured me most came from the house next door, with only one wooden fence between us. It was the radio.

I would wait for the light to grow softer and sit down at my desk at last, ready to work under the lamp. But at just that hour, when the room should have become quiet enough for thought, a hard and splitting noise would begin next door and continue until after nine. Political talks in heavy country speech, long dramatic songs, strange readings half like student theater, and Western music mixed in between all came through the boards without mercy. Some houses were not satisfied even with the radio and played popular records at all hours as well. The whole neighborhood seemed determined to fill the air with sound.

Because of that, every summer I form the same habit. I leave home at six, often before I have properly finished my evening meal, and sometimes after eating somewhere outside. It is not that the radio disappears when I step into the street. On the road, radios pour from shops and houses in even harsher waves. But there the noise mixes with streetcars, motorcars, footsteps, and common city sounds, so it becomes only part of the outer world. That general noise troubles me less than the single sharp noise that enters a quiet room and wounds the mind.

My draft of "Disappearance" had already been stopped for more than ten days because of this summer assault. Once a work is broken in that way, the feeling that fed it may go out little by little like a lamp running short of oil. I knew that danger, and yet I could not fight the noise with patience alone. So I did in this summer what I had done in the two summers before it. I went out every evening while the sun was still above the roofs, though in truth I had nowhere in particular that I wished to go.

In the days when old Kōjiro Sōyō lived, I used to walk to Ginza almost every night, and each night added some new interest to the last. But he was gone now, and the night colors of the city no longer had the same life for me. Worse than that, something had happened that made it unwise for me to go there carelessly. A former rickshaw man, who in earlier times had gone in and out of geisha houses in Shimbashi, had become a ruined and ugly fellow, the kind of man who looked as if he might once have killed someone. He wandered around Owaricho and watched for faces he remembered.

The first time he stopped me, I gave him a fifty-sen coin at the corner of Kurosawa's shop. That kindness became a mistake. When I gave him money, he grew bold. When I did not, he shouted in a terrible voice, and I could not bear the little crowd that gathered to stare, so again I gave him another coin. One night I tried to trick him and led him to a police box at a crossing, but the officer on duty already knew him and had no wish to take trouble over the matter.

On another day I even saw that same man talking and laughing with a policeman near another police box, as if they were old companions. It seemed likely that, in the eyes of the police, his identity was clearer and more acceptable than mine. That thought did not please me. Since Ginza had lost both its charm and its safety, I changed the direction of my evening walks. I began to cross the Sumida River to the east and rest myself by visiting the woman named O-yuki, who lived in the house by the ditch.

After going back and forth by the same road for four or five days, even that long trip from Azabu grew less troublesome than it had seemed at first. Changing cars at Kyobashi and again near Kaminarimon became easier with habit. The body learns such things sooner than the mind. I also discovered which hours were most crowded and which lines were slower or more comfortable, so that, if I timed my journey well, I could even sit quietly and read on the way.

I had long given up reading on trains and streetcars after I began to use glasses for old eyes in the Taisho years. Yet once I started making those long trips again, I returned to the habit. I do not often carry newspapers, magazines, or new books, so on one of my first evenings I took with me an old volume by Yoda Gakkai

about twenty-four views of the Sumida. I thought that the words of an earlier scholar might add a little flavor to the scenes through which I was passing. Old prose, when read in the right place, can sometimes make the present hour seem deeper than it is.

By the third day or so, my evening outing had taken on a fixed shape. On the way I would stop to buy food for myself, and at the same time I would buy some small present for the woman. This practice, after only four or five visits, produced two useful results. Since she saw that I regularly bought canned food and bread, and since my shirt or coat sometimes had a missing button that I had not bothered to mend, she came to believe more firmly that I was a man living alone in a rented room. If I was a bachelor in a cheap apartment, there was nothing strange in my coming to see her night after night.

She could not possibly guess that I left home because the radio drove me from my own study. Nor would she think that I had no taste for theater or moving pictures and therefore no other place where I liked to waste time. All that settled itself without any careful excuse from me. Yet because of the district and its habits, I wondered whether she might become suspicious about the source of my money, so one evening I asked a question or two in an indirect way. She only answered, "Even in a place like this, some men spend a great deal. There was one customer who stayed almost a whole month."

"A whole month?" I said. "Without reporting to the police?" She replied that some houses might report such things and some might not. When I asked what kind of man he had been, she said, "A draper. In the end his master came and dragged him away." "So he had run off with the shop's money," I said. "Probably," she answered. When I told her, "You need not worry about that from me," she did not even trouble to ask what I meant. It was plain that, so long as the night's payment was made, she did not care very much about the rest.

But another thing became clear to me little by little. As far as my work was concerned, she had already decided for herself what sort of man I was. Upstairs, on the sliding doors, there were cheap copied pictures of beautiful women from old ukiyo-e prints, and among them I recognized several I had seen before in

illustrated magazines. Once I explained one of those books to her in some detail, and another time, while she was upstairs with a customer, she happened to notice me downstairs writing in a notebook. From that, it seems, she concluded that I worked in secret printing or the trade of forbidden books, for she later said, "Next time, bring me one of those books."

I still had a few such old volumes at home from things gathered long ago, so at her request I carried three or four of them to her on a later visit. From then on, my occupation was fixed in her mind without either of us naming it, and the source of my suspicious little funds also became, to her, perfectly clear. After that her manner grew much more open. She no longer treated me like an ordinary customer. Women who live in the shadows often do not fear men who also seem to have some darkness behind them. They are more likely to feel kindness, pity, and an odd kind of trust.

