

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: Miira no Kuchibeni (木乃伊の口紅)

Author: Tamura Toshiko (田村俊子)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)

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

Original Japanese text available at:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000655/card5006.html>

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Tamura Toshiko, *Lipstick on a Mummy [Miira no Kuchibeni]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

A lonely wind came through the trees, and the tall dark tops moved in the weak air of an early January evening. From the upstairs window, Minoru could see the bare branches, the cloudy yellow sky, and the roof of a five-story pagoda far away. She stood there with her hands under her sleeves and thought about her husband, Yoshio, who had gone out in the morning to look for work without any clear plan. A pale strip of light on the wall slowly died, and the room grew dim from one end to the other. She remembered that she had meant to buy tofu for supper, yet she felt too tired to go downstairs. Even when she heard the tofu seller's whistle and the steps of people passing the house, she did not move.

On clear evenings, she thought, the woods of Ueno would be covered by a soft purple mist at this hour. She liked to imagine that the sky, before leaving the trees, breathed that color across the world as a last secret gift. But tonight there was no softness in the air. The roofs and branches looked dry and hard, and the darkness came over them like a thin cold cloth. When she looked down, she saw the daughter of the music teacher next door come out and bow with a small smile. At once Minoru remembered an evening in summer when that same girl had seen her leaning on Yoshio's shoulder, and the old shame flashed back into her chest.

Minoru gave a quick, awkward bow in return and hurried downstairs. She shut the storm shutters in the lower room, turned on the light in the tea room, and then stepped out to the gate. In front of the house lay the shared graveyard, with two or three fresh grave markers standing among the older ones. The narrow road beside it was white and empty in the fading light, and no one was there. Their thin little dog, Mei, was running around with a twig in its mouth, its pale body almost the color of stone in the evening shadow. When it came near her feet, it sat facing the same road and waited with her, its tail moving only a little on the cold ground.

"Mei," Minoru said softly, looking down at the small head under her sleeve.

The dog lifted its face to her, then turned one ear as if trying to catch some far-off sound from the still air. From the graveyard came a cold wind that seemed to pull at the roots of a person's hair. Minoru looked first one way and then the other along the road, but she saw only the weak lamp of a boarding house a few doors away. That small light remained in her heart like the only warm thing in a pale world. At last she went back inside, bringing the silence with her.

By the time Yoshio came home, a fine rain had begun to fall. He stepped in with wet shoes, his head bent, his Western suit hanging badly on his narrow body. Without much care, he passed through the bright tea room, went to the inner room, and threw himself down with the cloth bundle he had carried all day. "No good," he said at once. "Nowhere would buy my manuscript." Minoru had expected as much when she saw he still carried the bundle, yet hearing him say it still hurt her. He had been wandering from shop to shop all day, and she felt sorry for him as if he were a small bird lost in the rain.

"Did you eat anything?" she asked. Yoshio pressed his face to the mat and answered that he had eaten nothing after walking to so many bookstores. His voice sounded dull, as if it came through cloth. Minoru had not eaten either, because she could not bear to sit alone with chopsticks while he was out. The moment she heard that he was hungry, she felt all the simple joy of a meal return to her body at once. She went into the kitchen and began to prepare food with quick hands. Until the trays were ready, Yoshio did not move from where he lay.

After they finished eating, Yoshio put down his chopsticks and said, "I am a useless man. I do not have the power to support you." He lay down again as if even those words had tired him. Minoru did not answer. Instead, she cleared away the meal, opened the drawers of the chest, and quietly took out a few things one by one. Yoshio watched her and asked if she was going out. She said yes, because there was nothing else to do.

She wrapped the things in a cloth, put on her coat over her everyday clothes, and tied the strings at her knees beside Yoshio's pillow. "I will go and come back," she said, touching his forehead. "You will not be lonely by yourself, will you?" His forehead felt cold under her hand, and after a short pause he said he would go

with her. She told him he had better change, because his Western suit would look strange for this errand. While he changed, she stood before the mirror with the large bundle in her arms and thought that if she were alone, she could ride there and return quickly. Because he was coming, they would have to walk in the rain, but she kept that thought to herself.

They closed up the house and stepped outside with umbrellas. Minoru saw Mei in the dark corner of the wet garden and spoke to it like a child. "Stay here and guard the house. We will bring you something when we come back." The little dog already knew the signs and was trying to hide under the veranda before it could be shut inside. Even after the gate closed behind them, Minoru kept thinking of the dog waiting silently in the dark. A little farther on, Yoshio noticed the heavy bundle and offered to carry it for her.

At the tram stop many people were waiting because the cars were late. The rain had only just begun, but earth, wood, clothes, and air were already filled with the same cold wet smell. Minoru stood a little apart from Yoshio, who held the bundle under his coat. Even after they got on the tram, they avoided looking at each other in the bright light among strangers. Now and then Minoru noticed the corner of the bundle showing under Yoshio's coat, and she saw how poor and awkward he looked. She turned her face away and stared at the lamps outside, blurred by rain.

When they came out again in the town, Minoru went into a side street alone and then returned to where Yoshio was waiting under his umbrella. Her face had a small hidden smile on it. "Did it go well?" he asked. "Yes," she answered. The large bundle was gone now, and the paper money left in her coat pocket made both of them feel, for a moment, almost like ordinary people. As a slow tram passed before them, Minoru looked at Yoshio and smiled on purpose, as if they must quickly bring back some lost duty of closeness between them. He smiled too, rubbing his chin, but there was unease in his eyes.

"I am freezing," Minoru said. "I need something warm." She walked ahead, and together they went into a small Western-style restaurant near the ward office. There were no customers inside, and the room felt both bright and empty. Minoru glanced at herself in the mirror and then stood by the stove with Yoshio, warming

her hands and lightly pressing her shoulder against him to cheer him. She knew he often looked at his own poverty with a wounded, fallen look, and she hated that expression in him. “Do not look so miserable,” she said with a laugh, but the joke only hurt him.

Yoshio stayed silent for a while, staring into the fire. Then he said there had been something unpleasant that day. He had seen a review of his writing, he said, and the review called it old and worn out. Minoru laughed and answered, “Well, that cannot be helped.” Yoshio turned to her sharply and repeated her words as if they were a blow. She smiled again, but this time the smile only made the distance between them clearer. At last he said, with red eyes and a low voice, “You are a person with very little sympathy,” and Minoru said nothing at all.

Part 2

“So you really think I am a useless man,” Yoshio said when they left the restaurant and started up the dark slope toward home. The street lamps were wet with rain, and the drops on the glass made the light look weak and tired. Their shadows moved beside them like two people who had fallen far down in life and were trying to hide in a corner of the night. Yoshio walked fast, and his voice came out harder each time he spoke. Minoru said nothing, but she could feel that the quiet between them had already broken.

Yoshio could not bear the thought of his day. He had failed to find work, failed to sell his writing, and then had found a printed review that laughed at him. That shame already hurt him enough, but what hurt more was Minoru’s laugh and her light voice saying that it could not be helped. He had wanted her to stand beside him against the world, even for one minute. Instead, he felt that she had stepped away and joined the people who looked down on him.

“You stay with a man you do not respect,” he said, not turning back. “You can smile in front of a husband you think is worth nothing. You are colder than a bad woman from the street.” He kept speaking in that cruel way and went on ahead through the rain. Minoru followed in silence, her wet hem clinging to her legs and

making each step slow and heavy. She tried to catch up, but Yoshio was already too far before her.

