

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

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Author: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (谷崎潤一郎)

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Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Naomi [Chijin no Ai]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

I am going to write, as honestly as I can, about the strange life my wife and I have lived together. It is a memory that I cannot forget, and I think it may also tell the reader something about the times we live in. Japan was changing then, and many new ideas were coming in from the West. Men and women were becoming more modern, more free, and more eager for a new way of life. Because of that, I feel that our unusual marriage was not only a private matter. It was also a sign of a new age.

I first met the woman who is now my wife about eight years ago. At that time she was working near the Kaminarimon gate in Asakusa, in a café called the Diamond. She was only fifteen years old, and even there she was not yet a full waitress. She was still a beginner, a small and quiet girl who did simple work and stayed in the background. I was already twenty-eight then. Looking back now, I still cannot say that I was struck by her beauty alone.

The first thing that caught my attention was her name. Everyone called her Nao-chan, but her real name was Naomi. I liked the sound of it at once. When I thought of it written in Roman letters, NAOMI, it felt almost foreign, almost Western. After that, I began to watch her more carefully. The more I looked at her, the more I felt that she did not belong in that café. Her face reminded me of a film actress, Mary Pickford, and even before I knew her well, I thought there was something Western in her shape and manner.

Still, she was not bright and lively in those days. She seemed pale, quiet, and somewhat sad, as if a thin gray shadow lay over her. She did not laugh much, and she did not talk much. Because she had only just begun work there, she still wore little makeup and knew few people in the place. She moved quickly and softly, doing her tasks without drawing notice. It may be that this silent way made her seem cleverer than she really was. At any rate, she made me curious.

At that time I was an engineer at an electric company, and I earned one hundred and fifty yen a month. I had come to Tokyo from Utsunomiya, studied at technical school, and then found steady work. I lived alone in a boarding house and had no great money troubles. My family in the country was able to manage without help from me, so I was fairly free. I was known as a serious and proper young man, almost too proper. My pleasures were simple enough: a walk in Ginza, a moving picture show, or now and then a visit to the Imperial Theater.

Yet I was not a saint. I had no skill with women, and no real love affairs, but I looked at them with the usual interest of a young man. Even so, I did not think Naomi was the most beautiful girl in Tokyo. There were many prettier women in trains, in theaters, and on city streets. What drew me was something else. I thought that if I took her out of that café, cared for her, and gave her some education, she might grow into something fine. If that happened, I might even make her my wife. At first, that was all.

There was another reason too, and I must admit it. I was tired of my plain life, tired of my lonely room, tired of coming home to the same dull evening again and again. I wanted some color, some warmth, some living thing near me. I imagined a small house, a few flowers, a sunny veranda, and a simple daily life. Naomi could help in the house, and at the same time she could brighten it. I did not want an arranged marriage with meetings, gifts, formal visits, and endless family talk. I wanted something freer, lighter, almost like play.

So I began to visit the Diamond often. If I had free time, I went there. On her days off, I took Naomi to moving pictures, and afterward we ate a simple meal together. She loved films very much. She was always quiet, and even when she was pleased, her face did not show much. But she never refused when I invited her. She would say, "Yes, I can go," in a plain voice, and come with me without argument, like a child who trusted the world too easily.

Sometimes the picture house was full, and we had to stand in the back. Then I would say, "Naomi-chan, can you see?" and she would rise on her toes and try to look between people's shoulders. "No, not at all," she would answer, still trying. Then I would lift her onto a wooden rail and say, "Hold my shoulder." Sitting

there with her legs swinging, she would watch the screen with wide, steady eyes. “Is it good?” I would ask. “Yes, it is,” she would say, and that was all. When I asked if she was hungry, she answered honestly. If she wanted food, she said so. If not, she said that too.

One evening, after we had seen a Mary Pickford picture, I said to her in a restaurant, “You look like Mary Pickford.” She only looked at me and said, “Do I?” When I asked about her name and family, she answered in short pieces. Her father was dead. Her mother was alive. There were many brothers and sisters. But whenever I tried to ask more, she became closed and uneasy. Even so, she was always faithful about meeting me. If I was late, she would still be there, waiting on a bench or under the roof of a little shrine in the rain, wearing old clothes, a light touch of powder, and neat white socks on her small feet.

One wet spring evening, when the café was quiet, I finally had a longer talk with her. I had been slowly drinking a sweet cocktail, and when she brought a plate to my table, I asked her to sit for a moment. She lit my cigarette and sat beside me. I asked if she liked reading, and she said yes. I asked what she wanted to study, and after a pause she said, “I want to learn English. And I want to study music too.” Then I said, “If you truly wish to do that, I can help you. I can take you out of this place, let you live under my care, and try to make you into a fine woman.” She looked straight into my eyes for the first time and answered at once, “Yes. If you will do that, I will go.”

I was surprised by how quickly she agreed. Still, it was necessary to speak with her family, and at last I did. They were careless in a way that shocked me. They seemed almost glad to let her go, as long as someone else would take responsibility for her. Her mother told me that they had once thought of making her a geisha, but Naomi did not want that life. When I heard how little they valued her, I felt even more pity for her. Soon after that, she left the café, and the two of us began to search for a house together.

We walked through many areas near my work, meeting after work on weekdays and early in the morning on Sundays. We looked in Omori, Kamata, Shinagawa, and other places, and after each search we ate together and often ended with a film

or a walk in Ginza. On those warm late spring days, walking side by side through roads lined with green trees, we must have looked like a strange pair. Naomi loved flowers and often stopped to look at them, calling out with real delight when she saw a bright one in a garden. At last we found a poor little Western-style house near the train line in Omori. It was badly planned and not very practical, but it looked like something from a fairy tale. Naomi clapped her hands softly and said, "How modern! I like a house like this." And because she liked it so much, I decided at once that this would be our house.

Part 2

We moved into that fairy-tale house late in May. When we began to live there, it did not feel as inconvenient as it had seemed at first. From the small upstairs room, we could see the sea in the distance when the air was clear. In front of the house there was a little open space that was just right for flowers. Trains passed from time to time on the nearby line, but there was a rice field between us and the track, so the sound was not too bad.

The rent was low, and that pleased me as much as the look of the house. It was not a house for an ordinary family, and that was why it was cheap. On the day we moved in, I said to Naomi, "From now on, do not call me Kawai-san. Call me Joji-san, and let us live like real friends." I wrote home and told my family that I had left my boarding house and taken a servant girl of fifteen into my care, but I said nothing more than that. No one from home was likely to come, and I thought I would explain later if I ever had to.

For a while, our days were full of buying little things and putting them in their places. I tried not to decide everything by myself. Even when it was only a curtain or a chair, I asked Naomi what she liked and let her choose. The house had no proper space for the usual things of a Japanese home, so we were free to make it look as we pleased. Naomi sewed cheap printed cloth into curtains, and we found old wicker chairs, a sofa, a table, and other Western furniture to fill the big studio room.

We also hung a few photographs of American film actresses on the wall, including Mary Pickford. I would have liked to make everything Western, even our beds, but that would have cost too much money. Instead, bedding was sent from my family home. Naomi was given a rough cotton quilt meant for a maid, and I felt sorry when I saw it. "This is too poor," I said. "Shall I give you one of mine?" But she shook her head and answered, "No, this is enough for me," and carried it alone to the little three-mat room under the roof.

My room was next to hers, a slightly larger one in the same upper space. Every morning, before getting out of bed, we spoke to each other through the thin wall. "Naomi-chan, are you awake?" I would call. "Yes, I am awake. What time is it now?" she would answer. Then we would laugh and argue gently about who would cook the rice, or whether we should be lazy and eat bread, milk, and jam instead.

Sometimes we cooked rice in a small pot and set it on the table without any ceremony. Sometimes we ate canned food with it, and sometimes we had only bread or sweets. If we wanted something better, we went out together to a nearby Western restaurant. Naomi often said, "Joji-san, please buy me beefsteak today," in a voice that sounded simple and cheerful. To me, that kind of life felt freer and more pleasant than a regular household with rules for every hour of the day.

After breakfast I went to work and left Naomi alone in the house. In the mornings she worked with the flowers in the little garden, and in the afternoons she locked the house and went to her lessons. I found an elderly American woman named Miss Harrison in Meguro to teach her English conversation and reading. For music, I sent her to a woman who had finished music school a few years earlier and gave piano and singing lessons at home. Naomi put on a hakama, dark stockings, and small shoes, and she looked like a girl student on her way to a new life.

As the weeks passed, she began to change. The pale, quiet café girl became healthier, brighter, and much more lively. In the evening, when I came home from work and she returned from her lessons, the long light of early summer still filled the big white room. She would sing what she had learned, run about in slippers,

play games with me, crawl under the sofa, jump over the table, and rush up and down the ladder like a small animal. Once I even crawled across the room while she sat on my back and used a towel like a rein, laughing and shouting at me as if I were a horse.

One day, while she was running up and down too wildly, she slipped from the top of the ladder and fell. She began to cry at once, with the helpless tears of a true child. When I picked her up, I saw that the skin near her elbow had been torn and blood was coming out. "What a small wound to cry over," I said, though of course I was worried, and I cleaned it and tied it carefully. But every day after that, when I changed the bandage, she filled her eyes with tears again and sniffed like a little girl.

At that time, I still told myself that what I felt was not yet love. I believed I was happy simply because I could care for her, teach her, and watch her grow. Then summer came, and my company gave me two weeks of vacation. As usual, I went back to my family home in the country and left Naomi at her mother's house in Asakusa. But once I got there, those days felt empty and dull beyond measure, and I suddenly understood how much her absence weighed on me.

At last I could bear it no longer. I made some excuse to my mother, left earlier than I had planned, and reached Tokyo late at night. From Ueno Station I took a taxi straight to Naomi's house and called to her from outside the lattice. "Naomi-chan, I am back," I said. "A car is waiting for us at the corner. Come at once, and let us go to Omori." She came out a moment later with a small bundle in her hand, wearing a pale soft kimono with a light purple grape pattern and a wide bright ribbon in her hair, and I felt at once that she had changed a little during those few days apart.

In the taxi I asked what she had done while I was away. "I went to moving pictures every day," she answered. Then, after a pause, she said, "But you came back sooner than I thought." I told her that the country was too dull for me, and that Tokyo was better after all. Then she said, with a sudden childlike eagerness, "I want to go to the sea. I want to go swimming somewhere." I looked at her slender shoulders under the grape-pattern cloth and said, "Then shall I take you

to Kamakura, or perhaps Hakone?” and she answered at once, “The sea is better. I truly want to go.”

So, early in August, I took her to Kamakura for a short stay. Naomi wanted to remain much longer, and she pouted when I told her that we could stay only a few days. I tried to quiet her by promising that I would have Western clothes made for her later, and that pleased her at last. Yet when we boarded the train and found ourselves among elegant ladies and daughters of rich families going to the shore, both of us grew strangely uncomfortable. Naomi, who usually seemed so modern to me, suddenly looked poor and uncertain among them, and even I began to feel the difference between our world and theirs.

I could see that she felt it too. She tried to hide her cheap parasol in the shadow of her sleeve, and the grape-pattern kimono that had looked so charming in Tokyo now seemed painfully small and humble. At first I had imagined taking her to a better hotel, somewhere fine enough to make the whole trip bright and memorable. But after walking back and forth and looking at the grand buildings, we lost our courage. In the end, instead of choosing the best place, we went to a modest seaside inn at Hase and stayed there.

Part 3

The inn was noisy, and there were many young students staying there, so we did not spend much time inside. Every day we went down to the beach and stayed there from morning until evening. Naomi forgot her shame from the train almost at once. The moment she saw the sea, her face changed, and she became bright and eager again. Clinging to my arm, she said, “This summer I must learn to swim properly,” and then she ran into the shallow water and splashed about like a child.