For my own part, I had only one real cause for caution. I did not care if common people saw me, or even if someone followed me through the bright street of night stalls and narrow lanes. At my age, and after the judgments already passed on me in earlier years, there was little left for me to protect in the eyes of decent society. What I feared were men of letters and newspaper men. If they discovered that I had begun to cross the river secretly at night for such amusements, they would surely try once more to make a scandal of it. So each evening, on the train and later in the crowded streets of that quarter, I kept watch before me, behind me, and on both sides. And as I did so, I thought that this uneasy caution would serve as an excellent experiment for describing the hidden life of Taneda Junpei in "Disappearance."

Part 8

I already knew the address of the house by the ditch, the one where I secretly went to see O-yuki. It stood at some number in Seventh District, Terajima Town. In that pleasure quarter, the place was not in the center. It was near the northwestern edge, away from the most important streets. If one wished to

compare it to Yoshiwara, one might say it was like a far corner near the river, not the bright heart of the district.

Since I had only lately heard the story, let me explain a little of the place's history. In the late Taisho years, when the ground behind Asakusa Kannon was cut down and wide new roads were opened, the bow-shooting booths and drinking shops that had long stood there were all ordered away. They moved without any fixed plan to both sides of Taisho Road, the same road where buses still ran. Then more such places were pushed out from other parts of Asakusa, until that road became lined almost completely with cheap drinking houses. The police then grew strict and forced them off the main road into side lanes.

Some of those people had tried to remain near the old places, in back streets by the park and Senzoku. But the earthquake ended all that. For a time they all fled to this district instead. After the city was rebuilt, a few changed their trade and tried to become proper geisha houses, but Tamanoi kept growing stronger in its own way and finally became almost a permanent pleasure town. In the beginning, the district was reached mainly from the direction of Shirahige Bridge, so the busiest part was near the old tram stop.

Then, in the spring of Showa five, when the city celebrated its rebuilding, a straight new road was opened from Azuma Bridge to Terajima Town. The city streetcar was extended as far as Akiba Shrine, buses went farther still to a garage at the edge of Seventh District, and the Tobu Railway set up Tamanoi Station on the southwest side of the quarter. From that time, people could come from Kaminarimon for only a few coins and still get there before midnight. So the whole shape of the district changed. Lanes that had once been hardest to find became easiest to enter, while places once called central were left at the edge.

Even after that change, the bank, the post office, the bathhouse, the small theater, the movie house, and Tamanoi Inari all remained on the old Taisho Road. On the newer road, which people called Hirokoji or the Improved Road, there were mostly taxis and lines of night stalls. There was not even a police box or a public toilet there. It amused me that even in such a rough new quarter, the same law of rise and fall still ruled. Places change their fortune as people do. Nothing keeps

its first place for long.

The house where O-yuki lived seemed to me tied by some strange fate to my own late and forgotten kind of life. It stood deep inside a lane off Taisho Road, beyond a dirty little Fushimi Inari shrine with worn flags, and farther in still along the ditch. Because it lay so far back, the sound of radios and gramophones from the main streets did not reach it clearly, and the footsteps of idle visitors grew faint before they came that far. For a man like me, driven from home by the radio next door, it was almost the best resting place that could be imagined. The farther I went into that lane, the more the noise of the present age seemed to fall away behind me.

In that quarter, I heard, there was a rule that from four in the afternoon, when the women sat at the windows, radios, gramophones, and even the shamisen were forbidden. On rainy nights, when the calls to customers died away little by little, the sound one heard most clearly was the whining of mosquitoes gathering inside and outside the houses. That sound made the place feel lonely in exactly the right way. Yet it was not the loneliness of a poor modern slum. It was rather the sad, old loneliness one feels in the back streets of an old play.

O-yuki herself, who always wore her hair in an old style, the dirty ditch beside the house, and the cry of the mosquitoes all struck my senses strongly and brought back images from thirty or forty years before. If I could, I would have thanked her openly for that gift. She had more power to call back the past than an actor in an old drama or a storyteller speaking of ancient lovers. She did it without speaking of the past at all. She did it only by being there.

When I watched her in the dim light, holding the rice tub close, filling her bowl, and quickly eating tea over rice while the mosquitoes cried outside, I would suddenly remember women I had known in youth and the poor rooms in which they had lived. Not only women of my own, but even the women of old friends returned to mind. In those days people did not speak of “boyfriends,” “girlfriends,” or an “love nest.” A man could call his woman simply “omae,” and that was enough. A husband might call his wife “okka,” and a wife might call her husband “chan,” and no one thought it strange.

The mosquitoes along the ditch still sang the same poor song of the outskirts that they had sung thirty years before, but the language of Tokyo had changed greatly in only ten years. Seeing a mosquito net hanging one night in O-yuki's room, I remembered some old lines I had once written: that they were clearing the place and hanging the net; that even without it the heat was hard to bear under a cotton net; that the whole house was full of autumn sunlight by the ditch; that in a poor life even the fan was broken in late heat; that the holes of the net had to be tied and tied again in September; that mosquitoes still came singing from the waste basket; that stains on the wall seemed to count the few that remained; and that perhaps even this net would at last be sold for drink in the late autumn. They were old verses, and half of them had been made when I went to visit a dead friend who had hidden with an unapproved lover in a row house behind Chokeyji in Fukagawa.

On the night when the net made me remember those lines, O-yuki had suddenly begun to suffer badly from a toothache. She had just left the window and gone under the net to lie down when I arrived, but soon she crawled back out again. There was no good place for her to sit, so she lowered herself beside me on the raised wooden step. "You are later than usual," she said. "You should not keep a person waiting so long." Her way of speaking had become rougher and more familiar ever since she decided that my business must be something secret and not fit for the open world.