When she finally entered the house, Yoshio had already thrown himself down beside the little brazier. Minoru took the small loaf of bread from its paper bag and tore off pieces for Mei, who had run after her into the kitchen space. She moved on purpose without looking at Yoshio, as if she could protect herself by keeping her face turned away. “Hey,” he called in a sharp voice. “What?” she answered, but she stayed where she was, touching the dog and asking softly if it had been lonely by itself.

In a sudden movement Yoshio got up, crossed the room, and kicked Mei in the side where it lay with its head on Minoru’s knee. “Put it out,” he said. He stood there with his jaw pushed forward, as if all his strength had gathered only to give that one order. The little dog, even after being kicked, crawled back toward his feet and tried to play with the end of his sock. “Come here,” Minoru said to the dog, catching it by the collar and drawing it close once before she led it away.

She pulled the dog through the lattice door and thrust it out into the rainy dark, then shut the door and came back in. When she sat down before Yoshio again, she held her mouth tight, as if she were trying to keep back both breath and tears. He had already thrown himself down once more and now stared at the ceiling. “Let us separate,” he said at last. The words were flat, but they struck her harder than any shout. She lifted her face, and the tears she had held back rose at once into her eyes.

Yoshio lay there and thought of the long road ahead. Could this warm, demanding woman remain tied to his weak life for ten years, twenty years, all his life? Since their marriage, he thought, there had not been one true word of comfort from her, not one soft word that had made poverty easier to carry. When he looked back over their months together, he remembered not peace but her restless laughter, her bright moods, her body always near him, and the heavy smell of life itself. In that bitter moment, even her nearness felt like another weight he could not support.

“A man like me cannot keep a wife,” he said. “I do not even have the power to

feed myself.” “I know that,” Minoru answered clearly, and when she spoke, tears spilled down her face. “Then we should part now,” he said. “It will be better for both of us.” Minoru swallowed, pressed her hands together, and said, “I will work too. I will do something. In time, I will.”

Then both of them fell silent. Through that silence, the graveyard in front of the house seemed to send in a strange fear, as if voices of the dead had begun to whisper through the rain. At last Yoshio spoke again. “Work? What can you do?” he said. “You are finished too. You have less future than I do.” Then he began naming other women who had started in art at the same time as Minoru and were still shining in that world, women whom people praised and remembered.

“You cannot do it,” he said. “If I am old and out of date, then you are old too.” Minoru kept crying, and the sound of it filled the poor room. She thought of the two of them as a man and a woman who had both wished for art without having enough gift or enough strength, and who had now fallen together into a hard life that neither could escape. “Why are you crying?” Yoshio asked. “Because it is sad,” she answered. “I will take revenge. For your sake, I will take revenge on the world. I will. I really will.”

“That means nothing,” Yoshio said at once. “If you can work, then work now. It lowers your value to live playing in the hands of such a weak husband. If you truly believe you can do something, then do it for yourself.” Minoru looked up with wet shining eyes. “I cannot work now,” she said. “The time has not come. You cannot ask the impossible.” But when Yoshio saw the stubborn fire still alive in her face, his anger rose again. “Words are easy,” he said. “Nothing ever appears in real life. Better to separate.” Then he cut off the talk, stood up, and went into the inner room to make the bed.

Minoru watched him in silence from where she sat. Yoshio pulled the bedding down from the shelf with one hand, spread it in a rough slanting line, and climbed in without even changing his clothes. Only then did Minoru notice how cold she had become from arguing so long in a room with almost no heat. She wrapped the ends of her kimono tighter around her feet and stayed by the paper door, thinking how shameful it was that she still had to cling to a man who wanted to shake her

off because life was too heavy for him. She did not want to depend on such a weak power forever, yet she could do nothing and hated herself for it.

At last she stood, walked straight to the bedding, and pulled back the quilt with her right hand. "I must sleep too," she said. "Give me the bedding." They owned only one set of night things between them. Yoshio sat up, searched for his glasses, and then got out, saying only, "Sleep, then," before going back to the other room. Minoru carefully spread out the round, twisted bedding, brought her pillow, and lay down, thinking of how his plain hard heart and her complicated sticky heart always struck against each other, day after day, and how she had still never found in him the tender feeling that could gather up the bright, torn threads of her life.

Part 3

Yoshio finally found a small job when the cherry trees were in bloom. Every morning Minoru walked with him and Mei to the tram stop, watching his thin body go toward the center of the city to earn the money that kept the two of them alive. Sometimes, before the tram moved, she lifted her hand and sent him a playful kiss through the window like a girl in love. Then she would turn back with the dog, speaking to it as if it understood every word, and cross the graveyard on her way home. After that she opened the upstairs window wide and sat in the hard warm light of spring, reading all day while the sun touched her forehead.

The books gave her something that daily life did not. New words flowed into her mind, and from page to page she smelled another world, a world made of art, distance, and promise. When a scene in a book pulled her away from the poor room, her heart became too full for stillness, and she would rise and walk out among the graves. Her cheeks would burn as if even a light scratch could bring blood. Sometimes the touch of a rose branch on her sleeve was enough to fill her eyes with tears.

Everything in the world began to look dear and painful to her at once. She walked back and forth near Tennoji, where dark green pines stood above the loose white clouds of cherry blossoms and the evening sky grew deep at the edges.

There were times when she could not hold down the rush of feeling inside her and pressed her forehead against some stranger's gravestone, as if the stone might cool the wild heat in her thoughts. The days were softer now than in winter, yet her heart was not at peace. It only moved more quickly, and in more directions, because spring had come.

One evening the two of them went for a walk on the hill at Ueno. The white night under the cherry trees had a pale yellow color, and the lamps in the woods shone through the flowers like the eyes of a beautiful woman made bright by wine. "It is a lovely night," Minoru said, and she walked in a light happy way, moving her whole body as if the air itself had music in it. She felt that all the whispers of lovers hidden in that hill through the year had risen again when the cherry blossoms opened. It seemed to her that every petal carried a little of those old soft voices.

She stepped under a low branch and spread both sleeves, standing there as if she wanted the tree to cover her like a roof. The scent of flowers mixed with the faint old scent of perfume from her coat, and she followed that smell with each step as if it were the breath of something lost and dear. Yoshio, however, walked apart from her with his arms folded and a stiff dry face. The thought of poverty stayed on his mind and gave him no pleasure even among the flowers. When he looked at her poor clothes under the borrowed spring scene, her joy seemed foolish to him, almost ugly because it stood on such a poor base.

"Let us go home," he said, stopping without warmth. They stood for a moment and looked down at the lights beyond the pond, which lay in a ring below them. A far-off shamisen sound came from somewhere and trembled so lightly that the lights themselves seemed to be making it. Minoru suddenly thought of the soft weight of a good kimono touching her legs, something she had not felt for a long time. The hem she now moved with the tip of her wooden clog felt thin and cold.

"They are holding a gathering in Yoshiwara tonight," Yoshio said, and then began to walk again. Leaving the wide bright road behind them, they turned their steps toward the darker part of Yanaka. Music from some distant town came up in loose waves and moved through the cool air of the hill before fading into the

cherry trees. Minoru felt spring filling her whole chest with brightness. At the same time she knew that beyond this hill there was another world, loud and rich and full of people who were laughing, drinking, and living as if the night belonged to them.

She could not enter that world, and the thought of that made her suddenly sad. "I wish we could spend one day like real people and go about enjoying ourselves," she almost said, turning to look at Yoshio. But at that very moment a carriage passed close by them with such quiet smoothness that it seemed unreal. For an instant they saw, through the side of the cover, the deep red and bright patterned silk of a woman's robe inside. It crossed their eyes like a painted picture lit in the dark.