I held her body with both hands and showed her how to float on her front. At other times I made her hold a post and kick her legs, or I suddenly let go so that she swallowed a little salt water and learned by surprise. When we grew tired of that, we played in the waves, lay on the sand, or took a small boat out toward the open water in the evening. Naomi wore her bathing clothes with a large towel

over them, and she seemed to belong to that bright world of sea and sky more than to any house in Tokyo. She laughed often there, and the sound of it stayed in my ears long afterward.

Sometimes, when the sea became calm at sunset, I rowed while Naomi sat near the back of the boat or lay with her head against the side, looking up at the sky. Then she would begin to sing in her high clear voice. She sang "Santa Lucia," then other songs she had learned, and her voice moved out over the quiet evening water. "Farther," she would say. "Let us go a little farther." By then the shore lights were growing dim, the sky was darkening, and her white towel shone faintly in the evening air.

I had never known such a time before. I was a practical man, an engineer, not a man of books or fine art, and yet, sitting in that boat with her, I felt as if I had entered another world. The lights on land grew soft through the evening mist, and I felt that the two of us were drifting away from ordinary life. I did not think clearly. I only felt a sweet sadness and a wish that the boat might keep going forever. For a man as plain as I was, that alone was already a great event.

But there was something else, and it was no small matter. Until then I had lived with Naomi in the same house without truly knowing what kind of body she had. In Kamakura, when she first came out wearing the dark green bathing cap and bathing suit that we had bought in Ginza, I saw her clearly for the first time. I was deeply pleased. Her body was just as I had half imagined it would be from the way clothes had hung on her, and I felt strangely proud, as if some private hope of mine had been proved true.

She was not tall, yet she seemed taller than she really was because her body was well balanced and her legs were long. Her waist was slim, her shoulders were full and healthy, and her arms and legs were straight and lively with strength. "Joji-san, are my legs straight?" she asked, standing on the sand and looking down at herself with open pleasure. "Yes," I said. "Very straight, and very fine too." She walked a little, stood still, and stretched one leg out on the sand, smiling as if she herself knew how well made she was.

There was also something strong in the line from her neck to her shoulders.

When she wore her bathing suit, she often came to me and said, "Please fasten this button for me." Then I would stand close and help her with the buttons at the shoulder. I had expected a girl with such a long neck and gentle sloping shoulders to be thin and weak when dressed so lightly, but she was not. Her shoulders were full, her chest was deep, and she seemed full of breath and life. When she moved her arms, the cloth stretched tight over her young body, and I could not help seeing in her the power of youth itself.

It was natural that a girl built like that should love movement. Naomi was quick and skillful in every physical thing. Kamakura was only the beginning. After we returned, she kept practicing at the shore near Omori and soon learned to swim well. She learned to row, to handle small boats, and to spend whole days outdoors without tiring until the very end. Then, when she came home at last with her wet bathing things in her hands, she would fall into a chair and say, "Ah, I am tired. And I am terribly hungry."

At such times we often gave up the idea of cooking. On the way home we would stop at a Western restaurant and eat with the greed of two happy young animals. Naomi loved beefsteak and could eat far more than I expected from a girl of her age. "Another one," she would say without shame, and the waiter would look at her in surprise. Those summer days were so full of sun, salt, appetite, and movement that I could go on writing about them without end. Even now they shine in my memory with a special light.

There is one more thing from that summer that I must not leave out. Naomi often became too sleepy or too lazy to go to the public bath after the sea, so at first I helped her wash off the salt water in the kitchen or with a basin at home. "You cannot go to bed like this," I would say. "Your skin is sticky. Come here, and I will wash you." She obeyed very simply and let me do it. What began as a practical habit slowly became a regular part of our life together.

Even after the hot season ended, the habit remained. We arranged a Western-style bath in one corner of the studio and screened it off, and through autumn and into winter I still washed her there. Yet even then I cannot say that I clearly understood my own heart. No doubt I already loved her, but in my own mind I

still believed that my greatest pleasure was to guide her, teach her, and shape her into the woman I wanted her to become. I had not yet admitted to myself how deeply my feeling had already grown.

During that time I even began to keep notes about her, almost like a diary. She changed so quickly from month to month that I wanted to record those small signs of growth. I wrote down what she said, what she wore, how her body changed after the summer sun, and how she laughed in the bath or called me foolish names in play. Looking back now, I think that was another sign that my fate was already tied to hers. Without knowing it fully, I had begun to watch her as a man watches the one person he cannot lose.

Part 4

As I said before, I had been keeping a diary about Naomi's growth. I wrote down the small changes in her body, her voice, her habits, and the things she said in play. Sometimes I even took photographs and placed them between the pages, because I wanted to keep her changing face before my eyes. Looking back, I can see that I was no longer only a guardian or teacher. I had already begun to watch her with the deep attention of a man who feared that his happiness might vanish. The diary only made that feeling clearer.

At last, in the second spring after we came to Omori, our relationship changed completely. It happened on April 26, when Naomi was sixteen by the old count. There was no clear speech before it, and no sudden struggle of feeling. By that time we already understood each other without words, and so the change came naturally, almost quietly, as if it had been waiting for the right night to appear. Afterward, she put her lips close to my ear and said, "Joji-san, you will never throw me away, will you?" I answered at once, "Never. You know my heart well enough by now."

Then I asked her, "When I said I would take you away from that café and care for you, did you think I meant to make you my wife one day?" She did not answer quickly, but after a moment she said, "I thought perhaps that was what you meant."

I held her more tightly and felt almost wild with gratitude. “Thank you, Naomi-chan,” I said. “I never thought fortune would be so kind to me. You have become even closer to my dream than I hoped. I will always cherish you, and I will never treat you like an ordinary wife whom a husband soon grows tired of.”

She had tears in her eyes when she answered me. “I will study hard,” she said. “I will become the kind of woman you want me to be.” Then, before I knew it, I too was crying. We lay awake long into the night, talking about the future, about the life we would build together, and about the things she would still learn. It seemed to me that a bright road had opened before us, and that nothing in the world could close it. I was happier than I had ever been in my life.

Soon after that, I went home to the country and told my mother everything for the first time. I explained my ideas about marriage, and I tried to make her understand why I wanted Naomi, and no one else, to be my wife. My mother already knew my character well and trusted me more than most parents trust their sons. She listened quietly and then said, “If that is truly your wish, then I will not stand against it. But because the girl comes from such a family, take care that no trouble grows later.” It was not a warm welcome, but it was honest and fair, and it relieved me greatly.

After that, I arranged matters with Naomi’s people as quickly as I could. They were so easy about it that the whole thing was settled with almost no difficulty. There was no ugly talk about money, no foolish demands, and no long quarrel. Even if the public ceremony was to wait for some years, I wanted our names to be entered properly at once, and that was done. From then on, whatever face we showed the outside world, we were husband and wife in the eyes of the law. Because of that, our closeness grew still deeper and more natural.

One day I said to her, “Let us go on living like friends forever, even though we are husband and wife.” She answered, “Then will you always call me Naomi-chan?” I asked if she wanted me to say “wife” or “Naomi-san,” but she shook her head. “No,” she said, “I do not want that yet. Please keep saying Naomi-chan until I ask you to change it.” I laughed and told her that then I too would remain Joji-san forever. She was lying back on the sofa, playing with a rose, and then suddenly

she threw her arms around my neck instead of the flower.

In those days I said many foolish, passionate things to her. "I do not only love you," I told her once. "I worship you. You are my treasure, the jewel I found and polished with my own hands." I even said that I would gladly spend all my salary on her if it could make her more beautiful. But Naomi, at least in words, kept returning to study. "That is not necessary," she said. "More than presents, I want to learn English and music properly." Then I answered, "Yes, study, and become a lady who can stand even before Western people without shame."

I often used such words as "Western" and "like a foreign lady," and Naomi loved hearing them. In front of the mirror she would try expressions copied from the actresses she admired. "Look," she would say, "do I not look foreign when I smile like this?" Then she would copy the face of Mary Pickford, or the eyes of another actress, or a way of holding the head that she had seen in a film. She was wonderfully quick at catching those small things. Sometimes, for a moment, she looked so much like a different person that I stared at her in amazement.

Because of that, I grew more and more eager to dress her in unusual ways. I thought ordinary Japanese clothes did not suit her. "There should be something new for you," I told her. "Not fully Japanese, not fully Chinese, not fully Western, but something fresh." She asked, "Then will you have such clothes made for me?" and I said yes at once. After that we spent many Sundays in department stores and cloth shops, hunting for strange patterns and light materials. Sometimes we even went as far as Yokohama and searched among foreign shops for cloth that no ordinary woman would think of wearing.

Much of it was cheap, but that did not matter to us. We cared more about shape and color than price. Some robes were loose like nightgowns, some narrow like tubes, and some were only lengths of cloth fastened here and there with brooches. Naomi would put them on with bare skin under them, then stand in front of the mirror while I moved her this way and that, making her sit, walk, turn, or lean back so I could see the effect. Wrapped in pale white, rose, or light violet cloth, she looked to me like a great living flower.

As a result, clothes began to fill the house. There were too many to fold away

neatly, and in any case we had more interest in using them than in storing them. They hung over chairs, lay in corners, covered the sofa, and even appeared halfway up the ladder or along the rail of the upper space. The big studio room slowly came to look like a costume room in a theater. Because she wore many of those things directly on her skin and we did not wash them often enough, they were hardly elegant in a proper household sense. But to us they were part of our game, part of the world we had made together.

That is why I must admit something plainly. By then Naomi had become, for me, not only a wife, but also a rare doll and a beautiful object for display. I do not say this proudly, but it is true. I wanted her to live, laugh, learn, and grow; yet at the same time I wanted to arrange her, dress her, and gaze at her as if she were a work of art that belonged only to me. Even then I had not given up my first hope of making her into a great modern woman. But without knowing it, I was already walking toward a trouble far deeper than I understood.

Part 5

Even in those happy days, when I let Naomi do almost everything she liked and tried to please her in every way, I had not given up my first wish. I still wanted to educate her well and make her into a fine modern woman. If you ask exactly what I meant by “fine” or “modern,” I cannot give a very clear answer now. In those days I probably meant only this: a woman who could go anywhere without shame, who looked stylish, and who could stand beside Western people without feeling small. Foolish as it sounds now, I believed that I could both treasure her like a beautiful doll and also raise her into a truly admirable woman.

So I often said, “Naomi-chan, play is play, but study is study. If you become an excellent woman, I will gladly buy you many more things.” She always gave the answer I wanted. “Yes, I will study,” she said. “I will surely become excellent.” After supper, I usually taught her for half an hour. We read from her English books, practiced conversation, and reviewed what Miss Harrison had given her. But Naomi often came to the lesson in one of her soft velvet dresses or loose gowns,

leaning back in a chair, pushing a slipper with the tip of her foot, and looking as if study and play were the same thing.

“What are you doing?” I would say. “Sit properly when you study.” Then she would draw in her shoulders and answer in a sweet childish voice, “Teacher, forgive me.” At other times she joked and said, “Mr. Kawai Teacher, please be kind,” while peeping into my face and touching my cheek with one finger. Faced with such a pupil, I had no strength to remain severe for long. The lesson that had begun with firm warnings soon turned into laughter and foolish play. For a while, I let it go on like that.

Yet the more closely I looked, the more uneasy I became. Naomi had already studied English for about two years under Miss Harrison, and by that alone she should have been farther along than she was. She could read aloud pleasantly enough, and her pronunciation was very smooth, but when I asked her the meaning of what she read, or tried to make her put simple Japanese into English, she was weak, uncertain, and often quite wrong. I could not understand it. If she had truly been learning all that time, why was the result so poor?

At last I went to see Miss Harrison myself. She was a large, friendly old American woman, and she received me with smiles and great calm. When I said, “Naomi reads well enough, but she does not seem to understand grammar or translation properly,” Miss Harrison shook her head at once. “No, no,” she said. “You are mistaken. She is a very clever girl. Japanese people think too much about grammar and translation. That is the worst way. One must read English in English, again and again. Naomi-san has beautiful pronunciation. She reads very well. In time she will surely become skillful.”