"I am sorry," I said. "Is it your tooth?" "It started all at once," she answered, turning her cheek so I could see it. "It hurt so much I thought my head would spin. It is swollen, isn't it?" Then she said, "Please stay here and watch the place. I am going to the dentist while there is still time." I asked whether the dentist was nearby. She said it was just before the inspection office, near the public market, and then laughed that I seemed to know every corner of the district like a man with too many women. "Do not be so cruel," I answered. "This body may still rise in the world." "Then wait for me," she said. "If it takes too long, I will come back." "So I am the one waiting outside the mosquito net," I said, and she gave me a quick look before hurrying away.

As her language grew rougher, I too answered her in a similar tone. I did not do this in order to hide my station. I have long had the habit of speaking in the language of the person before me, just as one uses a foreign language in a foreign land. If another person says “I” in some rough local way, I can do the same. Speech is easy enough. Writing is harder. When modern women write letters, I find their short cut words and easy forms much harder to bear on paper than in speech.

That very day, while putting things out to air, I had found an old letter from a woman of long ago, a geisha who had once been kept in Komagata. In those years women still wrote in the old formal style, even if they knew only a little. Her letter said, in effect, that she had moved from her old, narrow place to a new address, that she was ashamed to have been silent for so long, that she had something she wished to tell me in person, and that I should please come when it suited me. She added directions by a bathhouse and a greengrocer, said that if the weather was good we might go together to Horikiri, and ended by saying that no written answer was needed.

In that letter, some of her spellings were wrong in the old downtown way. And the ferry she mentioned, like another ferry beside it, is gone now without a trace. Where, then, am I to search for the last remains of my youth? Sitting alone in O-yuki’s room while she had gone to the dentist, I felt that question more sharply than before. The ditch outside was dark, the mosquitoes went on singing, and the old city that had vanished seemed, for a little while, to come back and sit beside me.

Part 9

When O-yuki came back from the dentist, the room below was no longer empty. Someone had come to the window and pushed in a printed notice while calling, “Ando-san.” O-yuki picked it up and set it aside without much interest, but when I looked at it quietly, I saw that it was a police notice asking people to watch for a robber. She paid no attention to such things. Instead, she opened her mouth

toward the master of the house and said that the dentist had told her the bad tooth must be pulled the next day.

“Then you will not want anything to eat tonight,” the master said, getting ready to stand. I gave money to O-yuki in a way that could easily be seen, and before anyone could say more, I went upstairs first. The upper floor had only three small rooms. Near the window was a three-mat space with a low table, and beyond it were two more rooms, one about six mats and one about four and a half. The whole house had probably once been a single dwelling, later divided into a front half and a back half, so the walls were thin, and sounds from the neighboring side passed through them without effort.

I had often pressed my ear to those thin walls and laughed to myself at the clearness with which I could hear other people’s voices. “There you are again,” O-yuki said when she came up after me. “It is too hot for foolishness like that.” Then she went to the little room by the window, pulled back the faded curtain, and said, “Come here. There is a nice wind. Look, lightning again.” “It is a little cooler than before,” I answered, joining her. “Yes, this is better.”

Just below the window there were reed screens that hid the lower part of the lane, but above them one could see surprisingly far. I could see the upper windows of the houses across the ditch, women sitting by their own openings, the shadows of people walking up and down, and much of the lane itself. Above the roofs the sky hung low and heavy, the color of lead, without a star anywhere. The red glow of the neon lights from the main street reached even that low sky and made the hot night feel still heavier.

O-yuki took a cushion, placed it on the window sill, and sat down there looking out into the dark. After a short while she suddenly took my hand and said, “Listen. If I pay back all my debt, will you keep me as your woman?” I answered half in play, “You have seen what I am. That would be difficult.” “Do you mean I am not fit for it?” she asked. “If a man cannot support a woman, then he is not fit,” I said.

She did not answer at once. Somewhere down the lane a violin tune began to drift through the night, and she softly hummed along with it. When I tried to look at her face, she turned away, rose quickly, caught a pillar with one hand, and

leaned half her body out toward the open air. I sat back down at the little table, lit a cigarette, and said, "If only I were ten years younger." She turned at once and asked, "How old are you really?" "I will be sixty before long," I said.

She looked at me for a long moment and then laughed in disbelief. "No, you are not. You are not even forty. Thirty-seven, maybe thirty-eight." I said, "I was born as a kept woman's child, so perhaps I do not know my true age." She answered, "Even if you are forty, you look young. Your hair does not look that age at all." Then she asked me how old I thought she was. I said that she might look twenty-one or twenty-two, though perhaps she was twenty-four. She told me I was too smooth with my tongue and said she was twenty-six.

I asked again about something she had mentioned before. "You once told me you had been a geisha in Utsunomiya. How did you come here? Did you already know about this district?" "I had been in Tokyo for a while," she said. "And I needed money." I asked whether she had been frightened at first, since the life here was not the same as a geisha's life. She answered that she had known what she was doing before she came. A geisha, she said, remains buried in debts forever, while here, if one means to sink, it is better to go where the money is better and the end comes faster.

I told her that such clear thinking was admirable, and I asked whether she had thought of it by herself. She said that when she was still a geisha, an older woman from a teahouse whom she knew had already been working in this district and had explained things to her. "In that case," I said, "when the new year comes, earn what you can on your own and save what you can save." She answered that people told her her age was a good one for water-trade work, but that no one could really know what would happen later. Then she looked straight at me and said only, "Can they?"