Then it was gone, but not truly gone. The covered carriage, carrying the pride and ease of spring with it, seemed to remain before them long after it had passed. Minoru said nothing after that. She walked on in silence and thought about Yoshio, who was silent too, and wondered what sort of dream held his whole heart at that moment. She could not tell whether he was thinking of the bright world outside them, or of the poor road under their own feet, and so she kept walking beside him without another word.

Part 4

Near the end of April, word came that the wife of the teacher who had once shown great kindness to both Minoru and Yoshio had finally died. The news reached them in the morning and changed the whole day at once. Yoshio had already gone out in his one good Western suit, and Minoru had thought she might somehow get their proper clothes back from the pawnshop. But when she counted what little money they had, she saw at once that this could not be done. Then she knew she must go and borrow something, though the thought of it made her face grow hot.

She went to a friend's house in Koishikawa and stood for a while before going in. Several cherry trees were blooming along the wall as if the house itself were

rich enough to let beauty spill out onto the street. Inside the sitting room, she met her friend after a long time, yet she could not force herself to say plainly, "I need to borrow mourning clothes." If she had been living alone, she thought, she might have said it. But now she belonged to a household, and that made the shame feel heavier. Her friend, who was clever enough to understand without asking too much, smiled gently and brought out a crested robe of pale red-brown silk with little butterflies embroidered near the hem.

"A funeral should be black," the friend said, "but I do not have black." Minoru thanked her and took the robe with both hands. Even that kindness hurt her, because it showed how completely her poverty could be seen by another woman. It was raining when she left. Carrying white magnolia flowers, she went to the ferry landing at Azumabashi and took the boat across. As the boat drew away from the bank, a long soft feeling moved through her heart, and old years rose up from the river like shadows.

From the boat she looked at the embankment, which held many memories for her. Rain lay on the cherry season there like the proper background to a sad old picture. The reed screens of the tea houses looked wet and fallen, and the fine rain crossed the flat river water in thin straight lines. Minoru dropped her eyes to the moving surface below and felt that her own youth had been slowly washed away there, little by little, without her ever seeing the exact hour of its loss. The blossoms above the road still fell as they had long ago, and now they seemed to her less like comfort than like a cruel smile ready to deceive some other young heart.

When she got off at Kototoi and walked up the bank, drops from the cherry trees fell on her umbrella like the last tears of an old sorrow. On the way she met two or three people she had known before, all going to the same house. By the time she passed through her teacher's gate, she was later than the hour she had promised Yoshio. Inside, the sound of many people filled the house with a damp low murmur. Open sliding doors showed groups of mourners everywhere, and dark robes and striped garments gathered at the edge of the rooms and hung toward the veranda.

In the kitchen she found an old servant who had known her in earlier days and gave her the magnolias. Then she slipped into a corner of a room near the entrance and sat quietly down. There she saw the dead woman's small children being passed from arm to arm among the women, each child comforted with sad tender words. The eldest daughter was there too, moving in and out by the paper door and looking at the visitors with swollen red eyes. Long ago Minoru had played with that girl, tossing balls and toys with her when she was still very small. Now the child had grown tall, and seeing that growth before her eyes made Minoru feel the shortness and sadness of her own changed years.

She remembered how the teacher had once laughed and said, "This child is very good at copying you." The little girl, not yet four then, had carried a cloth bundle in imitation of Minoru, bowed in a proud little way, and said, "This is Minoru," making everyone laugh. That memory stood before her so clearly that the room seemed to hold the past and present together in one breath. Then she heard Yoshio call softly from the veranda and turned. He asked her to come nearer and said in a low voice that he would go borrow five yen for the funeral gift from the office. They exchanged those poor practical words with a faint smile, and then he left her again.

Minoru wandered through the house looking for her teacher and at last found him in a dim inner passage. She could not see his face clearly in the half-dark, but she heard at once that his voice was full of tears. He asked her, "Have you been strong lately?" just as she was about to leave him. The simple kindness of the question pierced her more deeply than anything else that day. For a moment she saw in him again the old fragile figure she had once adored, and when she tried to answer, her throat closed with tears.

That night Minoru could not sleep. Her mind stayed full of tangled threads of memory, and with them came the sweet scent of western violets her teacher had once sent her in spring. She counted the years in the dark. Five years had passed since she had left the teacher's side, and eight since the days when she had lived almost entirely inside that teacher's sharp bright little eyes and deep affection. In those days she had believed that if she left that shelter, her heart would have

nowhere at all to go. Crossing the river each day by boat, she had stood at the landing and felt as if each trip dropped another small red drop of her own feeling into the shining water.

Yet there had come a time when she had believed she must turn away from that beloved teacher. She had begun to think of real life, of the life she herself must somehow live, and the quiet days in the study, smelling old camphor from the books and being loved and guided, had begun to feel dangerous to her. At times she had even felt bitter, as if that protecting kindness had numbed the very power in her that wanted to wake and act. She had thought that only by leaving could she open a new road for herself. But after leaving, no new work had truly appeared in her hands, and no clear proof of awakening had come. Remembering that now, she felt only useless tears and a painful longing for the pure faith of her younger self, when she had loved one person with her whole heart and had not yet been beaten on all sides by the world.

On this night the feeling was stronger than ever. She kept seeing the teacher at the coffin, covering the face with one hand while the sutras were read, as if grief had broken the body in half. The image would not leave her. It returned each time she closed her eyes, and each time it seemed nearer than the poor room where she lay. Yoshio went to the wake that night and did not come home, and Minoru remained alone with memory, with the scent of violets, and with the deep restless sadness of all that had already been lost.

Part 5

Soon white lilies, which Minoru loved, began to appear in the house almost every day. One stood in the alcove, another on top of the bookcase, and sometimes one more in a poor little vase near the window, so that even their bare room seemed to borrow a little grace from summer. On Yoshio's days off, the two of them took Mei and walked as far as Oji, passing long fields that still held a deep fresh green under the early sky. There were hours when they looked almost like a peaceful young couple. In such hours, Minoru could almost believe that their life

might yet open into something larger and finer.

Behind Momijidera they once went down to a stream and threw the little dog into the water, laughing as they washed its body with soap. Mei came out of the stream covered with white foam, shaking its small frame so hard that drops flew over both of them. The water held the green of young maple leaves and the light of the sun together, and it looked thick and clear, almost like green jelly. Afterward they tied the wet dog to a post at a tea stand on the hill and sat there half the day, looking over a wide soft spread of new leaves below. The summer air was full and slow, and now and then Minoru forgot everything except color, light, and the tired sweetness of sitting still beside another body.

On the way to that hill there stood a detached house hidden among tall hiba trees. Through the branches they could see the side of a pale gray Western-style building, with its upper floor turned lightly toward the road. Each time they passed it, Yoshio stopped and looked up with an expression almost like prayer. "I do not need anything else," he would say. "Only let me build the ideal house." Minoru listened, and though she knew they could not even keep their own clothes out of the pawnshop, she let the dream live in the air between them. It cost nothing to stand by the road and look at another person's walls.

Around that time Minoru also became more and more concerned with her hair. Every other day, it seemed, she found some reason to go to the hairdresser near Shinobazu Pond, and she began to touch her hair again and again even at home. In the little drawer of her dressing chest, oily bits of bright red silk wrapping cloth slowly gathered and piled up. Such small vanities were dear to her because they let her feel, for a moment, like a woman still moving toward beauty rather than away from it. Yet even in these soft summer days, peace never lasted long between them. Their hearts were shaped too differently, and each one seemed always ready to strike against the other.