There was reason in what she said, and yet it did not satisfy me. I did not mean that Naomi must know grammar as if she were a scholar. I meant only that after two years she should at least understand the structure of simple sentences and not fail at the easiest exercises. But Miss Harrison kept smiling and repeating, “She is very clever.” I began to think that Western teachers were sometimes too ready to admire a Japanese child who looked stylish, Western, and charming. Naomi’s face, her voice, and her lovely pronunciation had completely won the old lady’s

heart.

In truth, I was half annoyed and half pleased by this. I disliked the method, but I could not deny that I felt proud when a foreign woman praised Naomi so warmly. It was almost as if I myself had been praised. Miss Harrison's affection for her was clear enough. When I visited her room, I even saw several photographs of Naomi placed around the mirror on her dressing table. So I came home dissatisfied with the teaching, yet secretly proud of Naomi's effect on other people.

That night Naomi asked, "Well then, what did Miss Harrison say?" There was something in her tone that troubled me. She sounded as if she already knew she had an ally and was not afraid of my opinion. That irritated me more than I expected. "She says you do well," I answered, "but Western people do not always understand Japanese students. Good pronunciation alone means nothing. You remember things well, but when I ask the meaning, you do not know it. A parrot can repeat sounds. That does not make it wise."

It was the first real scolding I had ever given her. Until then, I had spoken gently, even when I was disappointed. But from that time on, I grew stubborn. If Naomi was really to become the sort of woman I had imagined, then she needed more than charm. She needed a mind that could follow rules, connect one thing with another, and understand what she was doing. So I lengthened our lessons from half an hour to an hour, sometimes more. During that time I allowed no play, no touching, and no foolish smiles. I made her do grammar, translation, and written exercises, and I corrected her sharply.

I also used a harder method on purpose. Instead of telling her every answer, I gave her hints and forced her to think. "You have read the rule," I would say. "Now translate this." If she wrote it wrongly, I did not explain at once. "Read the rule again," I said. "If you understand it, you can do this." When she still failed, my temper rose. "How can you not see such an easy thing?" I cried. "If you went to school like this, you would be at the bottom of the class." Then her face would darken, and before long she would begin to cry quietly.

Our whole life changed during those study hours. A moment before, we might have been laughing together like the happiest pair in the world. Then the books

came out, and suddenly the room felt heavy, close, and full of anger. I grew hot with impatience, and she sat with a hard face, swelling with hurt pride. More than once I called her stupid. Once I even tapped her forehead with my knuckles. But Naomi, when she chose to resist, had a terrible stubbornness. If she decided not to answer, she would sit like stone, with tears running down her cheeks, and still refuse to say a word until at last I myself gave up.

One evening the quarrel went farther than ever. I was trying to teach her that words like “going” and “doing” needed the proper helping verb before them, and no matter how many times I explained it, she kept writing them wrongly. Even after I had shown her the different tenses, she still wrote absurd things. At last I lost control. “Fool!” I shouted. “How many times must I tell you? You cannot say such things. Do it again, and do not think you may stop tonight until it is right.” I threw the notebook back toward her. Naomi turned white. She pressed her lips together, lifted her eyes, and stared straight between my brows with such force that for a moment I could not move.

Then, without a word, she snatched up the notebook, tore it to pieces, and flung the scraps onto the floor. “What are you doing?” I cried. She said nothing. She only kept staring at me with that same fierce, burning look. I rose to my feet and tried to frighten her at last. I gathered some of her clothes into a cloth bundle, brought out money, and said, “If you will not apologize, then leave this house now. Take this and go back to Asakusa. I will settle the rest later.” At that, she finally weakened. She lowered her head, grew small, and trembled like a child. When I asked again whether she would apologize or go, she shook her head that she did not want to leave, and at last, with bad grace and half-turned face, she bent over the desk in apology.

By then I could no longer miss what was growing inside her. Perhaps it had been there from the beginning, and I had mistaken it for childish charm. Perhaps I had spoiled her too much and let it grow. In any case, Naomi was no longer easy to guide. When something displeased her, she could become silent, swollen with pride, and strangely fearless. Worst of all were her eyes. They were not soft like a young girl’s eyes should have been. They were sharp, strong, and full of a deep

power that could almost frighten me. When she fixed them on me without speaking, I sometimes felt that she was not the one being ruled in our house.

Part 6

“You are stubborn,” I said at last, “but once I have spoken, I do not turn back easily either. If you know you were wrong, then apologize. If you hate the idea of apologizing, then go back to Asakusa. Which will it be? Decide now. Will you apologize, or will you leave?” At that, Naomi first shook her head as if she did not want to go. Then, when I asked whether she meant she wished to stay, she gave a small nod. “Then you will apologize?” I asked, and again she nodded.

I told her that if she truly meant it, I would forgive her. “Then put your hands down properly and apologize the right way,” I said. She did as I ordered, but even then she did not do it with a soft heart. She bent over the desk lazily, half turned away, and bowed with a manner that still seemed to mock me. There was no sweetness in it, and no real surrender. Even in apology, she wished to keep some pride.

By that time I could no longer hide the truth from myself. Whether Naomi had always had such a nature, or whether I had spoiled it into strength, I cannot say with certainty. Perhaps what had seemed childlike charm at fifteen had only grown larger as she grew older. In the beginning, if I scolded her, she listened after some tears. But now, if the smallest thing displeased her, she puffed up at once and turned hard.

Tears, at least, would have left some softness in her. But sometimes she did not cry at all. She only looked at me with that sharp upward gaze, as if she were aiming a weapon. I have often thought since then that if there is such a thing as animal force in the eyes, Naomi had it in great measure. Her eyes were too strong for a young woman’s face. They were bright, fierce, and at the same time filled with a deep attraction that was hard to resist.

Around that time two opposite feelings fought in my heart every day. One was disappointment. I had to admit that Naomi was not the clever, admirable woman

I had once dreamed of making. However much I wanted to think well of her, I could no longer deny that her mind would not grow in the way I had hoped. I began to tell myself that perhaps she had only been suited for the kind of life from which I had taken her, and that I had been foolish to expect more.

But the other feeling was love, or rather something darker and more helpless than love. If her mind disappointed me, her body, her face, her skin, her lips, her hair, and above all her eyes drew me more strongly than ever. She was becoming more beautiful every month, and the more I called her foolish in my thoughts, the more bitterly I was pulled toward her. That was my true misfortune. Without noticing it fully, I had begun to forget the pure wish to guide her, and had started instead to follow where she led.

To quiet my own shame, I argued with myself in a low and cowardly way. "The world does not give a man everything," I thought. "I wished to make Naomi beautiful in both mind and body. I failed in one part, but in the other I succeeded beyond hope. Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps I should accept the half of my dream that did come true." In that way I bent my thoughts little by little, until they would fit my weakness.

Naomi noticed the change in me before I had even finished noticing it myself. "These days," she said one evening, "you do not call me stupid so often in the English lesson." I answered, "I decided that too much scolding only makes you more stubborn, and brings no good result." She gave a little laugh through her nose and said, "Of course it does. If you keep saying 'stupid, stupid,' I will never listen. Most of the time I could have answered well enough, but I only pretended not to know, just to trouble you. Did you never understand that?"

I knew very well that this was empty pride, spoken after the battle was over. Even so, I pretended to be impressed. "Was that really so?" I asked. "Naturally," she said. "No one could fail at such easy things. You were the foolish one for believing it. Whenever you grew angry, I thought it was so funny that I almost laughed." "Then you made a complete fool of me," I answered. "Yes," she said, her face bright with victory. "You see? I am a little cleverer than you."

Instead of punishing that pride, I encouraged it. At the time I told myself that

this too was part of my plan. I had begun to believe that even false confidence might be useful to a woman. Japanese women, I thought, too often seemed timid and unsure of themselves. A modern woman, by contrast, needed spirit, quickness, and a bold face before the world. So even if Naomi's confidence was built on vanity rather than truth, perhaps it would still help her. That was the excuse by which I allowed myself to be ruled.

There was another reason as well. When a man is deeply taken by a woman, he often prefers her pleased face to plain truth. If she says something false with bright eyes and a proud smile, he may understand very well that it is false, and yet still choose not to break the spell. He thinks, "Yes, you are trying to fool me. But you are so charming while doing it that I will let you continue." That was exactly how I began to behave with Naomi. I let her believe that she had beaten me, because seeing her delight gave me pleasure.

We often played card games and little board games in those days. If I had really tried, I could have beaten her often enough. But I usually let her win, and after she had won again and again, she came to believe that she was naturally better than I was at all such contests. "Come, Joji-san," she said, "I will beat you once more, so sit down properly." I answered, "I only lost because I was careless. This time I will truly win." Yet while saying so, I still made weak moves and let the game slip away.

Then she laughed and mocked me openly. "How sad," she said, "that a grown man should lose to a girl of eighteen. You really do not know how to play at all." Sometimes she added, "Age is nothing. It is brains that matter," and then looked at me with triumph. Little by little, what had begun as my kindness became her firm belief. She no longer thought, "He lets me win." She thought, "I win because I am stronger." And once that belief took root, it changed the air between us.

In games, as in many other things, victory does not depend on reason alone. There is also force, nerve, boldness, the pressure of one will against another. Naomi possessed that kind of force in abundance. Once she had tasted victory, she came at me as if she expected the world to give way before her, and often I felt myself weakening even before the game had properly begun. Before long she

said, "Playing for nothing is dull. Let us wager a little." Then, though she had no money of her own, she would set the amount herself and calmly win my coins from me. It was only a small thing at first, but even in that small thing, the balance between us had already begun to turn.

Part 7

It was early September, when Naomi was eighteen, and the heat of summer was still strong. One evening I came home from work about an hour earlier than usual because the office was quiet that day. As I entered the gate and stepped into our little garden, I saw a young man there with Naomi. I had never seen him before. He looked about her age, or perhaps a year older, and he was standing carelessly with a stick in his hand while she crouched by the flower bed and talked up at him from behind the tall flowers.

He wore a light summer kimono, a straw hat with a bright ribbon, and an expression that was bold without being truly handsome. His face was red, his eyebrows were thick, and though his features were not bad, he had many pimples over his cheeks and forehead. Naomi was half hidden among the flowers, so I could only see part of her face and her dark hair moving now and then. The scene was not openly improper, yet it was so unexpected that I stopped at once. Then the young man noticed me, lifted his hat politely, and said to Naomi, "Well then, I will be going."

Naomi stood up at once and answered, "Good-bye." The young man walked toward the gate, and as he passed me he touched the edge of his hat again, almost as if he wished to hide his face while being polite. When he was gone, I asked, "Who was that?" I was not yet truly jealous. I only felt a light uneasiness and a strong curiosity, as if I had entered a room and found a chair moved from its usual place.

"Oh, that was a friend of mine," Naomi said calmly. "His name is Hamada." When I asked how she knew him, she said, "He goes to Isarago too, to study singing. His face is full of pimples and not nice to look at, but his voice is beautiful.

He sings baritone very well. We were in the same quartet at a music gathering.” The way she spoke was so cool and ordinary that I could see no sign of fear in her. She even added that this was his first visit, and that he had only come to invite her into a social dance club.

“And what did you tell him?” I asked. “I said I would think about it,” she replied, and then at once her voice changed. She came nearer, softened her tone, and said like a spoiled child, “Please let me do it. Please, Joji-san. You should join too, and then we can learn together.” I asked whether men were allowed in the club, and she answered, “Of course. Anyone can join. A Russian lady teaches there. She came from Siberia and is poor now, so they made this club to help her. If more students join, it will help her. Please let us go.”

As she pleaded, I realized something that had been growing for some time. Naomi was becoming bored with our life. We had been living in the house at Omori for nearly four years, and for most of that time we had shut ourselves away from the world. We had played cards, acted out scenes from films, played silly games, and even taken interest in the garden when nothing else remained. But Naomi was quick to tire of every amusement. She could not sit still for long, and more than once I had seen her throw down a book, stretch herself on the sofa, and say, “How dull this is. Is there nothing interesting left to do?”