That look made me uneasy. I could not say exactly why. It was not that I believed some immediate demand would follow, but I felt as if some unspoken thing were still caught between us. From the edge of the sky, already red from the neon signs, lightning flashed again. This time the light was sharp enough to hurt the eye, though no thunder followed, and the air, instead of growing cooler, turned

close and still again, like the breath before a storm.

“It looks as if another evening storm will come,” I said. O-yuki, still gazing outward, answered in a slow voice, “It has almost been three months since the day I came back from the hairdresser with you, has it not?” There was something in the way she stretched the last sound of the sentence that moved me more than the words themselves. If she had simply said, “It has been three months,” the remark would have been no more than talk. But the way she let it hang in the air made it seem like a question, a memory, and a request for an answer all at once.

I nearly replied aloud, yet in the end I said nothing. I only looked at her, and with my eyes tried to answer what my mouth could not. I could not understand why a woman who each night had to receive so many men coming into that lane should still remember the first evening when she and I had met. To remember it suggested that the memory had some sweetness for her. But I had never imagined that a woman of such a place could feel, even by mistake, any soft or tender feeling toward a man like me, whom she did not even judge to be old enough.

The truth was that I had reasons of my own for going to her house so often. I wanted to study the district for my story “Disappearance.” I wanted to escape the radio next door. I wanted to avoid the bright and empty modern life of central Tokyo. None of those reasons could be spoken to her. Her house was, for me, only a resting place during my evening walks, and in order to keep it so, I had allowed her first mistake about me to remain uncorrected. I had even deepened that mistake by my words and manner. I could not quite free myself from blame for that.

In truth, I know very little of society outside the quarters where women are bought and sold. I do not wish to explain here why that should be so. Let it be enough to say that if anyone wished to know what kind of man I have been, he might find a clue in some old writings of mine. Long ago I wrote that a man may go for years into such dark places not because he mistakes them for pure places, but because he knows them to be dark from the beginning. He may prefer to find one remnant of fine stitching on a thrown-away rag rather than stare at stains upon a wall that claims to be white.

I had once written also that in the proud halls of justice one may often find filth dropped by birds and rats, while in the valleys of vice one may sometimes gather flowers of human feeling and the fruit of honest tears. Those are large words, and perhaps foolish ones. Yet they explain why I was not greatly afraid of the women who lived among the smell of the ditch and the crying of mosquitoes. Before I even knew them, I had already felt something like closeness to them. Sitting beside O-yuki in that dim upper room, with the red sky over the roofs and the lane below still restless in the heat, I understood that this feeling had not been a mistake.

Part 10

I knew that if I wished to grow close to women like these, or at least not to be kept at a respectful distance, it was better to hide my true place in the world. I did not want them to think, “This is a man who need not come to such a place.” If they thought that, they would put a space between us at once. They would become careful, polite, and cold. For me, that would have been worse than being misunderstood.

I had already seen a small proof of this. One night, near the end of the improved road by the city bus garage, a policeman had stopped me and questioned me. I disliked naming myself as a writer, and I disliked even more the trouble that would come after such a name was known. So I had been forced to take a taxi and go around by a larger road, moving outside the maze instead of through it. After that, I bought a map, studied the streets, and made up my mind never again to pass a police box late at night if I could help it.

All these thoughts came back to me now because I could not find any proper answer to what O-yuki had said. The smoke of a cigarette seemed the only thing that might hide my face from her eyes. She kept looking at me with those dark, heavy eyes of hers, and then at last she said, “You truly look so much like him. That night, when I first saw your back, I was startled.” “Is that so?” I answered, trying to sound easy. “A man can resemble anyone. Such things happen.” Then I asked, “Who was it? A dead patron of yours?”

“No,” she said. “It was from the time when I had only just become a geisha. I thought if I could not be together with him, I would die.” “When people lose their heads,” I said, “they all feel something like that for a little while.” She gave me a quick look and said, “You too? You do not seem the kind.” “Do I seem so calm?” I answered. “A man is not always what he looks like. You should not despise him too quickly.”

She smiled then, but it was only half a true smile. The small hollow in one cheek, which usually made her face seem almost girlish, looked different that night. It was as if she had called it up by force in order to cover something else. Because her face changed so slightly and yet so clearly, my heart grew even more uneasy. I asked whether her tooth had begun to hurt again, and she said that the injection had already taken the pain away.

Our talk broke off once more. Then, by good fortune, someone who sounded like one of her regular customers knocked below. O-yuki quickly leaned out of the window and looked down past the screen. “Oh, Take-san,” she called. “Come up.” As she ran down the stairs, I followed more slowly, slipped away into the toilet for a little while, and waited there until the customer had gone upstairs. Then I came out as quietly as I could and stepped outside into the lane.

The evening storm that had seemed ready to burst did not come after all. I had gone out to escape the heat of the lower room, where the fire for tea was never allowed to die and where the mosquitoes gathered in wild numbers. Since it was still too early to go home, I walked along the ditch and came out to a side street with a small bridge across it. Festival stalls stood on both sides, and the whole place had the restless light of a holiday night. Men, women, children, and idle young fellows moved slowly under the lamps as if the heat itself had driven them all into the open.

I should have mentioned this before. After I had grown used, in body as well as in mind, to going every night into that district, I began to change my clothes before leaving home. I copied the people who walked about looking at the night stalls. I put on old trousers and old wooden clogs, found an old hand towel for my head, and tied it in a rough way that no proper man would have used on an ordinary city

street.

Once I was dressed like that, I could go south toward Sunamachi or north toward Senju and even farther without fear that anyone would turn to look closely at my face. I looked like any common man of those outer districts, a fellow out to buy something cheap or pass the time. So that night too, I moved carefully through the crowd, watching my unfamiliar clogs so that I would not stumble or have my bare feet crushed. I crossed to the Inari shrine at the end of a lane opposite, prayed there in my casual way, and looked at the stalls gathered around the dirty old flags and little dark shrine.