Yoshio's nature was plain, straight, and stiff, while Minoru's was full of turns, shades, and hidden motions. He hated to lose before a woman, and she hated to bow before a man. The smallest rubbing of sleeve against sleeve could grow into a quarrel, and there were nights when they argued until two or three in the morning,

not caring who in the street might hear them. Sometimes it began with money, sometimes with books, and sometimes with a thought Minoru had taken from reading. When she understood something in a way different from Yoshio, the difference itself became poison between them.

On such nights Minoru would at last fall silent and look at him with a cold bright pity that was even harder to bear than words. She would let her eyes rest on his narrow forehead as if measuring its limits, and Yoshio would flush at once and cry out, "Do not act so proud. What can you do? What can you understand?" His face then became rough and ugly, like that of a laborer ready to spit at an enemy. Those words touched the most painful place in her heart, because she too feared that all her knowledge and longing might still lead to nothing. "Say it again," she answered once, reaching out at once and pushing his shoulder. "Say it again, and tell me why."

"I will say it as many times as I like," Yoshio shouted. "You are no good. You understand nothing." "Why?" she cried. "Why, if I am wrong?" By then neither of them could stop. Minoru was the kind of woman who would not fall back until her body itself had been overpowered, and in her fury she even raised her hands to force his head down and make him apologize. He answered with violence. The struggle ended only when he had hurt her badly enough to break the force of her resistance.

The next day Yoshio looked at the marks left on her body and said in a dark tired voice, "One day you will end as a cripple." Even after his anger had cooled, the memory of how cruelly his fingers had gripped her soft flesh returned to him like a bad dream. Minoru, for her part, had risen early and done a great wash, moving through the work with a body that felt as if boards had been tied over the flesh. Light clouds passed near the eaves and looked down on her like gentle white smoke. The damp early-summer air held sunlight in it, and the light before her eyes seemed to break into little pieces like bits of colored glass.

By afternoon a light rain began to fall. Minoru took the washing in from the veranda and then remained standing there, looking out at the small garden while the rain dropped softly through the still air. In that little patch of earth the

hydrangea Yoshio had planted the summer before now stood in the center and spread the largest shadow. A few box trees in one corner carried tiny white flowers like hail, poor and modest in appearance, but the hydrangea had grown stronger than everything else and seemed to hold the whole ground under its leaves. There was nothing else in the garden. Each time the rain struck those broad leaves, a quiet sound rose, and Minoru listened to it as if it carried back some old forgotten tenderness.

She stood there a long time, watching the rain fall on the plant and feeling her thoughts sink lower and deeper. The house behind her was silent, yet not at peace, and the silence itself seemed to hold something waiting. By the time Yoshio returned home at the usual hour, the rain had already stopped, and the garden looked washed and dark. One glance at his face was enough to tell her that he had brought back some fixed thought from outside and was carrying it inside him like a hidden weight. Before he spoke, Minoru already knew that another turn in their life was close.

Part 6

When Yoshio came home at the usual hour, the rain had already stopped, but some hard thought still seemed to hang inside him like wet cloth. Minoru had only just begun to clear the evening meal when he spoke in a voice that was too calm to be safe. “What are you going to do?” he asked. She looked at him and knew at once what he meant. A week earlier he had come back from work with a newspaper clipping in his hand and had said, almost proudly, “I found something you can do.”

The clipping had been a notice from a newspaper in the provinces. It announced a writing prize, and Yoshio had at once thought of the unfinished story Minoru had been keeping little by little in a drawer. “Add enough pages to fit their rules and send it,” he had said then. “If you win, we can breathe again.” But the closing day had already been very close, and Minoru had felt, from the first moment, that she could not write anything she truly wanted in so little time. So she had

answered vaguely, put the matter aside, and touched it no more.

Now Yoshio's mouth tightened as he looked at her and asked again, "Why have you not started?" Minoru kept standing by the trays and answered, "Because I do not want to do such a thing." He stared at her. "Such a thing?" "A gamble," she said. "I do not want to use my pen like that." At once he saw the proud look he hated rise again into her face, and the sight of it cut across his nerves like a knife.

Minoru's anger also rose. It seemed to her that Yoshio knew nothing at all about a woman's art except how to force it into service for money. He could not give her new books, could not guard the part of her that still wanted beauty, and yet he knew very well how to drive her toward a prize like a horse toward a betting post. "I do not have such a ruined pen," she said. Yoshio shouted, "Do not talk so proudly." She turned fully toward him then, white in the face, and answered, "I never said I would not work. If you want me to work in any way at all, I can go be a telephone operator. But I will not use the writing I have kept inside me for this kind of chance."

The words had hardly left her mouth when Yoshio seized the tobacco tray beside him and threw it at her. Ash and bits of tobacco scattered, and his voice followed them. "You know nothing about loving our life," he cried. "If you hate it, then leave it. What kind of way is that to speak to your husband?" He kicked over the tray of dishes near his feet and came toward her with a face she had never feared so clearly before. Minoru felt, before he even touched her, the full violence of what might happen next. "What are you doing?" she cried in a thin bright voice, and when he came close enough for her to hear his heart beating, she pushed both hands against his chest with all the force she had and ran out through the back door into the evening.

Outside, the light had not fully died. A dull silver color still lay over the world, and the graveyard before the house seemed to be waiting for the first complete drop of darkness. Minoru stood there without moving, listening. From inside the house came rough crashing sounds, as if screens or doors were being broken, and in between them she thought she could hear a sharp woman's cry. Then she understood that the cry might be her own voice still ringing inside her nerves. Her

blood had not yet settled. It trembled through her body, rose suddenly in waves, and would not grow quiet.

Under that rising dark she bent her head and began to think with painful clarity. Yoshio had shouted that she did not know how to love their life together, and she had to admit that there was truth in it. She could walk to the pawnshop for him and endure shame, yet she could still look at the few coins in his purse with a distracted face and not truly live inside his daily struggle. But another truth stood beside it. He did not know how to love her art. He could not give it room, could not feed it, could not even keep from insulting it. "If I do not love your life," she thought bitterly, "then you do not love my art." The two truths stood facing each other like enemies, and she felt then that perhaps they really must part.

She began to walk, and the darkness pressed close around her. Mosquitoes gathered near her face with thin weak sounds, and when she looked back, the tops of the gravestones seemed to creep after her in the dark like low pale heads. Fear finally drove her faster, and she hurried out beyond the hedge. Just then Mei came running from somewhere nearby and stopped before her, lifting its little face and shaking its whole body with joy. At the sight of the dog, Minoru suddenly felt she had found the only thing in the world that was glad she still existed. She bent down, held the small warm body against her, and said through tears, "Thank you." Then, wiping her face with her sleeve, she walked back toward the house while crying as she had never cried outside before.

She stood for a while outside and listened before going in. When she finally lit the tea-room lamp, she saw only the ugly remains of the quarrel: spilled ash, broken order, food kicked across the floor. Yoshio was nowhere below. A little later, while she was cleaning, she heard a heavy turning sound above her and understood that he was lying upstairs on the bare mats. At once she pictured him there, thin jaw, thin neck, head buried in his arms, and her resistance weakened. The thought came over her in a tired womanly way that if taking up the pen would count, in his mind, as work and would give him even a little relief, then perhaps it was no difficult thing after all. Her strength always burned quickly and died quickly. In the end she still threw herself back before the one man whose feeling

she could not stop seeking.

The next day she sat at the desk and began again the story she had once left half written. She hated it almost at once. The earlier pages were not dear to her, and she could smell in them the same old weakness of style from which she had never fully escaped. So she kept changing the first part instead of moving forward, unable to bring herself to carry something abandoned into the open light. Yoshio soon came and saw what she was doing. "How long will you keep fussing over that?" he asked. "I should stop," Minoru said. "It is no good." "Even if it is no good, do it," he answered. She tore at the pages and said again that she was hopeless, but he counted the days left, saw that there were still more than two hundred pages to make and fewer than twenty days to do it, and turned cold with anger. "You are useless. Give it up, then," he said, throwing the manuscript down before her. When she asked, "If I give it up, what then?" he answered at once, "Then we separate." That one sentence broke the last of her resistance. Tears came into her eyes as she gathered the scattered pages and said, "I will write. There is nothing else."