So the idea of dancing tempted me too. In truth, I had long dreamed of seeing Naomi, beautifully dressed, moving with ease among fashionable people. I had always wanted her to become not only lovely at home, but admired in the world outside. I myself was shy, awkward, and poor at social life, yet that was exactly why such glittering places drew me. “Your wife is wonderfully modern,” I imagined people saying. That foolish hope still lived inside me. So, after only a little hesitation, I agreed that we should join.

Naomi then explained the matter in more detail. The teacher, she said, was a Russian woman named Madame Shlemskaya, once the wife of a count. Her husband had disappeared during the revolution, her children were lost, and she had escaped to Japan alone and poor. Naomi’s music teacher, Miss Sugizaki, was helping organize the club for her, and the manager of the whole thing was that

same Hamada, a student at Keio. The lessons were held twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays, in a musical instrument shop on Hijirizaka in Mita. The fee was twenty yen a month for each person, which seemed very high to me, but Naomi argued that dancing was a luxury anyway and that a skillful person could learn quickly.

Our first visit came soon after. Naomi met me at Tamachi Station in the late afternoon, and together we climbed the slope to the shop. It was a narrow little place with pianos, organs, and gramophones crowded close together, and even from below we could hear footsteps beating upstairs in time to music. Near the foot of the stairs stood several students, noisy and restless, staring at Naomi and me as we entered. One of them, holding a flat mandolin, called out to her in a familiar voice, and Naomi answered in the same rough student style. They spoke of Hamada, of dancing, and of money, while I stood there feeling more and more like a stranger.

“Do you know all these boys?” I asked as we climbed the stairs. “Not exactly,” Naomi answered. “They are from the mandolin club. I sometimes meet them here, so that is all.” When we reached the second floor, I stopped in surprise. A large room had been cleared and made into a practice hall, and several people were moving awkwardly across the floor while a gramophone played. In the middle stood Hamada, running here and there, putting powder on the boards so people could slide more easily. And near the center, in the red light of the evening sun, stood the Russian teacher.

She wore a white blouse and a dark skirt, and she held a little whip in one hand. She could not have been young, yet she looked far younger than I had expected, perhaps about thirty. Her face was pale and firm, her manner cold, and there was something noble in the way she stood and watched the students. She called out, “One, two, tree,” in a quiet but commanding voice, and whenever a student made a mistake she cried, “No!” or “No good!” and struck the floor with the whip. Once or twice she even tapped a careless foot. The whole scene looked more like military training than dancing.

Some people sat in the waiting room next to the hall, watching and talking. One

woman, round-faced and dressed in a rich style, was praising the Russian lady with deep admiration. Another, older and thinner, with a red-haired Western hairstyle and too much powder on her face, kept agreeing with her. They spoke of the teacher's noble birth, her hard life, her strictness, and the strength of Western women. I sat among them in misery, not knowing what to say, while a talkative woman asked me in half-English, half-Japanese whether this was my "foist time." I could barely understand her, and my awkwardness only grew worse.

At last Hamada came over, smiling as if he belonged there completely. He thanked Naomi for lending him her fan, said he had already been learning for half a year, and told us not to worry. "A woman only has to follow," he said. "The man leads." When I asked what kind of people came there, he explained that many were employees of an oil company, along with a doctor who danced for exercise. He also told me that the Russian teacher spoke very little Japanese, but that it did not matter, because for dancing one only needed "one, two, three" and a few gestures.

Soon afterward Miss Sugizaki herself came up to us. She greeted me in a polished, formal way that made me even more uncomfortable than before, and she led us to the Russian teacher for an introduction. I noticed that she called Naomi "Miss Kawai," and that alone made my heart beat harder. I wanted to see how Naomi would behave before a real Western woman. But when Madame Shlemskaya turned toward us and smiled slightly, Naomi, who was usually so proud, suddenly became red-faced and shy. She said almost nothing and only took the teacher's hand softly. As for me, I could hardly raise my eyes. I bowed, touched that white jeweled hand, and felt that we had stepped into a new world from which our old quiet life could never fully return.

Part 8

Though I was an awkward and ordinary man, I had always loved Western style. In another life, if I had been rich, free, and handsome enough, I might have gone abroad, lived in Europe, and even tried to marry a Western woman. But I had

neither the money nor the face for such dreams. I was small, dark, and too unsure of myself, and I knew it very well. So I had told myself that Naomi, with her partly Western look, was the best I could hope for, and that I should be satisfied with that.

Even so, to stand near a real Western woman still felt like an honor beyond anything I had expected. I had spent years only looking at such women from a distance, in operas, in moving pictures, or in my own imagination. Now, by chance, dancing had brought one close to me, and not only any foreign woman, but a countess, or so I believed. When Madame Shlemskaya held out her hand, I hesitated before touching it. It seemed too white, too noble, and too costly a thing for my rough fingers. That first handshake alone made my heart beat faster than it should have.

Naomi's hands were lovely too, and I had often praised them. They were smooth, fine, and soft, with long fingers that looked delicate and graceful. But Madame's hand was of another kind. It was fuller, stronger, and whiter, with large bright rings that somehow did not look vulgar on her. Her skin was pale in a way I had never truly seen before, and under that whiteness I thought I could almost see thin blue veins like lines in marble. After seeing that hand, I felt, with some shame, that even Naomi's skin was not so fair as I had once believed.

There was also the way Madame moved when she danced with me. Even though she seemed small for a Western woman, she was still taller than I was, and in her high shoes her uncovered breast seemed almost level with my face. The first time she said, "Walk with me," and put her arm around my back to guide me through the steps, I hardly knew what to do with my body. I worried that my face would touch her skin, that my breath would offend her, that my hands were too damp and ugly to hold her properly. If a loose strand of her hair fell near me, I felt a shock run through my whole body.

She had a scent too, one that stayed with me long after the lesson ended. Later I heard rude students say that foreign women often had a strong body smell and that Madame used perfume to hide it. Perhaps that was true. But to me the mixed smell of perfume and warm skin was not unpleasant at all. It felt sweet, sharp, and

strange, and it made me think of faraway countries, bright gardens, and foreign ships beyond the sea. I often drew it in almost greedily, and when I did, I forgot the room, the steps, and even the floor under my feet.

I will admit it plainly: after that, I kept going to the dance lessons not only for Naomi's sake. The hour I spent each Monday and Friday in Madame's arms became the happiest hour of my week. I felt almost drunk during those lessons, and while they lasted I sometimes forgot that Naomi was even in the room. Naomi noticed only that I had become unexpectedly eager. "You are much more serious than I thought you would be," she said. I answered, "I feared I would be useless at it, but it turns out to be very pleasant. And it is good exercise too." She laughed and told me that one must not think too much before trying things.

After we had practiced for some time, Naomi began to urge that we should go out and dance in public. She had heard of a place in Ginza called the Eldorado Café, where people had begun to dance more openly. I was frightened by the thought. "I do not have that kind of boldness," I told her. But Naomi stared at me and said, "That is exactly why you will never improve. No one gets good by practicing only in private. You must go where other people are and dance without shame." Then she added, half in anger and half in mischief, "If you will not come, I can go alone with Hamada or Ma-chan."

That was enough to force me into agreement. Once the matter was settled, a new trouble began at once. Naomi pulled out all the clothes she owned and tried them on one after another, turning before the mirror, asking my opinion, and then rejecting each dress before I had fully answered. "This is wrong," she said. "This one is too dull. This one does not make me stand out." At last she stamped her foot and cried, "I need something new. For dancing I must have something much brighter than these." There was no peace in the house until I gave in.

The truth was that by then my income could no longer keep up with her spending. Once I had lived with care, saved money each month, and put aside a little for the future. Even after my salary rose, and with bonuses included I earned nearly four hundred yen a month, it was still not enough. Our ordinary living cost more than two hundred and fifty yen, sometimes nearly three hundred, and much

of that went not to rent or light, but to food. Naomi had grown more demanding in what she ate. If she was bored, she always said, “I want something good,” and food from restaurants and shops appeared in the house almost every day.

She disliked cooking and disliked housework even more. When I came home, I often found food boxes in the kitchen and dirty cups, plates, stockings, and underclothes lying everywhere. Dust gathered on the tables and chairs, and the pretty little house that had once seemed like a bright cage for two happy birds began to smell close and stale. I tried to clean it myself, but the mess had grown too deep. We hired maids more than once, yet none stayed. There was no proper room for them, Naomi ordered them about like a queen, and our own life felt cramped whenever another person stood watching us.

Clothes, shoes, lessons, tram fares, magazines, books, English, music, and now dancing—money ran out in every direction. Naomi would not wash even a pair of socks herself, because, she said, laundry would make her fingers thick and spoil her hands for the piano. She had gowns made constantly, wore some until they were ruined, and never touched others again. I began to cut down everything on my own side. I rode third class while she rode second, wore the same clothes again and again, avoided company dinners, and even cooked rice for her myself so that we would not spend more than necessary. Yet even that did not please her. “A man should not work in the kitchen,” she said. “And if you dress like that, how can I walk beside you proudly?”

So when she demanded money for a new dress for Eldorado, I resisted at first, because the end of the month was near and I had little cash left. She answered with tears and silence. That night, after we lay down, she turned her back to me and pretended to sleep. I shook her shoulder and begged her to look at me, and at last I turned her gently toward me. Her eyes were half closed, but she was not asleep at all. “I will buy it for you,” I whispered. “Even if it causes trouble, I will find a way.” When I said that I would write to my mother and ask for money, Naomi at once grew soft and loving again, threw her arms around my neck, kissed my face again and again, and thanked me with tears in her eyes. The next day I gave her two hundred yen, and while she went alone to Mitsukoshi, I sat at my

office desk and wrote my first begging letter home.

Part 9

The night of our first visit to Eldorado came on a Saturday. The dancing was to begin at half past seven, and when I returned home around five, Naomi was already busy before the mirror. Her bath was finished, the room was warm with steam, and she was putting powder on her face with great care. "It is ready now, Joji-san," she said, pointing proudly at the sofa. There, spread out before me, lay the new kimono and obi that she had ordered in a rush from Mitsukoshi.

The kimono was rich and striking, almost too striking. The ground color was a dark red with a black shade in it, and bright flowers were scattered over it in yellow and green. The obi shone with silver lines like waves, and here and there there were old-fashioned boats worked into the design. Naomi stood half dressed, patting powder over her shoulders and neck, and asked, "Is my choice not clever?" But to my eyes the whole thing was a little too loud. Her strong body, full shoulders, and wide hips did not suit such soft, noble cloth, and instead of looking elegant, she looked almost rough, like a woman trying too hard to seem grand.

I did not tell her that. She was too pleased with herself, and I had no wish to begin the evening with a quarrel. When she had dressed fully, she turned at once to me and said, "Now you must wear the dark blue suit." I answered that I would rather wear the brown one, but she stared at me sharply and said, "Do not be foolish. For an evening party a man wears dark blue or a dinner jacket. And you must wear a stiff collar, not the soft kind. That is proper form, so remember it." Then she brought out my clothes herself, brushed them, pressed them, and even lectured me about ties, shoes, and socks as if she had known such things all her life.

I could not imagine where she had learned so many rules, and in truth most of them were not even correct. Still, she spoke with such confidence that I let her arrange everything. By the time we finally left the house, much time had been lost. When we arrived, the music had already begun. At the entrance to the dance room

there was a paper sign in English, and a boy collected the fee from the men. Inside, perhaps ten couples were dancing, yet even that small number made the place feel full, noisy, and hot.