At one stall I bought a pot of ever-blooming flowers. Carrying it carefully, I came out by another lane and returned to Taisho Road. A little ahead, on the right side, stood a police box. I thought I would probably be safe, because I was dressed like the people of that quarter and carried a flower pot like a man on an ordinary errand, yet I preferred not to test my luck. So I turned away before reaching it.

Behind the shops on one side of that road spread the quarter called the First Section, a maze of lanes and houses. The ditch that ran through the Second Section, where O-yuki lived, came out suddenly by the roadside at the end of the First. It passed in front of a bathhouse called Nakajima-yu and then slipped again into the hidden streets of the pleasure quarter. The place where I now walked was one of the busiest and narrowest in the whole district, with parts of the First and Second Sections on one side and the Third on the other. There were kimono shops, a women's clothing store, a Western-style eating place, a post box, and the hot movement of many people all crowded into one thin street.

Yet under all that noise, the uneasiness that had begun upstairs with O-yuki still had not left me. I knew almost nothing of her past. She said she had once been a geisha somewhere, but she sang no long songs, played no shamisen, and showed little skill in the older arts. Her speech had almost no country accent, yet the clearness of her skin and the shape of her face made me think she was not born in Tokyo itself. I guessed that she was the daughter of people who had come from some distant province and settled near the city.

She was lively by nature and did not seem to sink too deeply under the weight

of her present life. Even so, I now saw more clearly than before that the women in the windows and the men who passed outside were joined by a thread that could not be cut. The men laughed, bargained, called names, and moved on. The women answered in the same light tone. But under that play there was still the old human wish to be seen, chosen, taken away, or saved. Thinking of this, I could no longer treat O-yuki's earlier words as a simple joke.

When the bright part of the street near the post box and the cloth shop fell behind me, the road gradually grew quieter. A rice dealer, a vegetable shop, a fish cake seller, and at last a timber yard appeared one after another, and with each familiar sign my feet seemed to grow surer of their direction. In one lane I could already see the dirty banners of Fushimi Inari, though most first-time visitors seemed never to notice them. Since few people came in and out there, I always used that entrance myself. It led behind the front row of houses, where fig trees grew and where one could move without attracting much notice.

There was still a customer upstairs, for the curtain in the upper room held the shadow of light behind it, and the lower window stood open. The radio from the front street had at last gone quiet. I lifted the flower pot and set it softly inside through the open window. Then, without waiting or calling out, I turned away. Leaving the pot there in silence felt easier than facing her again that night, so I walked on toward Shirahige Bridge alone.

Part 11

When I reached Shirahige Bridge that night, I stopped and leaned against the rail. Below me the river moved in darkness, and from a park farther downstream I could hear dance music and festival singing carried over the water. My unfinished story, "Disappearance," came back to me at once. I had begun it at the start of summer, and even now it still lay unfinished on my desk. When I remembered O-yuki saying, "It has almost been three months," I realized that the story had already been delayed much longer than I had meant.

The last part I had written ended on a bridge very much like this one. Taneda

Junpei and the café girl Sumiko stood together in the hot night, speaking of what might happen to them in the future. At first, when I planned that story, I had thought it easy enough to make a fifty-one-year-old man and a woman of twenty-four come together for a short hidden life. But as I wrote, I began to doubt it. It started to seem forced, like something arranged too neatly by an author.

Now, however, the memory of O-yuki at the upstairs window changed my mind again. The tone of her voice, the way she leaned there and said that three months had passed, seemed to answer my doubt for me. What I had thought unnatural was perhaps not unnatural at all. It was not some false trick added by a writer. It was a thing that could happen quietly, without either person fully understanding how it had happened.

When I got home, I washed my face, combed my hair, and at once lit incense beside my inkstone. Then I took up the old draft and read the last lines I had written. Taneda and Sumiko stood on the bridge and spoke softly so that no one nearby would hear them. He joked that he was living like a criminal in hiding, and she warned him not to speak so loudly. He answered that, although such a hidden life was fearful, it also gave him a strange feeling that he would never forget.

Sumiko tried to cheer him and told him not to give himself up to dark thoughts. Taneda said he felt younger all at once, as if his life had suddenly woken again. She said that people live according to their state of mind, and that she herself was no longer truly young either. She spoke of working seriously, saving money, and perhaps opening a small oden shop. He worried about the money, asked about the woman who would help her, and listened while she explained all her little plans.

So the unfinished scene remained on my desk, still warm in my mind, while my own life continued across the river in another hidden lane. Some days later, after that troubled night with O-yuki, I stayed home for three days. I was busy with my books and with airing them in the late summer heat, a task I have always loved. Yet even while I handled old volumes and stood among the smell of paper and sun, I felt that I was avoiding a place to which I ought to go.

On the fourth evening, after supper, I could bear it no longer. The light was already fading earlier than before, though the heat had not lessened. I took the

train, then the subway, then a taxi from Kaminarimon, trying by every means to shorten the journey. I will not pretend this was ordinary. Though I had spent my youth in idle pleasure often enough, I had not for many years felt such restless haste in going to see a woman.

When I entered the familiar lane, even the old shrine flags seemed changed. The dirty banners at Fushimi Inari had all been replaced, and the new ones were white instead of red. The fig tree and the grapevine by the ditch were still there, but their leaves were thinner now, and the season, though still hot, had moved a little farther toward autumn. At the window I saw O-yuki, but her hair was dressed in a different style, and for a moment I almost thought I had come to the wrong house. Then she opened the door quickly and called, "You," first in a strong voice, then in a softer one, and said she had been worried.