Part 7

Minoru wrote like a person running straight into a storm. For many hours each day, she felt Yoshio's eyes on her from somewhere near the desk, and those eyes seemed to drive the pen forward even when her own will had already gone tired and empty. Sometimes she carried the lamp and the desk inside the mosquito net, fell flat on her back as if dead, and then suddenly rose again and began to write in a rush. Sometimes the summer sun filled every room from morning until evening, and she fled from one corner of the house to another as if the light itself were chasing her. There were moments when she pressed her forehead again and again against a wall in the shade, then turned back and wrote more.

At last the work was finished on the very afternoon of the final day. Yoshio wrote Minoru's name on the packet, tied it up, and carried it to the post office himself. Minoru stood there in her thin blue summer robe, wiping her face with

the wet sleeve and thinking back over the ten days that had just passed. At the tip of the pen that had been driven on by a man's command, she could see none of the beautiful art she had once imagined. What had moved her hand was not beauty but fear. When she remembered that, she could only feel disappointment.

After that, the hot days of August continued, heavy and bright. One morning Minoru noticed a small article in the newspaper, and the words caught her eye at once. She read it more than once, then folded the paper and sat still for a while with her hand on it. When Yoshio left for work, she placed a nail near the entrance to fasten things later, changed her clothes, and went out alone. At Hirokoji she boarded a tram bound toward Edogawa.

Before long she was walking through a narrow street in Ushigome, white and dry under the burning noon light. She wore a faded summer robe of light cloth and carried a faded dark purple umbrella, but neither gave much help against the heat. The little stones in the road caught in her wooden clogs, and every few steps made her stumble and lose her breath. Sweat ran under her arms, and the heat rising from the ground climbed into her sleeves and hem while the sun pressed down from above. By the time she found the place she wanted, her face had become red as fire.

She had first asked at the police box by the bridge for a place called Seigetsu, and from there she turned toward the riverbank. Seigetsu stood on the right side of the road, an old house that looked almost like the former home of some warrior family. At the front step she asked a maid for a man named Koyama and was at once shown inside. The large room where she waited felt empty and wide, with all the sliding doors open and yet not the least breath of wind passing through. The whole house seemed to be holding its breath under the weight of the noon heat, and Minoru sat in the middle of that stillness, pressing a handkerchief to her face and moving her fan again and again.

At last a small man came out from the back carrying a tobacco tray. His eyes were dark and long-lashed and looked swollen, as if he had just risen from a daytime sleep. When he spoke, his smooth Osaka voice rolled through the hot room in a sleepy, muddy way, and now and then a little wetness gathered at the

corner of his mouth. But when he smiled, his whole face filled with an almost womanlike charm. He did not know Minoru's name, though he knew Yoshio's, and he turned her calling card in his fingers while he began to talk.

Koyama first explained the theater group he and others were building. He said that their earlier performance had been arranged by a showman and had therefore been misunderstood by the public, but that the second performance would be something very different. With the help of Sakai and Yukida, he said, they would make it truly artistic. He also said they meant to choose only actresses of good conduct and decent background. As he talked, he seemed to decide that Minoru was not a foolish woman, and little by little he began to speak to her more freely.

"If your wish is really so strong," he said at last, "I will speak carefully with Mr. Sakai and Mr. Yukida first, and after that I will send you my answer. I think it will probably be all right, but I cannot decide everything by myself." That was enough for the moment. Minoru thanked him, rose, and left the house. When she finally returned home, half the garden was already in shadow, and a single festival lantern was swinging under the eaves of a nearby empty house in the thick hot air. Without even changing her sweat-soaked clothes, she sat in the middle of their open room and thought for a long time.

That night she went out with Yoshio to visit a shrine where a festival was being held. In the back streets beside the graveyard, red lanterns shone here and there like pieces torn from the bright world of the main road and dropped into the dark. Under one of those lights she saw a woman in a white summer robe standing in a doorway, her sleeves moving with a soft, almost dangerous grace. When they reached the busier street, the poor dull town had changed completely. Night stalls, lights, and crowds had made a fresh new world there, one that seemed to move by its own power.

They were pushed along with the others into the shrine grounds. Near a sweet-bean stall, they came to a show tent where a dark woman of about forty, with her sleeves rolled up, was calling loudly to the crowd. Looking through a gap in the hanging curtain, they could see two young women inside, dressed as if they were reciting old dramatic lines. One of them was strikingly beautiful. From the half-

dark space within, she kept sending rich, flowing glances toward the crowd, and the thick white powder on her face, together with the sharp bright colors of her robe, made her look even more vivid. “What a beautiful woman,” Minoru said, pulling Yoshio’s sleeve, and he laughed and peered in too, seeing the painted sign above with a woman’s long neck stretched out like a ghost story.

After that they bought roasted chestnuts and walked toward the edge of the hill, where they could look out over the dark distance of Mikawashima like a black sea. People kept passing in front of them on their way up to the shrine, but Minoru no longer cared about the crowd. “I have something to ask you,” she said, and led Yoshio away from the noise and down the slope. Then, as they crossed the railway line and walked toward Nippori, she told him she wanted to act again and join the new theater group. She explained what Koyama had said about the new play and the hard female lead they were trying to cast, though she did not fully show how much hope she had already tied to that role.

Yoshio listened in silence for some time. He knew that before their marriage Minoru had once made a great noise about becoming an actress, but he had never believed she had much skill for the stage. As he imagined her there, he thought not only that her acting might fail, but also that her plain face would not stand out under stage lights before the eyes of others. To him it all seemed reckless, late, and uncertain. “Why think of such a thing now?” he asked. “I have thought of it for a long time,” Minoru answered. “I only had no chance.”

Even after they returned home, he would not give easy consent. Lying half naked on the veranda and smoking, he told himself that if the stage were a sure road to money, that would be another matter. But this looked like another uncertain world that might lead anywhere or nowhere, and he wanted steady help with daily living, not a dream. He was also ashamed at the thought that people he knew might see a wife who was neither beautiful nor skilled enough on the stage. “You should just stay quiet and write,” he said. “Write what?” she asked at once. “I will find writing work for you,” he said.

Minoru’s eyes flashed. The truth was that she herself had already begun to lose faith in her pen. The forced manuscript had shown her that whatever new life she

had secretly believed was growing inside her writing had not yet come out at all, but she would never confess that weakness to Yoshio after the proud words she had once thrown at him. So instead she spoke only of the stage. "In literature, no matter what I think, the world does not accept me," she said. "Now the time is right, so I will go out through acting once again. I have confidence. And if Sakai and Yukida guide the stage, I can do it."

Yoshio still answered that he believed she could write, and that if she must help their life, she should do it with the pen. He also said she was already too old to begin such a path. "Does art have an age?" Minoru asked. "That is something people already inside art can say," he replied. "You would only be starting now." At that, something fierce rose in her chest. "Very well," she said. "I will do as I choose. It is not art for your sake and not work for your sake. It is my art. It is my work. What right do you have to stop me just because you support me?" Her old desire burned up in her with a force she had not felt for a long time, and she thought she must make this man, who looked down on her, bow before her through her work on the stage. When he asked where the money for such preparation would come from, she answered at once, "I will borrow it myself."