There were tables along one side where people sat to rest and watch others dance. Men and women were gathered there in little groups, talking in low voices and looking around the room. As soon as Naomi entered, I felt many eyes turn toward her, and then toward me behind her. Their expressions seemed half curious and half mocking. I imagined them saying, “What sort of woman is that?” and “Who is the man with her?” At once I became terribly aware of myself: my small body, my dark face, my poor old suit, and my clumsy manner among people who seemed far more practiced than I was.

Naomi, though she too was somewhat frightened, recovered more quickly than I did. She whispered, “We cannot stand here forever. Let us go to one of the tables.” I followed her across the floor, but the polished boards were slippery, and once I nearly fell. Naomi clicked her tongue and frowned at me, which only made my shame worse. At the table she sat down, took out her mirror, corrected her face a little, and then quietly reminded me that my tie had slipped to one side. Then I noticed Hamada in the room, and when I said, “There is Hamada-kun,” Naomi at once corrected me and said, “Do not say Naomi-chan here. You must say Naomis-san.”

Soon I learned that another man there was Kumagai, whom Naomi and the others called Ma-chan. He came up to us with the easy boldness of a man who already felt at home in such places. Naomi spoke to him in a rough and cheerful manner that surprised me. The respect and softness she often showed me in private had disappeared. She joked with him, laughed at him, and answered him almost like one boy speaking to another. It was clear that in this world she belonged more naturally than I did.

Before long Hamada and Kumagai left us for a dance, and I was alone at the table with four drinks before me. Yet in a strange way I felt some relief then. I had not come to dance for my own pleasure. I had come mainly to see Naomi among other people and to judge how much she would shine. From my chair I watched

her carefully as she moved with Kumagai through the crowd. She lifted the white-socked feet in her dancing sandals with skill, turned lightly, and sent the long sleeves of her kimono flying. Seen from a little distance, she was beautiful indeed, and my fears about her loud clothes grew weaker.

When she returned, flushed and thirsty, she seized her glass and asked eagerly whether I had watched her. I praised her honestly, and she said that later she might dance with me during an easier number. Then she began at once to mock another woman in a pink Western dress, a woman who was dancing with different partners and trying very hard to look foreign. Naomi spoke cruelly, calling her silly and vulgar, and laughed over the way a foreign man had invited her to dance without even a proper introduction. I told Naomi not to speak so sharply in public, but she only said that one must say such things, or else foolish people would trouble everyone around them.

Presently Hamada brought over the actress Haruno Kirako, and Kumagai brought the woman in pink, whose name was Kikuko. Kirako made a very different impression from Naomi. She was not wild or rough. Everything about her was delicate, careful, and polished, from her small beautiful hands to the quiet way she bowed and smiled. If Naomi was like a flower growing in the open field, Kirako seemed like a flower raised carefully indoors. Even Naomi, who had been speaking so proudly before, fell quiet for a time after Kirako joined us.

But Naomi's nature could not stay quiet long. Soon she began asking questions with false sweetness, half praising and half teasing Kirako, while Kumagai and Hamada watched with uneasiness. Then she turned her sharp tongue on poor Kikuko again, making jokes about monkeys so openly that everyone understood except Kikuko herself. Hamada laughed behind his hand, Kumagai looked away and shook with silent laughter, and even Kirako seemed uncertain whether to smile or be shocked. I sat there in growing discomfort. Naomi was lively, clever, and impossible to ignore, yet the more she enjoyed herself, the less control I felt I had over her.

At last Naomi said, "Now it is the one-step. I will dance with you, Joji-san." Those words filled me with joy. I had almost given up hope that she would dance

with me that night, and I stepped out with her in a fever of excitement. But once we joined the moving crowd, I lost my head completely. The room spun, the music became only noise, and the polished floor was far harder to manage than the practice room at Mita. Naomi kept whispering, “Do not lift your shoulder. Do not grip my hand so hard. Move more quietly,” and with each correction I only grew more nervous. At last she broke away in anger and said, “I cannot do this with you yet. Practice more at home.”

Her mockery before the others wounded me deeply. Kumagai laughed and said that if she talked like that, no timid man could dance at all. Hamada kindly tried to comfort me, and then, to my great alarm, suggested that I dance with Kirako. I refused in confusion, but before the matter was settled, a young foreign man with a painted face came up and asked Naomi to dance with him in quick English. She turned red and wished to refuse, yet she lacked the language and the courage to do so. In the end she stood up and went with him. Left with no escape, I accepted Kirako’s hand, and to my surprise it was a pleasure beyond expectation. She was light, easy, and full of quiet grace. With her I almost forgot my fear, and when we returned to the table, Naomi was making excuses, saying that she had danced with the foreigner only because she pitied him. Near midnight we finally left, and Hamada, Kumagai, and the women walked with us as far as Shimbashi, singing dance tunes in the night air while Naomi sang louder than them all.

Part 10

Before long, our quiet house in Omori was quiet no longer. Hamada, Kumagai, and other young men who had come into our life through dancing began to visit more and more often. They usually arrived in the evening, just around the time I returned from work, and then the gramophone would begin and the studio would fill with steps, laughter, and tobacco smoke. At first they showed some restraint and went home before supper, but Naomi hated to let a gathering end early. “Why are you leaving already?” she would say. “Stay and eat.” Little by little it became the rule that anyone who came to the house would also be fed there.

One damp evening in the rainy season, Hamada and Kumagai stayed especially late. Outside, the weather grew worse by the minute. Wind drove the rain hard against the windows, and even from inside we could hear how fierce it had become. The two young men kept saying that they ought to go, but neither of them truly wished to step out into such a storm. Then Naomi suddenly said, as if the idea had only just pleased her, "This is too terrible. You must not go home in weather like this. Stay here tonight."

Hamada hesitated a little, and Kumagai looked at him as if leaving the decision to him. Naomi, seeing their uncertainty, pressed them harder. "Why be shy?" she said. "It is summer. Even four people can somehow manage for one night. And tomorrow is Sunday, so no one needs to rise early." As she spoke, she kept glancing at me to see whether I would object. I did not like the idea, yet there was no easy way to refuse without seeming mean or suspicious. So in the end I said, "Yes, perhaps it is best. In weather like this, going out would be troublesome."

Once that was settled, Naomi grew bright with excitement, as if this were the most amusing event possible. We had only one mosquito net large enough to be of use, and when I asked how we should arrange the bedding, she answered at once, "All together, of course. That will be the most interesting." I had thought that the guests could take the net, and that Naomi and I might sit up downstairs or sleep elsewhere somehow. But she had already rushed ahead of such thoughts. "Come now," she cried, "all three of you help me carry the bedding upstairs."

In the little room under the roof, she arranged the futons with great speed and very little modesty. The space was too small for four people to lie in one neat line, so three of us would lie side by side and the fourth would lie across the end. "There," Naomi said, pleased with herself. "You men sleep there. I will sleep here by myself." Kumagai laughed and said that the whole thing looked like a pigsty, but Naomi only laughed back more loudly. To her, the crowded room, the hanging net, the storm outside, and the late hour made the whole affair feel like a school trip or some wild game.

When the bedding was spread and the net hung, she changed into a pink gauze gown and came back in with her long hair loose. In the dim light, with the green

mosquito net hanging low overhead and the storm sounding outside, she looked less like a wife in an ordinary house than like some strange creature enjoying its own power. She first stood over us, then sat boldly on the pillow, knees apart in the easy manner of a boy, and looked down at Kumagai and Hamada one after the other. "Are you sleeping already?" she asked. "No one is allowed to sleep yet." Her tone was playful, yet it seemed to contain a challenge too.

Then she began to tease all of us in turn. She stepped on Kumagai's chest to reach the light switch, jumped across the bedding, and laughed when he complained. She asked Hamada whether he truly felt no uneasiness lying near a woman, and asked Kumagai whether he thought her more like a seal or some other animal. At last she turned to me and said, "Joji-san, why are you pretending to sleep? Are you troubled because I am dressed like this?" I told her not to speak foolishly, but she only laughed. "That is a lie," she said. "Whenever I wear a gown like this, you cannot resist me. You are only behaving yourself because the others are here."

The worst of it was that she knew perfectly well how to trouble me. That pose, sitting with her knees raised, white arms and calves showing here and there through the loose cloth, was one she had often used in private to tempt me. Even in the dim room I could feel that she was looking at me with those half-mocking, half-inviting eyes of hers. Kumagai and Hamada answered back in the same rough spirit, and soon the three of them were joking together as if I were not husband, but merely one more young man among them. Naomi then declared that she must be "fair" to everyone. If one foot pointed toward me, the other must point toward Hamada. If her head lay one way, perhaps later it should lie the other way.

She would not keep still for five minutes. She rolled across the bedding, turned herself round and round, kicked the netting, threw the pillow from one side to the other, and laughed whenever anyone protested. Because of all this wild movement, the edge of the mosquito net kept lifting, and mosquitoes came whining into the room. Kumagai sat up and began slapping at them. Someone pulled one of the cords loose, and part of the net fell down. Then there was more noise, more laughter, more pushing and tying and lifting, while the rain roared outside and the

heat inside only grew heavier. By the time things became somewhat quiet, the east was already beginning to pale.

I slept little. The room was too close, too hot, too full of sweat, perfume, damp cloth, and human breath. Even with only Naomi and me, that little room often felt cramped in summer, but now with two grown men added to it, the air had become thick enough to choke us. Kumagai snored beside me, and every time he turned over, some damp knee or arm brushed against me in the darkness. Naomi, after all her noise, had fallen asleep in a disorderly pose: though her pillow lay nearer me, one leg was thrown toward my bedding, one knee was raised, and her head had tilted the other way toward Hamada. She looked exhausted at last, like a wild thing that had spent all its strength and dropped asleep where it stood.

After a while I became aware that one of her feet had slipped under the edge of my bedding. Quietly, so as not to wake the others, I touched it with my hand. At once all my old feeling returned. This small white foot, so beautiful in sleep, seemed entirely mine, for I had washed it night after night since she was a young girl. Her body had grown and changed over the years, but her feet still seemed strangely small and soft. I remembered every curve of them, the round heel, the little toe, the full flesh over the instep. Without thinking, I bent down and pressed my lips very gently to the top of that sleeping foot.

When I finally drifted into a little sleep, it could not have been for long. I woke late to laughter and foolish talk. Naomi was leaning over me and teasing my nose with a little straw-like stem. "You are awake at last?" she said. "It is already half past ten, but what is the use of getting up before the noon bell?" The rain had passed, and the Sunday sky outside was bright blue, yet inside the room the thick smell of the night still remained. All four of us were tired and untidy, and the bedding looked as if a fight had taken place there.

Yet even then Naomi seemed pleased with the whole adventure. She laughed at the state of the room, asked whether anyone had truly slept, and spoke as if the disorder itself were part of the fun. I ought to have felt only shame at such a night. In truth, I did feel shame, and something close to disgust too. But those feelings did not last alone. As always with Naomi, what offended me in one moment drew

me again in the next. And that was already the deepest trouble in my life with her: even when I saw clearly that something was wrong, my heart still ran after her.

Part 11

Until that time, no one at my company seemed to know anything about the disorder of my private life. My days at home and my days at the office felt like two separate worlds. Even while I worked, Naomi was often in my thoughts, but not so much that I could not do my duties. I still believed that my fellow workers saw me as a quiet, proper man, almost too serious for pleasure. That belief was foolish, but I did not know it yet.

One wet evening, while the rainy season still had not fully ended, the company held a farewell dinner for an engineer who had been sent abroad. It took place at Seiyoken in Tsukiji, and I attended only because I had to. After the meal was over, and after the speeches and sweet course were finished, the others moved to the smoking room for drinks and talk. I thought that was the right moment to leave. But just as I stood up, one of the men, smiling in a way I immediately disliked, called out, “Kawai, do not run away so fast. Sit down a little longer.”

I tried to excuse myself by saying that the roads would be bad in the rain and that I had a long way back to Omori. Another man laughed and said, “You are clever. Is that your real reason?” Then a third leaned toward me and said, “Come now, the secret is out.” I asked, “What secret?” though I already felt a bad chill in my stomach. One after another they began to smile, laugh, and exchange glances, as if I had been caught in some shameful trick.