At first I did not understand. I sat down at the entrance without even taking off my clogs, and she told me that something had appeared in the newspaper. She had thought it might perhaps be about me, though the details did not quite fit. I then understood what she meant and answered in a low voice that I was never careless in that way and was always on my guard. She said that when a person who usually comes does not come, the place feels strangely empty, no matter what else happens.

We spoke of the heat, and while I said how long it had lasted, she suddenly put her hand against my forehead and crushed a mosquito there. The mosquitoes were fiercer than before. She wiped the blood from my skin and from her own hand with a little piece of paper, showed it to me, and rolled it up. Then, as if nothing had happened, she called out through the window for two bowls of iced shiratama and also asked someone to buy mosquito incense.

She sat there at the window, teasing the men who passed and answering their jokes in return, while between those exchanges she spoke back to me over her shoulder. When the sweets came, she told me she would treat me that night. She remembered that I liked shiratama and joked that, since she had real feeling for me, I should stop wandering from house to house. I told her that if I did not come there, she imagined at once that I must be going to some other woman. She only

answered that men were all much the same.

While she laughed and played with the passersby, I sat in the corner and watched. It struck me again that even such talk through the window was tied by some thin thread to ordinary human feeling outside. The men in the lane still belonged to the world beyond, and she, sitting within, had not yet become wholly cut off from that world. That was why her cheerfulness seemed real. That was also why I felt more sharply than ever that she had begun to dream a false dream about me.

I knew then that I ought to end matters before they went farther. She had started to think that I might change her life. But I was not the man to do that, and even if I told her the truth about myself, she would only be hurt and disappointed. She had become, without knowing it, both a comfort to my tired heart and the strange helper who had given life again to my unfinished manuscript. For that very reason, I wanted to thank her and apologize to her, yet could do neither.

As the night grew later, a wind rushed in from the main street, ran through the lane, and shook the cords of the little curtain bells. Their sound, mixed with the quieter footsteps outside and an occasional sneeze from another window, made the autumn night seem suddenly deeper. Then O-yuki left the window, came back into the room, lit a cigarette, and as if only just remembering it, said, "Will you come early tomorrow?" I asked, "Early in the evening?" She said no, much earlier than that, because Tuesday was her clinic day and the place closed at eleven in the morning.

She wanted me to go with her to Asakusa. I almost agreed. It even crossed my mind that such an outing might serve as a kind of farewell cup before parting. But the thought of being seen in daylight by some reporter or literary man frightened me, and so I asked instead whether she needed to buy something. She said she wanted a watch, and since lined clothes for autumn would soon be needed, she also needed cloth and sewing things.

I asked how much such things would cost. She said at least thirty yen. I took out my wallet and told her to go by herself and order what she needed. When she stared at me in sudden delight, I looked hard at her face, wishing to remember it

as clearly as possible. Then I set the notes on the little table one by one. At that moment the owner knocked, and O-yuki, stopping halfway through some grateful words, hid the money inside her sash.

I left the house at once. At the entrance of the lane, the wind struck my bare head so sharply that I lifted a hand, only then remembering that I wore no hat. The flags at the shrine snapped wildly, the leaves of the fig and grape made a dry dead sound in the dark, and above the wider street the stars shone with a cold clearness that made the loneliness of the night even greater. I took my usual wandering road back toward the bridge, but the moon was gone, and the river wind had grown cool enough that I finally crouched by the tram stop to shelter myself beside the waiting shed.

Four or five days passed. In spite of all my resolutions, I felt again that I wanted to go once more, if only to look at her face without letting her know I was there. I even blamed the radio next door, as if that were the true reason, and crossed the river again. Before entering the lane I bought a cap to hide myself, waited until a small group of idlers went in ahead of me, and followed in their shadow. From the far side of the ditch I saw O-yuki at the window in her old hairstyle again, but I also saw that another woman had now taken the next window under the same roof.

I turned away into another lane. The night was hot and crowded, the corners jammed with people, and the air so close that I came out at last onto the wider road and stood sweating at the bus stop. An empty city bus stopped almost as if it had come for me, yet I did not get on. I let one bus pass, then another, then more, until at last I told myself I should go back and say goodbye properly. It would be better, I thought, than vanishing like a coward.

So I returned. O-yuki welcomed me as if she had expected me, but instead of seating me in the downstairs room as before, she led me at once upstairs. I understood the reason when she said that the owner and his wife were below, and that even an old servant woman who cooked rice had now come to stay. The house had grown noisy and full. O-yuki thanked me again for the money and said the new things should be ready the next day. But with the owner's family below and customers coming and going, neither she nor I could speak freely. I left after less

than half an hour, with everything unsaid.

Then the season moved forward all at once. The equinox came with violent weather, sudden rain, and fierce wind. Plants in my garden bent and broke. I stood looking at the ruined leaves and flowers after the storms and remembered old Chinese lines about wind and rain at an autumn window. The days passed, and on the night of the harvest moon I learned at last that O-yuki had fallen ill and had been taken into a hospital. It was only from the servant woman at the window that I heard it, and she could not even tell me what the sickness was. By October the cold came early, the shutters of the neighboring house were closed against the night, and even the radio next door no longer drove me from my desk as it had before.

Part 12

The story should really stop here. If I wished to make it end like an old-fashioned novel, I could easily do so. I could write that, half a year later, or perhaps after a full year, I met O-yuki again by chance in some place where I never expected to see her. I could say that she had already left that life and become an ordinary woman. Such an ending would not be hard to make.