Part 8

Not long after that quarrel, a postcard arrived from Koyama saying that Minoru had been accepted into the new theater group. Soon after came notice of the first reading rehearsal. Each new step seemed to come toward her one after another, and as the days passed, her face grew calmer and at the same time more distant. Yoshio, watching this from nearby, could not stay easy. He saw that she was fixing her eyes on some hope hanging far away beyond ordinary life, and there were moments when that look in her face made him deeply uneasy.

"If you are clumsy on the stage and make me ashamed," he said one day, "I will never go back to the office again. Everything depends on how you do this." Hearing that, Minoru felt a sharp dislike rise in her chest. She thought she could see, as plainly as if it had been held in his hand, the small social vanity inside him.

Why, she thought, could he not stand beside her art with simple honesty even for a little while? Instead of sharing her heat and danger, he cared first about his own face before others.

“Then we may as well separate,” she answered coolly. “If that happens, you will not have to be ashamed because of me.” This time the words came from her side, not his, but Yoshio no longer had the same sharp edge he had once shown. The idea of a woman stepping onto a bright public stage also held for him a shallow kind of curiosity, and that softened him in a different, weaker way. “Well,” he said at last, “if you have that much confidence, then do as you like.” After that he fell silent.

At Seigetsu, Minoru met Sakai and Yukida properly. She already knew who they were, and she had long admired Sakai, whose Hamlet had once made her feel drunk with the force of a new kind of acting. He was a small man, and in his eyes and nose there was something almost Western in shape. Yukida was very tall and always seemed to hold thought deep inside his head, even when he smiled. During rehearsals the two of them usually sat side by side in one corner of the room, Sakai bright and tense, Yukida leaning a little forward with heavy quiet gravity.

Koyama moved among them all with his quick little body and long-lashed friendly eyes, trying to hold the group together. There were two or three other actresses besides Minoru, all younger than she was and all beautiful. One, Hayako, had a thin face and a dark strong impression when she lowered her eyes. Another, Tsuyako, had a noble beauty in the shape of her face. In the middle of those women, Minoru had been given the lead in Yukida’s one-act play.

The role was that of an older woman, a musician who had lived a cold artistic life for many years. Then, suddenly feeling love, she tried to leave that lonely world and make a warm home with the man she loved. But after hearing words of jealousy and hard household truth from another woman, she gave up the dream of ordinary happiness and chose to return alone to the severe world of art. Minoru felt at once that the part was difficult and painful. It touched too many thoughts that already lived inside her own life.

The men in the troupe, however, did not treat the script with much respect.

Many of them were actors gathered from rough lower stages, and when difficult lines appeared that they could not fully understand, they laughed instead of trying to enter them. By the time Minoru began going to rehearsal every day, the weather had turned into the cold wet edge of autumn. Rain blew onto the veranda at Seigetsu, and actors in thin summer robes complained of the chill. On some mornings Minoru arrived early and practiced her lines alone until Sakai entered in a damp overcoat, bringing the cold air in with him.

Sakai and Yukida always came at the appointed hour, but the others drifted in slowly and lazily, so the two serious men often wasted long stretches waiting. Between them and the worn, unsettled actors there was always a twisted current of disorder. Sakai would suddenly lose patience and scold them openly for their stage habits and their lack of discipline. He kept saying that the translated comedy they were preparing would never become a work of art if everyone remained so scattered and careless. But the actors, who lived by the theater and did not want every line corrected by a man from outside their world, answered with silent resistance and bad faces.

Koyama sometimes tried to smooth things over, asking everyone to remember their promise and work together because there was little time left. The actresses, at least, were all spoken of well. They listened, learned, and rehearsed earnestly, and Sakai flattered them skillfully, saying that the future of the new troupe might depend on the women's art and that they must show the public that actresses were not foolish decorations. Yet even while hearing such words, Minoru felt her old bad weakness beginning again. Her spirit did not mix with that crowd. Little by little, the place itself began to pull her away from the stage instead of drawing her toward it.

She grew tired of trying to lower herself into the cheap taste around her. When she looked back on herself while she was there, she thought she saw not the artist she wanted to become, but an uneducated rough woman growing inside her. There was also another reason for her suffering. A supporting actress named Rokuko, older than Minoru and long used to the stage, had a beautiful actor's face, with large eyes and a high nose, and a hard worldly force in her manner. Whenever

Minoru was with her, she felt pressed down by that force as if her own self were being flattened little by little.

Rokuko had crossed many kinds of public life and had learned how to push other people back with a mere turn of feeling. She gave orders about Minoru's gestures in a way that felt too familiar and too bold. Minoru could not answer her. She might inwardly believe in her own artistic authority, but before this woman she became speechless and weak. The feeling was painfully old: when she had been a child at school, there had always been one or two girls in each class whom she feared, girls she tried to calm by bringing small gifts. Now that same helpless shrinking returned.

Rokuko herself was not even good in the role she had been given. Sakai and Yukida both said so and had trouble with her old stage habits and empty understanding, yet she did not mind criticism and kept working with determination. In the end, Minoru felt defeated not by art but by this whole atmosphere, and she told Yukida that she wanted to give up the part. She was crying when she said it. "You must not become so sentimental," Yukida answered, repeating the same thing several times in his heavy voice. Then Sakai came too, bent half forward near a pillar, and begged her with smooth kind words to endure it for the sake of the production and for the sake of the art they all praised in her.

But Minoru was already sick of it all. Once she had ceased to believe fully in the authority of the troupe, her pride grew harder and harder. She could not bear the thought of her highest artistic feeling being torn to pieces in such a place, and no one's request could bend her. She left Seigetsu determined not to return the next day. Yet the moment she reached home, Yoshio stood before her in her thoughts like a bar across the road. She knew he would think even less of her if she threw this away after having pushed so fiercely to begin. Still, there was nothing else to do, so she told him everything.

"Then you had better stop," Yoshio said simply. That answer was exactly what she had expected, and yet it still struck her like emptiness. She lay on her back and turned her face aside with a lonely look. "There is no place left for me to go," she said.

Part 9

“There is no place left for me to go,” Minoru said, turning her face away on the pillow. Yet even that complaint did not free her. Seen from outside, what she had done was no more than causing trouble and then trying to escape from the trouble herself. Yoshio looked at her with dry impatience and said that since she had asked to join the troupe by her own will, it was bad manners to stop whenever she pleased. Then he added that if she truly hated going, he would tell them that he, as her husband, had forbidden her to appear.

He did send such a refusal to the theater office. But that only brought more people around him. The managers came, and Yukida too, asking again and again that Minoru return, because there was no longer enough time before opening night to teach so difficult a part to another woman from the beginning. Koyama thought of the money already spent, and Yukida even sent Yoshio a long letter. In the end Yoshio said, almost with disgust, that it would be shameful to make such a disturbance now and easier just to go on with it. Two or three days later, Minoru began going again to Seigetsu.

Once she returned, her work itself was not thought bad. Many people praised this new skill in her and said that she had brought something fresh and living to the stage. Some critics, who cared first for art, even wrote that she had opened a new kind of life for actresses. But other critics, who looked at theater in a more ordinary way, wrote against her without kindness. They said her manner was rough and low, like a cheap woman from a fairground, and behind those words stood the thing Minoru already knew too well: her face was not beautiful enough for the stage.

She had never lied to herself about that. If she searched honestly, she could find almost nothing to praise in her looks except her eyes, and even those could not save the whole face. Yet she had wanted the stage not from vanity but from heat, from the kind of burning force that makes a person step forward without first measuring the chance of injury. Still, a woman on a public stage had to be

beautiful to some degree. No matter how hard the artistic flame burned within her, people still wanted the body carrying that flame to flower before them.