“So our good and proper Kawai goes dancing now,” one of them said. Another added, “And he is seen with a remarkable beauty too. Who is she?” Then someone else said, “Is she an actress? Or perhaps of mixed blood?” I tried to answer calmly, but the words did not come well. They pressed closer and closer, asking where Naomi lived, whether I would introduce her, whether she could be invited somewhere. Their tone was playful on the surface, yet underneath it there was a deep insult, and I felt it at once.

Then the cruelest remark came. One man said he had heard from a student at Keio that Naomi was famous among young men, that she “went about” widely, and that more than one student had already had something to do with her. When I heard that, the weak smile on my face froze like ice. I could not even be angry properly. The room spun around me, their laughter struck my ears like blows, and I no longer understood what was being said. I only knew that I had been mocked and that Naomi’s name had been dragged through mud before my face.

Somehow I got out of the smoking room and into the wet street. Until the cold rain hit my cheeks, it felt as if my feet were not even touching the ground. I walked fast through the city without knowing where I was going. The lamps shone on the wet road, streetcars passed, cars rushed by, and women under umbrellas crossed before me, but all those sights came and went like dreams. Inside my head there was only one thought, repeating itself in a hundred forms: could what they said be true?

I tried to defend Naomi in my heart. “She is wild,” I thought, “and rough, and foolish at times. But she is proud too. She knows the difference between what is low and what is not. She has often cried and told me that she remembers my kindness from the time she was fifteen. She would not betray me so badly.” Yet the more I tried to believe that, the more other thoughts rose up against it. Why were there always so many men around her? Why did Hamada and Kumagai behave so easily in our house? Why had that night of sleeping together felt so shameless?

By then I had walked far in the rain without noticing it. Suddenly another fear struck me. “What if,” I thought, “while I am wandering here like a fool, men are already back at the house again?” At once I saw in my mind the studio at Omori, brightly lit, Naomi in the middle, Hamada and Kumagai lying badly, smoking, joking, and filling the room with that same dirty laughter. The picture was so clear that I could hardly breathe. I rushed to the station, and the three minutes before the train came felt longer than any three minutes of my life.

On the way home I tried to make a plan. If Naomi had done wrong, could I forgive her? The honest answer was this: I could not live without her even for a

day. If she had fallen, it was partly my fault too, because I had spoiled her and made her love luxury and admiration. If she truly repented, I felt I could forgive almost anything. But what frightened me more than her guilt was her pride. If I accused her and she answered, "Then I will leave," would I really have the courage to let her go?

Then I remembered something that gave me a little strength. Naomi was proud and extravagant now. She had become used to comfort, pretty clothes, good food, and freedom. If she left me, where could she go except back to that poor family house? Students like Hamada and Kumagai might flatter her, but they could not support the life she wanted. "No," I thought, "she may threaten, but she cannot truly leave. She needs me as much as I need her." By the time I reached Omori, I had recovered enough courage to believe that, whatever had happened, we would not be separated that night.

When I arrived at the house, the ugly picture in my head turned out to be false. The studio was dark. No guests were there. Only the little four-and-a-half-mat room upstairs had a light on. I opened the front door with my key, switched on the studio light, and looked around. The room was as untidy as ever, but there was no sign that anyone had been visiting. A great wave of relief passed through me, and I went upstairs softly.

Naomi was asleep alone. This was not unusual for her. If she grew bored, she could lie down with a novel at any hour and fall asleep at once. She had thrown off the bedding in her restless way, and the open book lay near her face. I sat by her pillow and watched her for a long time without waking her. Looking at her sleeping like that, calm and white and defenseless, I asked myself again, "Can this woman truly be deceiving me?" It seemed impossible.

In sleep she always looked different from the lively Naomi of the daytime. Her skin seemed much whiter, her face more serious, almost sad. She had one arm lifted in a loose curve, and one hand lay stretched toward my knee as if it had reached for me without knowing it. There was something dark and beautiful in her sleeping face, something that made me think of a fox spirit in an old tale, a creature dangerous but too lovely to hate. Even if she had bewitched me, I felt

then that I would still choose to remain under the spell.

At last she opened her eyes and said, "When did you come back?" I told her I had come a little while before and had not wished to wake her. She smiled like a child and asked if I had been sitting there simply watching her sleep. Then she said that the evening had been dull because no one had come to visit. Soon she asked me to scratch the places where mosquitoes had bitten her, then to hand her a gown and help her put it on. While I changed her clothes for her, she let her body go limp like a dead thing in play, and then she said, "Put up the mosquito net. And after that, come to bed too."

That night I told her what had happened at Seiyoken. She became angry for my sake and said the men from my company were vulgar fools who understood nothing about dancing. "People still think that if a man and woman dance together, something dirty must be between them," she said. "New things always make stupid people talk. But I am careful. I am never alone with men. Even if you are away, they do not stay one by one. And even if I could deceive you, I do not do it." She repeated these things in a tender voice, with tears, kisses, and loving words about how she remembered my kindness from when she was fifteen.

Strangely, all through that long talk, she never once spoke the names of Hamada or Kumagai, and I too failed to bring them up. I had meant to question her more firmly, but her tears and kisses weakened me. In the end I told myself that there was no use digging into the past, and that I need only watch her more carefully from then on. After that night she did seem to change a little. She went dancing less often, allowed fewer visitors to come, and when I returned from work I often found her alone, reading, knitting, listening to the gramophone, or planting flowers. If I suggested dancing, she sometimes answered with a dull face, "As you like," or else said, "Let us go to the pictures instead." And when she kissed me after speaking so gently, I wanted very much to believe that peace had truly returned.

Part 12

After that seeming peace returned, our old life appeared to come back almost exactly as it had been years before. Naomi and I went out alone together nearly every evening. We walked in Asakusa, looked in at moving picture theaters, and then ate supper somewhere before coming home. As we sat facing each other over food, we spoke again and again about the days when she had first come into my life. "You were so small then," I said once, "that at the Imperial Theater you sat up on the wooden rail and held on to my shoulder so you could see the screen." Naomi laughed and answered, "And when you first came to the café, you were so silent and stared so hard from far away that you frightened me."

Those memories softened us both. Our conversations became full of little old details that no one else could possibly have known. Naomi said that when she had been a child she had never had many friends and had often played alone, which was why loneliness did not trouble her as much as I supposed. "I seem wild," she told me, "but my true nature is rather dark and quiet." I said that quietness was a good thing, though too much gloom would not do. Then she clung to my neck and kissed me with sudden force, saying, "You see? I have become a good girl again."

One evening she said, "These days you do not wash me in the bath anymore. In the old days you always did." I told her that I had only stopped because she had grown up and I thought I ought to be more reserved. "What is that to me?" she answered. "Wash me again. I will be your baby once more." Summer had just come, and because of that, the old Western bath that had long been left unused in the store corner was carried back into the studio. Then, just as before, I began once again to wash her body with my own hands.

Yet the Naomi I washed now was no longer the "big baby" of years before. When she lay in the bath, her body filled it richly, and I could see that she had become entirely a grown woman. Her hair spread thickly like a dark summer cloud. Her shoulders had grown broader and heavier, her breasts and hips fuller and more elastic, and her long legs seemed longer than ever in the half-light. "Have I grown taller?" she asked. I said yes, that she was now not much shorter than I was. Then she boasted of her weight and laughed at my small body, just as she had done in play so many times before.

From that came another old game. “Do you still have the strength to be a horse?” she asked. “When I first came, you used to crawl on the floor while I rode on your back.” I told her that I was certainly strong enough. Then I got down on all fours, and she climbed onto my back with all her weight and made me hold a towel in my mouth like reins. “What a tiny weak horse!” she cried. “Move properly now, and do not stumble.” She squeezed my sides with her knees and laughed so hard that I could hardly tell whether the pain or the sound of her joy pleased me more.

It was in the middle of those revived happy days that she suddenly said, “This summer, let us go to Kamakura again. It is the place of our beginning, is it not?” Those words moved me very deeply. She was right. The first time we had truly become one had been there by the sea, and yet for years we had gone elsewhere and forgotten it. “Yes,” I said at once. “We must certainly go.” I was delighted that the wish had come from her own mouth. It seemed another sign that her heart had turned back toward me.

So I asked the company for ten days of leave, locked up the house in Omori, and at the beginning of the month we set off together. At first I thought we would stay in some decent inn, but Naomi, with her usual quickness in such matters, brought me a different plan. Through Miss Sugizaki she had heard of a detached little house belonging to a planted garden near Hase, a place originally rented for the summer by an executive of the Oriental Oil Company, who had already grown tired of Kamakura and no longer needed it. Naomi insisted that such a place would be cheaper, freer, and more comfortable than an inn, and before I had fully considered it she had gone, inspected it, bargained over the rent, and settled everything herself.

I had been anxious, but when we arrived, I had to admit that she had chosen well. The place stood apart from the main house and had its own entrance, bath, kitchen, and two rooms. We could come and go without troubling the owners, and the whole thing felt almost as if we had established a new home for ourselves. Sitting on the fresh tatami, before a long brazier in a proper Japanese room, I felt an ease I had not known in years. “This is excellent,” I said. “Far calmer than Omori.” Naomi looked pleased and said, “You see? That is why I said this was

better.”

For the first few days I was very happy there. The sea was near, the weather was bright, and after bathing we would lie on the sand and talk lazily as in old times. Then, on about the third day, while we were resting on the beach after a swim, a shadow fell across us and a voice cried, “Naomi-san!” I looked up at once and saw Kumagai standing there in his wet bathing suit, water still dripping down his hairy legs. Naomi sat up in surprise. “Ma-chan! When did you come?” she asked. He answered that he had arrived only that day and had recognized her at once.

Then he lifted one arm toward the sea and shouted to someone far out in the water. A voice answered back, and before long Hamada came up from the surf as well. He greeted us cheerfully, said it had been a long time, and asked why we had not been seen at dancing lately. Naomi answered before I could say much, saying that she herself had grown tired of it. Kumagai then explained that he, Hamada, and two other young men had come only for the day because the heat in Tokyo had become unbearable. As he spoke, Naomi questioned them eagerly about where they were staying and how long they would remain, while I lay there listening with a faint uneasiness that I could not yet clearly name. It was as if, just when I had begun to believe that Kamakura would belong only to the two of us and to the memory of our first happiness, those old outside shadows had already found us again.

Part 13

That evening, after meeting the young men on the beach, we had a lively supper for the first time in many days. Hamada and Kumagai came, and later Seki and Nakamura joined us as well, so that six of us sat around the low table in the detached house and talked until about ten o'clock. At first I had disliked the thought that these people might disturb our stay in Kamakura, but once I actually sat with them, I could not deny that they had a certain freshness. They were noisy, careless, and young, yet there was little heaviness in them. Naomi too behaved

wonderfully well that night, neither rude nor coarse, but bright, amusing, and full of charm in the way she kept the talk moving and made everyone feel easy.

When the last train drew near, Naomi and I walked with them to the station and then came back alone by the summer road under the stars. The wind from the sea was cool, and in that darkness Naomi seemed again like the girl of our early days. “It was rather pleasant tonight,” I said. “Those boys are not so bad when one sees them like this.” Naomi answered in a cheerful voice, “Yes, if one knows them well, they are not bad at all.” Then, after a little pause, she added, “Still, it would be troublesome if they came too often. If they come again, we must not treat them too generously.”

I laughed and asked, “Would you truly turn them away?” She answered at once, “Why not? If people trouble us, I can say so plainly.” We had reached a dark place under the pine trees by then, and she stopped walking. “Joji-san,” she said softly, in that sweet pleading voice I knew so well. Without another word, I put my arms around her body in the darkness. Her lips came to mine with such force that I felt again the old intoxication of our first happiness, like swallowing a mouthful of sea water and fire at the same time.