If I wanted to make that meeting even more sad, I could invent a sharper scene. I could have us see each other from passing cars, or from the windows of passing trains, and let our eyes meet while no words could be spoken. I could choose a lonely river crossing in autumn, with reeds and falling leaves and a cold wind over the water. Such a place would be very suitable for sorrow. But that would only be a writer arranging tears too carefully.

The truth is simpler and also more painful. O-yuki and I never learned each other's real names, and we never knew each other's true addresses. We only met in that back street east of the river, in a house by the ditch where mosquitoes cried in the dark. Once such two people are parted, there is almost no chance that they will ever meet again. There is no road left between them.

It was only a light affair of love, or what people may call by that name. Even

so, the sadness of parting was not light, because from the first there was no hope of meeting again in any proper way. If I try to speak of that sadness fully, I fall into exaggeration. If I pass over it too quickly, then I fail to tell the truth of the feeling. In either case, something is lost.

A better writer might handle such a thing well. He might show the feeling clearly and still keep it quiet. I do not trust myself to do that here. If I tried too hard, I would only seem to be copying the touching endings of other books, and the result would be worse than silence. For that reason, I would rather stop before I make the story false.

Even so, there are some things that remain in my mind and cannot be pushed away. Long before O-yuki fell ill, I had already felt, without any clear reason, that she would not remain for very long in that poor house by the ditch, selling her charm so cheaply. In my younger days I heard an old man, who knew the world of pleasure very well, say something strange. When a man thinks, "I must settle matters soon with this woman, or someone else will take her away," then that woman will either die, or suddenly be carried off by some unpleasant man to a far place. He said that such groundless fears sometimes come true.

O-yuki had a beauty and quickness of mind that did not belong naturally to that district. She stood out from the others the way a single white bird may stand out in a dark flock. Yet times are different now, and I tell myself there is no need to imagine death so easily. She may recover. She may live. She may simply leave that life and be drawn, by duty or by chance, into some other road.

Still, one image remains with me more strongly than all the rest. I see again the closely packed roofs, the heavy lights shining up into the dark air before a storm, and the upper window where O-yuki and I stood side by side. I remember that we held each other's damp hands, speaking in half-formed words that were almost like riddles. Then lightning flashed suddenly, and for an instant her face shone out against the darkness.

That side of her face, shown in one white cut of light, has never truly left my eyes. Since I was twenty, I have played many games of love, some foolish and some sad. Yet I did not think that, in my old age, I would still come to such a state

of mind, and speak again of such a dream. Fate makes a mockery of a man in strange ways. It leaves him old, but does not always leave him free.

There are still a few empty lines on the back of my manuscript. I will use them as they are, without much thought for form. I will write something between prose and verse, because plain explanation is no longer enough. Perhaps these lines will do nothing. But at least they may give a little rest to the sadness of this night.

A mosquito was still alive, even in that late season, and it bit my forehead. You wiped the small drop of blood with a piece of paper from my pocket and threw it away in a corner of the garden. Near that place one stem of a plant still stood, though the cold nights had already begun. It did not know that it too would soon fall. Yet even while its leaves were drying, their colors only grew deeper and more beautiful.

I think of that poor plant again and again. It does not wait for the evening wind, and it does not understand that frost is already coming toward it. It only stands there in its fading richness, growing more moving because it is near its end. A hurt butterfly still wanders near it, shaking its broken wings. Even that butterfly may mistake the dying leaves for a flower that has come back again.

There is no time to build even a short dream of shelter now, because late autumn is already closing in. Evening gathers early over the corner of the garden. The place where you threw away the blood-marked paper has grown darker than before. I stand there alone after parting from you. Beside that single stem, which is fated to fall, I too remain standing, and I ask myself what kind of heart can go on like this.

If the weather grows colder night after night, that stem will not live long. I know this, and still I cannot turn away from it. In the same way, I know that you and I were never meant to walk together beyond that narrow season, and still the memory remains. It does not burn like a great fire. It stays instead like a small cold light that will not go out. Such is the whole of it.

On October 30, I laid down my pen.

Afterword: A Few Words after the Story

I wrote this account of the pleasure quarter in Terajima Town, east of the Sumida River, and I gave it the title *Bokuto Kidan*. The unusual character in the word *Bokuto* is an old literary character once used for the Sumida River. An earlier scholar made it for that purpose, and later writers used it again from time to time. In more recent years it had fallen out of common use, and that was exactly why I chose it. I wanted a title that sounded older, more distant, and a little more elegant than the plain names used in daily speech.

At first I had given the manuscript a simpler title, something closer to “Tamanoi Story.” Later I changed my mind. The district of Tamanoi lies not directly on the riverbank itself, but rather to the east of the old river world of Mukojima. So I did not wish to call it merely “above the river.” I wanted a title that suggested the eastern shadow of that older world, a place near it and yet apart from it. That was how the final title came to me.

In earlier years, when I still had certain friends beside me, I would have spoken with them at once about such a title. One old friend, Inoue Aashi, had already been gone for many years. Another, Kōjiro Sōyō, died only the year before, and since then I have had almost no one left with whom I could discuss such small literary pleasures. If Sōyō had still been alive, I would have carried this manuscript to him as soon as I finished it. He knew the hidden ways of that district far better than I did, and he could explain them as easily as a man points to the lines of his own hand.

When talk turned to that maze of lanes, he would borrow a pen, turn over the empty side of a cigarette box, and draw a map at once. He would mark the roads from the city center into the labyrinth, then show where each lane began, where it split, and where it joined another. He loved that kind of knowledge, and he shared it with delight. In those days I often met him at the crossing in Ginza at night. He did not like to wait for people inside cafés. He preferred to stand outside on the street, watching the city while he waited.