So along with praise there came laughter, contempt, and a dirty kind of mockery that struck from the side. Minoru saw clearly now that another deep place of disappointment had opened before her. One evening, after the performance ended, she walked beside the pond with an umbrella in her hand while the last wetness of rain still lay on the road. Yoshio was walking with her, as he had done night after night since the play began. He had sat in the audience each evening, his small eyes trembling, ready to catch every word of criticism spoken around him.

Many of his friends had come to see the play too, and that made his pain worse. It was not enough that Minoru's acting be praised. He also had to sit calmly before others while his wife, on whom all eyes rested, showed a face that could not surprise the house with beauty. For a man like Yoshio, even a clumsy wife of great beauty would have been easier to carry with pride than a gifted wife whose appearance caused people to smile behind their hands. Day after day he moved among these sharp little wounds and hid them under bitter half-smiles.

He was tired, and Minoru was tired too. Their nerves, strained by the same sadness, now seemed to drive that sadness away from each other by means of coldness and small cruelty. "Was it any better tonight?" Minoru asked after a long silence. "Very good tonight," Yoshio answered. Then again they walked without speaking, while the fatigue of art, of effort, and of public judgment drew Minoru farther inward, toward a dark and sorrowful place inside herself.

Looking at the lights on the pond, she felt tears quietly rise. Yoshio, after a long pause, said in a low thoughtful voice that her acting truly had ability and that this time he had honestly admired it. Then he added that an ugly face cost a woman many parts of her chance and that she would suffer great loss because of her appearance. He hated having to say such a thing to his own wife, yet he could not stop saying it. Again and again he muttered, "It would have been better to leave it alone," as if by repeating those words he could undo what had already been shown to the world.

The run of the play ended after only a few days. On the last night, when Minoru

rode home with her dressing table loaded onto a cart, rain was falling again. All the actors, men and women alike, carried the pale sadness of parting on their faces. The men wrapped their little stage properties in cloths or packed them into bags, then stood with one hand at the edge of a hat and said goodbye as if they were separating at the edge of a river that might never bring them together again. This new troupe had never had a strong base, and now it was already breaking apart.

Each actor had to think again of where to go next, where to earn money, where to sleep, and how to cross another week of life. Minoru sat on the cart and watched them go. Of all the women there, the one she had come to feel closest to was Hayako. Hayako's husband, a gentle-looking actor from a lower company, often came to the shared dressing room, and though she and he were always said to be quarreling, she still fixed his wig or looked over his painted face for him when he arrived.

Hayako was ill, and on mornings after she had coughed blood she looked so weak that it seemed she might fade away before another evening came. She often fought with Koyama about wages, and yet there had been something dear and loyal in her that Minoru could not forget. At parting Hayako had said she would visit one day, but no day came. Before long Minoru had returned to the old life again, sitting across from Yoshio before the small hibachi and looking at each other from the bottom of their hearts as though neither could find the other any longer.

By then autumn had deepened. The sunlight on the veranda had turned pale and watery, and the woods of Yanaka sat still like some lonely hidden person while their color slowly wore away. Their living grew worse and worse. Clothes for the coming cold were beyond all hope, and the room, once made less poor by the warm color of their love, now felt empty and harsh because each heart had begun to sit apart and watch only itself. To escape that emptiness, Minoru sometimes sold books and then used part of the money to buy expensive Western flowers, setting them here and there through the rooms as if color itself might save the house.

Yoshio could no longer bear even that. He thought again and again that he must

end this life that looked less like marriage than like playing house with a lover. He remembered his old father in the country, still working past seventy, and tears came to him when he thought that he had never once sent that father even a small gift. He remembered too the woman of trade with whom he had once lived, and how even on a smaller income they had somehow managed a more orderly life. From all this he built one bitter conclusion: Minoru's waste and wildness were ruining him.

More and more often he said that if only he could separate from her, his work in literature might recover and he might again step boldly over the world instead of being held back. He asked her almost every day whether she could not find some work and help him. Minoru understood that the time had truly come when the man's hand would cast her off. Yet even then she could not stop chasing the one thin line of light that had drawn her through so many years, always ahead of her, always promising meaning, never falling fully into her hands. Even if it were never to become hers, she wanted to spend her whole life following it.

One evening, after they came back from the Cock Fair, they spoke seriously of parting. Yoshio said first that he pitied her too, because his earning power was less than that of an ordinary man and he could not support even one woman properly. He said they should live apart for a time, and that if he ever became able to let her live in comfort, they could perhaps come together again. Minoru heard this and at once felt a terrible weakness, as if the warm pillar she had leaned on for so long had suddenly been pulled from beside her body.

Then her eyes fell on Mei playing in the garden. "So I will part from Mei too," she said, and tears rose at once. That little dog had tied together so many of their months with its small faithful life, and had comforted them both more often than either of them had comforted the other. "It is strange," she said in a voice that tried to sound light, "but it hurts me more to part from Mei than from you." After that poor little joke, she went on crying for a long time.

It was decided at last that Minoru would return for a while to her mother's house. Yoshio, after selling what little they still owned, made up his mind to leave their home and live for a time in a boarding house. The plan was no longer only a threat spoken in anger. It had taken shape and become something with dates, movement, and real loss inside it. Minoru felt weak each time she thought of packing, leaving the dog, and walking away from the life she had hated and yet could not stop holding.

They had dragged their unhappy life this far when fate, with a kind of cruel playfulness, suddenly dropped a piece of happiness on their heads. The very manuscript that Yoshio had forced Minoru to finish in the early summer had won the prize after all. It was the middle of November. The sky outside was bright and clear that morning, and the hard light of late autumn lay on the kitchen floor while Minoru was doing the first work of the day. Then a visitor came with the news.

The man spoke to Minoru upstairs. His voice was ordinary, but the meaning of his words did not feel ordinary at all. After he had gone, Minoru and Yoshio sat facing each other in the inner room for some time without moving. The room looked exactly the same as before, but it no longer felt the same. "Can it really be true?" Yoshio said at last in a weak tired voice, as if he were afraid to trust what he had heard.

Less than five days later, ten one-hundred-yen bills were placed in Minoru's hands. The money looked thick and bright and almost unreal, like something from another household. For the first time in many months, the great hard mass of money trouble that had hung over them like a sickness seemed to loosen. Yoshio could not stop speaking of it. "It happened because of me," he said. "Do you remember how angry I was then? If you had not finally listened, this happiness would never have come."

He spoke as if he himself had given the gift. Minoru answered at once, "It is not because of anyone." In one sense she truly believed that. When Yoshio had once shouted that she did not know how to love their life together, she had cried not for daily life but for the harm being done to her art, and she had thought that if she must earn money with the pen, she would rather do some lower kind of

writing than let her real work be made rough and poor by such pressure. Yet now, when she remembered how he had driven her and how that hateful labor had led to this result, she could not keep from feeling some gratitude.

“It really is because of you,” she said after all. The words came out with a softness she had not used in a long time. If this result could become the beginning of a new path for her, then perhaps not everything had been wasted. A joy almost like being born again moved through her body. “Then we do not need to separate,” she said. Yoshio answered at once, “More than that. From now on, both of us must work with all our strength.”

One of the judges had been the teacher in Mukojima whom Minoru had once known well. That judge had given her work a low score, and because of that the result had nearly gone against her. Yoshio cursed the teacher bitterly and said it was better for Minoru to be thrown aside by such a person than to be favored in the old way. The other two judges had given her high marks. Yoshio urged her to visit them both. One was a famous novelist of the present age, but he was ill and not at home when she called.