The rest of my leave passed quickly, and for a while our happiness seemed complete. I kept my original plan and went to work each day from Kamakura, taking the train in the morning and returning in the evening. The others, who had said they might visit again, came only once more after about a week and then disappeared. Because of that, my earlier uneasiness began to fade. I told myself that perhaps I had worried too much, and that this summer by the sea really had been given back to us.

Then, near the end of the month, unexpected work at the office forced me to stay late several evenings in a row. Usually I could return by seven and eat with Naomi, but now I had to remain until about nine, and by the time I reached Kamakura it was nearly eleven. That went on for three nights, and on the fourth day I had the good fortune to finish early. I left the office around eight and came back by train more quickly than Naomi would expect. I was tired from the long hot day, and all I wanted was to see her face, sit down in peace, and eat my supper

beside her.

The night air at the shore was wonderfully soft after the heat and noise of the city. There had been a short evening shower, and the damp grass, the wet pine branches, and the cool sand all gave out a quiet fresh smell. Here and there the road still shone with little pools of water, but the earth had already dried enough that the wheels of the cart and the runner's feet made almost no sound. From behind hedges came the music of gramophones, and now and then white summer robes moved in the dark like shadows of people who had come there only to enjoy the season. All of it made me feel, for a moment, very peaceful.

But when I entered the garden and went toward the veranda of our little house, Naomi did not appear. I called her name once, then twice, expecting her to slide open the paper door at once as she usually did. There was bright light inside, yet the room felt strangely still. When I opened the door myself, I found no one there. Towels, bathing things, summer robes, tea cups, cigarette ash, and cushions lay about in their usual disorder, but beneath that disorder I felt something colder: the stillness of a place that had been empty for some time.

I searched foolishly at first, looking into the bath, the wash place, and the kitchen. Then my eyes fell on the remains of a great meal and a large bottle of sake that had been half emptied. At once I understood that guests had been there. I ran to the main house and asked the landlady where Naomi had gone. She told me that Naomi had come back once in the evening, eaten with several young men, and then gone out again with them. When I pressed her, she admitted that earlier in the day Naomi had returned from the sea not with a group, but alone with Kumagai.

Even then I was not yet fully terrified. But the woman's face troubled me. She spoke with hesitation, and each answer came more unwillingly than the last. I asked where they had gone now, and after some confusion she said that it might be to a villa near the Hase shore. When I asked whose villa it was, she answered, "A relative of Kumagai-san." That struck me like a blow. Naomi had never once told me that Kumagai had family there. Then, step by step, I forced more from her and learned that Naomi had gone out on each of the past evenings during the very

nights when I had been returning late from Tokyo.

In that moment the whole hidden machine behind my back seemed to spring into view. I felt as if I had been standing on firm ground and had suddenly fallen into a deep hole, while high above me Naomi and all those young men passed by laughing. I saw at once that her wish to come to Kamakura, her easy choice of the house, her calm face, and perhaps even her tenderness to me had all been tied to some plan beyond my sight. I said only this to the landlady: "If they return before I do, please do not tell them that I came home." Then I ran out into the road again.

I found the villa without much trouble. It stood behind a stone wall and looked less like a summer house than an old family estate. I slipped through the gate as quietly as I could and saw that the front of the house was dark and silent. For a moment I thought I had been mistaken. Then, walking softly around the side, I noticed a light below and another above, and on the upstairs veranda I saw a mandolin and a soft felt hat that I knew very well. Yet the room itself was empty. A back door stood open, and beyond it an old gate led straight toward the beach.

The moment I stepped out by that back gate, Naomi's voice came to me clearly in the darkness. She was close, too close, and the sound of her laughter made my skin go cold. She was telling someone that sand had gotten into her shoe and that someone must take it off for her. Another voice joked. Another answered. There was more laughter, men's laughter, the easy laughter of people who feel no fear at all. I bent low, hid my collar and shirt as well as I could, and crept behind a little beach hut just as the whole group came out from in front of it and moved toward the waves.

There were four men: Hamada, Kumagai, Seki, and Nakamura, all in loose summer robes. In the middle walked Naomi. She wore high-heeled shoes and a black cloak that could not have been hers, because she had brought nothing of that sort with her to Kamakura. The wind kept lifting the edge of the cloak, and each time it did, she pressed it to her body with both hands. She walked drunkenly from side to side, bumping her shoulders against the men beside her, and the shape of her body moved heavily and shamelessly beneath the cloth. When they had gone a little farther, I rose and followed at a distance.

Soon they turned away from the beach and crossed a low sand hill toward the dark roads among the villas. Knowing that the trees there would give me better cover, I ran up the sand as fast as I could, then dropped back into shadow and listened. They were only a few steps ahead of me now, singing loudly as they walked. It was one of Naomi's favorite songs, and hearing it in that foolish chorus made my head burn. Then they changed to a dance tune, shook their hips in mockery, banged sticks against fences, and laughed like boys who had forgotten the whole world. At one point Naomi cried that there was no danger, because "Papa" would not be back before eleven-thirty.

They kept joking about her black cloak, calling her a gang leader and comparing her to film actresses. Once she slapped Kumagai across the face for teasing her too roughly, and then all of them laughed again. I had hidden myself well, but suddenly Hamada turned while stepping to the rhythm and saw me. "Who is that? Kawai-san, is that you?" he cried. At once the singing stopped. Everyone went still, and in the dark they all stared toward my hiding place. I knew then that there was no escape.

Naomi came straight toward me without the least sign of shame. "Papa? Is that you?" she said. "Why are you standing there? Come join us." Then, before I could move or speak, she threw open the black cloak and laid one arm across my shoulder. Under it she wore nothing at all. The sight struck me with such horror that words burst from my mouth before I knew what I was saying. I cursed her, cursed myself, cursed everything. But Naomi only threw back her head and laughed, and in that laugh there was the heavy smell of drink. Until that night, I had never once seen her drunk.

Part 14

That night and the next day, I forced the truth from Naomi bit by bit, though she fought me at every step. At last I learned that my guess had been right. She had wanted to come to Kamakura because she wanted to play with Kumagai there. The story about a relative of Seki's having a villa had been a complete lie. The

villa near Hase belonged to Kumagai's uncle, and even the little house we ourselves were renting had been found through Kumagai's help. Naomi had arranged the whole thing with him in advance and had fooled me from the beginning.

The landlady told me more when I questioned her carefully. Naomi had first come to inspect the house with Kumagai himself, and she had behaved as if she were already part of his family. Because of that, the owners had trusted her and had even turned away the people who had been there before us. When I heard that, I felt not only anger but shame. It was as if every step of the summer, which I had thought so dear and private, had been built on a joke played at my expense. Still, I tried to keep calm. I wanted facts more than I wanted noise.

So the next morning I did not go to work. I told Naomi that she was not to leave the room, not even for a moment. I gathered up her shoes, outer clothes, purse, and anything else that might help her escape or send word to someone, and I had them all taken to the main house. Then I called the landlady into another room and began asking questions one by one. "Has Kumagai been visiting often while I was away?" I asked. "Yes," she said, lowering her eyes, "very often." "And the others?" I asked. "Hamada, Seki, Nakamura?" She answered that they too had come many times.

The more I asked, the more confused and miserable I became. If Naomi and Kumagai had been lovers in secret, why were the others so often mixed in with them? Why did no one quarrel? Why did they all laugh together as if they shared one joke? The landlady said that sometimes the men came together, sometimes one by one, and that when they came alone, they often remained inside talking with Naomi. That troubled me more than anything else. I could understand one betrayal, but not a whole cloud of half-seen betrayals drifting in every direction. In the end, I could not even be sure whether Kumagai alone was the true danger.

When I turned again to Naomi, she still would not speak plainly. She insisted that she had no deep plan, and that she had only wanted to enjoy herself with many friends. "Then why did you lie so carefully?" I asked. "Because you are always suspicious," she answered. "You worry for no reason." When I asked why she had

used Seki's name instead of Kumagai's, she fell silent for a moment, bit her lip, and stared at me from under her brows. At last she said, "Because you hate Machan most of all, and I thought another name would make less trouble."

That name, spoken so sweetly from her mouth, made me furious. "Do not call him that," I shouted. "He has a proper name. And tell me the truth now. You have had relations with Kumagai, have you not?" Naomi's face did not change. "No," she said. "And if you say I have, where is your proof?" "I do not need proof," I cried. "I know." She answered with a small cold smile, "How can you know?" and her calmness was more terrible than tears would have been.

I demanded that she swear she was innocent, and she swore it at once. She even said that on the beach the others had made her drink and had forced that shameful joke on her, and that nothing more had happened than my seeing her in that condition. I did not believe a word of it. Still, her boldness shook me. It was as if she thought that if she kept her eyes steady long enough, the facts themselves would bend before her. After that I stopped arguing. I said only, "I do not believe you any longer," and I took away every scrap of paper, every envelope, every pencil, every stamp, and every pen, so that she could send no message to anyone.

On the third morning, I pretended to leave for work as usual. But instead of going to the office, I took the train toward Tokyo and decided to search our house in Omori. I thought that if Naomi truly had a secret understanding with Kumagai, or with any of those men, there must be some sign left there. Letters, notes, keys, something forgotten in a drawer or hidden in a box—anything might speak more honestly than she would. All through the ride I kept thinking of the empty summer house at Omori, standing closed and silent while our life had moved to Kamakura. It seemed possible that the true answer had been waiting there all along.

I reached the house around ten in the morning. The front was shut as we had left it, and I opened the door with my own key. Then I crossed the studio quietly and went up toward the little room under the roof that had once been Naomi's. I meant only to search her things and come away. But the moment I pushed open the door and stepped inside, I stopped as if struck by ice. Hamada was there, lying alone in the room.

He sprang up at once, and his face became bright red. "Ah," he said. "Ah," I answered. For a few seconds we only stared at each other, both trying to read the other's mind. Then I said, "Hamada-kun, why are you here?" He moved his mouth as if words would come, but at first no sound came out. At last, with his head bowed, he said in a very low voice, "I came only a little while ago."

"How did you get in?" I asked. "The house was locked." He answered, "From the back." "But the back was locked too," I said. He hesitated, then forced himself to continue. "I have a key," he said. "Naomi-san gave it to me." Even before he said more, I felt the ground give way under me once again. Still, I made him go on. "Then I suppose," I said, "that I can already guess why you are here."

Hamada lifted his face then, and what surprised me most was that he did not look shameless. He looked miserable, frightened, and almost noble in his misery, like a schoolboy who has at last decided to confess. "Kawai-san," he said, "I know I have deceived you. I know that what I have done is bad. No matter what blame you put on me, I will accept it. In fact, even before today, I had thought many times that I must tell you everything." As he said this, tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks. I had expected lies, excuses, or some rude challenge. I had not expected tears.

"First tell me plainly," I said. "Why did Naomi give you the key?" He answered, "Because she and I were to meet here today." "Today?" I said. "Only today?" He shook his head. "No," he said. "Not only today. Many times before." Then he told me that since Naomi and I had moved to Kamakura, they had already met in this house three times. She would wait until I had gone to work, then take a later train to Tokyo, come here around ten, and return to Kamakura before one, so that no one there would suspect where she had been.

I listened, and yet I felt I was hardly able to understand the words. Naomi was nineteen, and I was already thirty-two. That such a young girl could deceive me with such calm, such daring, and such skill seemed beyond belief. I had long known that she could lie when it suited her, but I had never imagined this cold, careful arrangement carried on right under my feet. "When did this begin?" I asked at last. "Since when have you and Naomi been like this?" Hamada answered

that it had started long before I had first seen him in our garden, and that he had first met her at Miss Sugizaki's place when he began studying piano there. As he spoke, I understood that the past I thought I knew had already been stolen from me piece by piece, and that this confession was only the beginning.