He was that sort of man in everything. While standing at a corner, or under a tree near a café, he would observe the passersby and write brief notes in his pocketbook. He counted how many women passed in Western dress, how many café girls walked with men, how many beggars or street performers appeared, and at what hour. He seemed never to grow tired of watching ordinary streets. He found his amusement not in society, but in the movement of the city itself. In this, he was unlike most men, and perhaps that is why I remember him so often.

One summer night in Tamanoi, while walking near the Inari shrine, I heard a young female street performer call out to me in a friendly voice. At first I did not know her. Then I remembered that years before I had seen her in Ginza when she was still a child, wearing bright red and black, carrying little clappers instead of a shamisen. Sōyō had known her then, and he would talk even with such girls while waiting for the last tram. Now she had grown up, her face a little prettier, her style more womanly, and she told me she no longer worked in Ginza.

I asked whether she liked the new district better. She said there was nothing truly good anywhere, but in Ginza, if a night went badly, she had too far to walk home. Now she lived in another place and worked in Tamanoi instead. I gave her a small tip, as I had once done when I met such girls in the old streets. Later I saw her once more, and after that the weather turned colder, so I no longer came so often at night. Yet I often thought of her, because in the space of only five years her whole small life had already moved from one world to another.

Thinking of her led me also to think of how much Ginza itself had changed. Much that had once seemed fixed had disappeared after the earthquake and rebuilding. Old shops had given way to new ones. Narrow streets filled with eating places from distant regions. More people from outside Tokyo had come in, and with them came other habits of food, noise, and street life. Even cafés and bars changed their names and their style so quickly that one could hardly keep up with them. A person who had known the district before the disaster could no longer walk there without feeling that he was moving through layers of time at once.

I remember, too, a small matter that may seem unimportant, yet to me says much about the age. People began to like iced coffee and iced tea so much that

many no longer wished to drink them warm. To me this always seemed a strange injury done to the nature of those drinks, because their fragrance is half their worth, and coldness destroys that fragrance. I have always disliked seeing things changed too far from their original character, whether in food, language, or art. A foreign thing should be enjoyed as a foreign thing, not bent too quickly to passing custom.

In the years when Sōyō was still living, we often sat late into the night at a coffee shop called Manchatei in West Ginza. We sat outside under the roadside trees because the inside was hot and full of flies. There he watched the people coming and going from the nearby bars and cafés, and between such observations he told me whatever he had just seen in the lanes nearby. He might report a quarrel, a drunken man, an old café girl now turned proprietress, or some other tiny change in the city's life. From him I learned more of modern Tokyo than I ever could have learned by sitting alone in my study.

He had lived a life of repeated disappointment. He worked in schools, offices, bookshops, and libraries, and later devoted himself to writing and research, yet success did not stay with him. Even so, he was never loudly bitter. He used his narrow and unlucky life as a chance to watch the city more freely than other men did. When he died in the spring of the year before, people learned that he had left behind almost nothing of value except old books, armor, and a few potted plants. He had possessed no hidden fortune at all.

In those late-night walks with him, we often spoke of the modern habit of crowding, competing, and pushing ahead. We saw it in cafés, in taxis, in trains, and in eating houses after midnight. Men wanted to be first in everything. They wanted the first seat, the first order, the first fame, the first gain. Even schoolboys seemed trained from childhood to push forward in crowds and to think of all life as a race for advantage. This desire to feel superior seemed to me one of the strongest marks of the present age.

I do not belong to that spirit. I dislike groups, cliques, and parties formed for mutual praise or mutual force. In literature as in life, I prefer those who stand apart. A flock may seem safe, yet even wild geese flying together are shot by hunters. Solitary birds are in greater danger perhaps, but they keep their own shape. I have

long felt the same about artists, and even about the women of the pleasure world. Some hide in crowds and systems. Others live almost alone in the shadows, and for that reason seem to me sadder, and sometimes finer.

In the autumn of this same year, on my way once more toward Tamanoi, I found myself remembering other public sights as well: celebration cars full of lights, popular dances in public parks, and all the other noisy signs by which the modern city congratulates itself. Years earlier I had half expected such public dancing to cause uproar, but it passed without trouble. The age had changed. Things once thought dangerous were now accepted if only they wore the correct clothing and came under the correct name. Such changes in public feeling interest me, though I do not always admire them.

Then one winter morning, I woke earlier than usual to the sound of voices and brooms outside. Sunlight had begun to fall on the leaves and fruit beyond my window. The maids in the neighboring house and in mine were sweeping fallen leaves on both sides of the hedge, and the dry sound of those leaves reached my ear more clearly than usual. Every year, when I hear that sound in winter, I remember an old line of verse about sorrow being like leaves: no matter how often one sweeps, there are always more.

That morning the insects were gone, the air had turned clear, and the season of late autumn had finally passed. Everything in the garden looked calm, and yet the calm only deepened my sense of loss. The sights of the hot nights, the moonlit roads, the lanes of Tamanoi, and the people who had once walked beside me all felt already far away. The world itself had not changed so much from year to year, but the people had. One by one, those whom I had known well had gone ahead of me into death. Knowing this, I felt that my own turn could not be very far off.

So I thought I should go and sweep the graves of those old companions. Fallen leaves must be covering them just as they covered my own garden. That seemed the proper close to these reflections. The city keeps changing, new lights appear, new crowds gather, and new streets make noise through the night. Yet in the end, the season turns, the leaves fall, and memory leads us back not to the bright center of the city, but to the places where the dead lie quietly under the trees.