The other was a lecturer at Waseda and a critic with real authority in the world of literature. Minoru went to see him as Yoshio wished. Before she left, Yoshio told her to take along a short story she had written long ago and kept carefully put away. He said she should ask whether the story might be printed in the powerful magazine that came from that critic’s hands. It was exactly the kind of request Minoru would once have refused to make.

In earlier days, even with all her uncertainty, she had still held a small pride about herself as a writer. She would never have pushed her own work into the hands of a stranger at a first meeting. But now something in her had gone numb. She obeyed Yoshio and carried the manuscript with her. It was not that she had become humble in a noble way. It was more that her spirit had grown tired and dull under poverty, fear, struggle, and the sudden turn of luck.

This time the man was at home, and he received her. Looking down with his thin face bent and his arms folded, he said of the prize story, “That is certainly a work of art. It is a good piece.” Then he took the short manuscript too and said he

would read it. During the visit he spoke about women's writing in a learned and severe way. He said that women often put in too many leaves and branches and did not know how to dig down to the root, and that this was the weakness of women's work.

Minoru returned home repeating those words to herself again and again. She chewed on each academic phrase he had spoken, as if by turning it over long enough she might find some hidden key inside it. The money had brought relief, and the praise had opened a door, yet nothing in her heart was simple. She was glad, but the gladness was mixed with strain, hunger, and a strange new obedience to forces outside herself. Still, as she walked back with the folded manuscript and the critic's words echoing in her head, she felt that the road before her had not closed after all.

Part 11

Very soon Minoru began to feel that the prize work had no real authority at all. The ten one-hundred-yen notes had looked large in the hand, but they vanished quickly, almost as if they had no body. Yet the money itself was not the deepest problem. The work that had come from force and fear had brought sudden comfort into the house, but it had not brought true standing in the world. In Minoru's mind, even the stage, where she had been laughed at by many people, still seemed to carry warmer blood than this success with the pen.

Her heart slowly stepped backward from the happiness that Yoshio kept trying to celebrate. To her, what had fallen on them was not good fortune in any noble sense. It was only one more trick of fate, something thrown down from above so that the broken tie between husband and wife might be knotted once again for a little longer. Their life, she thought, would soon return to the old shape and begin hurting them in the old way. Because she saw that clearly, the prize itself could not fill her with trust.

"I must do something," she told herself more and more often. She felt that she had to begin again, and that her own power must become stronger and strike

outward with greater force. The prize story had not truly shaken the world, yet one edge of it had appeared before the public by chance, and even that was enough to disturb her deeply. For the first time she felt, in a sharp worldly way, how much it mattered whether a work reached beyond the room where it was written. That feeling gave a new hardness to her will.

After that, she began to study with a nervous hunger. The eyes that had so often grown dull and sleepy over books now stayed wide open. At the same time, Yoshio moved farther and farther away from the center of her heart. She often stopped answering him fully and let his words fall aside while she turned her mind elsewhere. It was no longer Yoshio who ruled her inward life. For the first time, it was Minoru herself, and the old pride he had always hated went underground and became stronger there.

Yoshio still said from time to time, "You may call it my doing. If I had not forced you, none of this would have happened." Now Minoru received such words with a small hard smile that had real cruelty in it. The work he had whipped out of her had indeed turned into the money he wanted, and in that narrow sense he had got what he sought. But she did not feel that she owed him any deep debt. And as for the new road she was trying to cut before herself, Yoshio had nothing left to give her.

Little by little, Yoshio felt the change in her. He sometimes watched the back of the woman who had cut him off inwardly and was trying, with all her strength, to climb one more step by herself. He thought that the strange toughness now growing in her had come from the result of that published work. In his own heart he still half believed that he had been the one who gave her the blow that woke her. Yet he said none of this aloud. When he understood that the work was still hers, the art still hers, and that she had found her own strength and begun to move by it, he tasted a fearful feeling of being left behind, step by step.

One day a young man came to visit them. He was from the same home region as Yoshio and was studying literature at the Imperial University. From this student Minoru learned the truth about the prize. One of the judges whose name had appeared in the newspaper had been ill, and a younger writer named Minomura,

who was almost like that man's pupil, had judged in his place. The student greatly admired Minomura and spoke of him with eager warmth. Before long, he offered to take Minoru to meet him.

Minomura lived high on Kagurazaka. When Minoru entered the house, she saw in a dim room near the entrance a man standing with his back turned before a chest, as if he were hiding there until the new guest had been shown farther inside. Because the sliding door stood open, she could see him very clearly from her side. Then an older woman, the kind of woman whose face makes one think she must once have been very beautiful, led Minoru inward and made her wait. After a moment the same man came in. He was Minomura, and both his body and his way of speaking seemed heavy.

He began to talk about the trouble of judging manuscripts. He told her that when her work was in his hands, a violent summer storm and flood had almost soaked it through, but his wife had noticed the danger and taken it out in time. A landslide had damaged their former house, he said, and that was why they had moved here. Then he spoke of the story itself. At first, he said, he had not thought it especially good, but from the middle onward he began to find it interesting, and when a man named Arino told him he should give it one hundred and twenty points so that the real intention of the judging would not fail, he had refused to go so far, though he had still made her score twenty or thirty points different from others. "You were in danger," he said. "Looking at the others, you were on the edge."

As he spoke, he looked at her with the face of a man who believed her chance had rested entirely in his own hands. He picked out passages he liked and praised them one by one. Minoru listened, half drunk on the artistic color in his words, and thought that here too was another person who looked at her as if he had personally given her luck. While she was still in that mood, Arino himself happened to arrive. He sat in a small bent way, rubbing one side of his face with one hand, and he had a habit of saying, "But, you know. But, you know," in such a sweet and charming way that people were easily drawn to him.

Sitting among those men, Minoru felt for the first time in a long while that her

own feelings were dancing brightly again. Minomura and Arino each tried to drag the talk toward whatever was already in his own head, so that their words struck each other in odd ways, yet this made the whole scene more amusing to her, not less. Before long Minomura's wife returned home. She had a severe, beautiful look, like a woman actor from an older stage, and soon after that a young Russian came to the house to receive dance instruction from her. All these sounds, faces, and movements passed before Minoru in a kind of excited light.

She stayed until late into the night, almost feverish from the air of the place. Then she left with the student, and in the dark lane outside she bowed goodbye to Arino, who had come out with them. When she returned home, Yoshio was upstairs. The moment he saw her sit down, he noticed at the edge of her eyes and face the sign of some disturbed and rising feeling. He felt a jealousy toward her that he had not known for some time, yet he kept silent while she talked.

Minoru could not stop laughing over one thing. "When I went in," she said again and again, "that man Minomura was standing in the corner near the entrance with his back turned, and I could see him completely from my side." She repeated this detail many times and laughed alone, as if the strange beginning of the visit held some secret pleasure she could not fully explain. That night she had a dream unlike any other. In it she saw a male mummy and a female mummy lying one over the other in a glass case, in a form almost like the little spirit horses made from eggplants at festival time. Their color was gray, and the woman's face, flat and puppet-like except for the eyes, was turned upward, while the lips shone with a very clear and vivid red.

In the dream she stood beside the glass and looked at them. She did not know by herself what they were, and yet it seemed that someone had told her they were mummies. When morning came, she thought it had been a wonderful dream. If she had been a painter, she thought, she would have tried to put exactly those colors on paper. What seemed strangest to her was that the knowledge remained so clear: they had been mummies. She went at once to Yoshio, told him the dream, and said, "This must be some kind of sign," while already thinking of trying to draw the shape of it at her desk. "I hate dream talk," Yoshio said. He was sitting

in the cold patch of winter sunlight, combing the thin body of Mei.