Part 15

That night, after our little peace had been made with those short answers of "yes," Naomi and I lay together and talked as if nothing serious had happened. But if I speak honestly, my heart was not clean again, and it never truly became clean after that. A dark thought had shut itself inside me and would not leave. Naomi was no longer pure. More than that, the value she had once had for me seemed to fall to less than half of what it had been before.

The reason was ugly, but it was real. Much of Naomi's value in my eyes had come from the belief that I had taken her at fifteen, raised her, shaped her, and alone knew every part of her body and soul. She had seemed to me like a fruit that I myself had planted and cared for year after year until it came at last to full sweetness. If so, then I, as the one who had grown it, had the first and only right to taste it. Yet while I believed that, other men had already laid hands on it in secret, had torn the skin, and had bitten where no one but I should ever have touched.

I could not bear the thought. It was not that I hated Naomi herself every hour of the day. Rather, I hated the fact that this thing had happened and could never be undone. However much she wept, however much she promised, the event itself remained. The sacred place of her skin, which I had once worshiped like holy ground, seemed now to carry forever the marks of two dirty trespassers. The more I thought of that, the more bitter and helpless I became.

When Naomi saw me lying silent and crying, she changed her tone at once and said, "Joji-san, forgive me, please." I nodded and told her that I forgave her, because what else could I say? But the forgiveness of my lips did not reach the deepest part of my mind. Our summer in Kamakura ended badly, and before long

we returned to the house in Omori. From then on, something hard remained between us, and because it remained, the whole shape of our life together began to change.

On the surface we were reconciled, but in truth I no longer trusted her. Even after I went to work, I kept thinking of Kumagai and wondering whether Naomi might meet him again. Many mornings I pretended to leave the house and then circled quietly around to the back door to watch. If she said she was going to English or music, I sometimes followed her without letting her know. At other times I secretly read her letters. And the more I took on the mind of a detective, the more Naomi seemed, deep inside, to laugh at my sticky, suspicious ways. She did not openly fight with me, but a hidden sharpness began to show in all her movements.

One night I shook her shoulder and said, "Naomi, why are you lying there like that with your eyes shut? Do you dislike me so much?" She answered coldly, "I am not pretending to sleep. I am only closing my eyes." I told her to open them when a person was speaking, and when she did, she looked at me through half-lowered lashes with a face so cold that it cut me. Then I said, "These days we do not quarrel much, but it feels as if we are crossing swords inside our hearts. Are we truly husband and wife any longer?" Naomi answered at once, "I am not crossing swords. You are the one doing that."

Then she struck straight at me. "You do not trust me," she said. "You read my letters, you follow me, and still you want me to behave like a loving wife. How can that happen?" I tried to excuse myself. "I am nervous because of the past," I said. "If you would open your heart to me and love me honestly, then I could rest at last." She answered, "And if you trusted me honestly, then perhaps I could open my heart too." At that point I always weakened, especially at night. In daylight I might still hold my pride, but in the dark something lower and more helpless inside me always gave way.

I must confess something shameful here. By then Naomi had ceased to be for me a pure treasure or a holy image. In place of that, she had become something like a courtesan in my mind. The clean feelings of a lover, the faithful affection

of a husband, those had already begun to fade like a dream from long ago. Yet I still could not leave her. I was being dragged along by the attraction of her body alone, and that was her fall and my fall together. I had thrown away manly pride, purity, and self-respect, and I bent before her, though I knew very well how low I had become.

Naomi knew this weakness in me perfectly. She understood that her body had a power over men, and that at night she could defeat me whenever she wished. Because of that knowledge, she became almost strangely cold in the daytime. She acted as if she had no interest in me at all except for the one thing she knew she could sell me each night. Often she answered my words with nothing but “yes” or “no,” or with no answer at all. When I sat before her, I felt that her eyes were saying, “You have taken from me what you wanted, so what right have you now to demand tenderness, respect, or love?”

A state like that could not last forever. Even while we moved through our days in that cold half-peace, both of us knew that one day it must break. At last, one night, I said to her in as gentle a voice as I could manage, “Naomi, let us stop this foolish pride. I cannot bear such a life any longer. Let us try once more to become real husband and wife.” She listened without much expression, then asked, “And how do you mean to do that?” I said, “There is one way. If you would agree, I think it could save us.”

She asked, “What way?” and I answered, “Have a child for me. Become a mother. Even if it is only one child, I think then we could become truly husband and wife and find real happiness.” But Naomi rejected the idea at once, sharply and without thought. “No,” she said. “I will not.” When I asked why, she reminded me that once, in our earlier days, I myself had said that children would spoil the special kind of freedom and youth we wanted to keep between us. Then she looked at me with hurt anger and said, “So now you no longer want to love me as you loved me before. You do not mind if I grow old and ugly. That must be what this means.”

I tried to explain. “You misunderstand me,” I said. “Before, I loved you like a companion and a friend. Now I want to love you as a true wife.” But she shook

her head before I had even finished. "Will that bring back the old happiness?" she asked. I answered, "It may not be the same as before, but it may be a deeper and truer happiness." She cut me off at once. "No," she said. "If it is not the happiness we once had, then I want none of it. I came to you on that promise. I want the old happiness, and if I cannot have that, then I want nothing."

Part 16

Since Naomi would not agree to have a child, I still had one more plan in mind. I thought that the real trouble might not lie only in our hearts, but also in the strange house and the strange life we had made in Omori. That fairy-tale Western house had once seemed charming to me, but now I began to hate it. It was not practical, it had no proper order, and it encouraged a careless way of living. I thought that if we moved into a plain Japanese house and lived like a serious middle-class couple, perhaps we could still save our marriage.

I made the plan quietly and told Naomi nothing at first. I would rent a larger, ordinary house, one fit for a husband, a wife, and two servants. I would sell our Western furniture, replace it with Japanese things, and even buy Naomi a piano so that she could study at home. Then Miss Harrison and Miss Sugizaki could come to the house, and Naomi would no longer need to go out so often. More than that, if there were servants in the house, Naomi would be watched while I was away. To carry out such a change, I needed a large sum of money, so I wrote home and asked for help.

Money soon came from my mother, along with a letter saying that she had already found a possible young maid for us. The girl was the daughter of an old servant from our home district, and my mother wrote that such a child would be safe and obedient. Naomi noticed, of course, that I was arranging something. But for a while she said almost nothing. She watched me in silence, as if she were waiting to see how much I would dare to do without asking her. That silence was more frightening than open anger.

A few days after the money arrived, she suddenly said one evening, in a soft

voice that was at once sweet and mocking, “Joji-san, I want a new dress. Will you buy one for me?” I looked at her face and understood at once that she knew something. “A new dress?” I said. “For what?” She answered, “If not a Western dress, then at least a good kimono for going out in winter.” I refused at once, saying that she already had more clothes than she could wear.

Then she asked the question directly. “And what,” she said, “will you do with that money?” I tried to pretend not to understand, but she told me plainly that she had found and read the registered letter I had hidden under the bookcase. At that moment I realized that everything had been discovered: not only the amount of money, but also my plan to move, my plan to bring in servants, and my whole secret hope of changing our life by force. Naomi then began to remind me of older days. “Did you not once say,” she asked, “that for my sake you would endure any trouble and spend your money to give me all the comfort you could?”

I answered that my love had not changed, only the way I wished to show it. I tried to explain that I still wanted her to live well, but in a better and more respectable way. “Come with me tomorrow,” I said, softening my tone. “Let us look for a new house together. If you see one you truly like, I will take it.” But Naomi answered at once, “Then let it be a Western house. I do not want a Japanese one.” When I could not reply at once, she smiled as if she had proved her point. Then she added, “And as for servants, I will choose them from my own family. I do not want some country girl from your home ordering my life.”

After that, the bad air between us grew thicker day by day. Sometimes we did not speak for a whole day. The smallest word led to a quarrel, and the quarrels never ended in peace. Then, about two months after we had returned from Kamakura, I found clear proof that Naomi had not broken with Kumagai at all. I had long suspected it, and my secret watching had never truly stopped. One morning I noticed that Naomi’s makeup was brighter than usual, though it was not a day for lessons, and the moment I saw that, I knew something was wrong.

As soon as I left the house, I came quietly back and hid near the back entrance behind charcoal bags in the storage shed. About nine o’clock Naomi came out, beautifully dressed, and instead of walking toward the station, she hurried the

other way. I let her go ahead, then rushed inside, threw an old student cape and hat over my clothes, and followed from a distance. I watched her enter a place called the Akebono-tei, and about ten minutes later I saw Kumagai arrive and go in after her. Then I waited outside for nearly an hour and a half, walking up and down in the street like a sick man.

At last, around eleven, Naomi came out alone and walked home quickly without looking to either side. Kumagai remained behind. I let her go on ahead, then followed faster. A few minutes after she entered our house through the back door, I went in after her. The moment I stepped inside, I saw her standing there like a stick, already understanding everything. My hat, cape, shoes, and socks lay where I had dropped them earlier, and by seeing them she had guessed how I had followed her. Her face was pale and still, and in the bright clear autumn light of the studio she looked terrible and beautiful beyond words.

“Get out!” I shouted. That was all I said at first, and she said nothing back. We stood facing each other like two people with naked swords, each waiting for the other to move. In that instant, to my own horror, I felt how beautiful she was. I understood then that a woman may grow more beautiful under a man’s hatred, and Naomi, with her pale lips tightly closed and her eyes fixed on mine, seemed like evil itself made flesh. Again I shouted, “Get out!” and then, mad with hatred, fear, and that terrible beauty, I seized her by the shoulders and pushed her toward the door.

Then she changed. A moment before she had stood silent and hard, but now her face broke, her voice trembled, and tears filled her eyes. She fell to her knees and cried, “Forgive me, Joji-san, forgive me this once.” Because I had not expected that sudden weakness, it only made me angrier. I struck her again and again with my fists and called her every cruel name I could think of. At once she understood that begging had failed. She rose suddenly, changed her tone as quickly as a skilled actress, and said in her ordinary voice, “Very well, then I will go.”

I told her to leave at once. She asked if she might at least go upstairs and take some things, and I said yes, but that she must be quick. She rushed up, dragged out baskets and cloth bundles, packed more than she could carry, and then coolly

called a rickshaw for herself. When she finally left, she bowed in an almost cheerful way and said, "Good-bye then, and thank you for all your kindness." After that, the rickshaw rolled away, and I stood there staring after it. Then, for no clear reason, I took out my watch and saw that it was exactly twelve thirty-six.

At first I felt only relief. I was tired in mind and body, worn down by long secret war, jealousy, desire, and shame, and it seemed as if a crushing weight had at last been lifted from my shoulders. Naomi had become for me like a strong drink that poisoned me while I drank it, yet that I could never refuse when it was set before me. So when she vanished, it was as if a heavy summer sky had suddenly cleared. But that feeling lasted less than an hour. Soon the image that returned to me was not her lies, nor the inn, nor Kumagai, but her face at the moment of our battle, that pale, cruel, shining face, more beautiful than any I had ever seen.

The more I tried to forget it, the brighter it became. I began to think that I had done something terrible and foolish, that I had thrown away a beauty the world would never give me again. Memories came one after another: the times I had washed her in the Western bath, the times I had crawled on the floor while she rode on my back like a horse, the laughter of our first years, the thousand small looks and movements that belonged only to her. At last, in my madness, I even got down on all fours and crawled alone through the room as if she were still on my back. Then I went upstairs, pulled out some of her old clothes, laid them over my shoulders, and took in my hands the little socks she had once worn. Before long I remembered the diary I had kept about her growth, and I dragged it from the bottom of the bookcase and began turning the pages, looking again at the old photographs, until it seemed to me that I had not sent away a wicked woman, but had lost the whole best dream of my life.

Part 17

After I had gone mad with longing over Naomi's old clothes, old photographs, and old memories, I sat down at last and tried to think more calmly. If she had truly gone back to her family in Asakusa, then someone from that house should

surely come to me before long. I had told her clearly to go there and send word at once, and I had also said that I would return all the rest of her things. So I waited through the day, listening for footsteps outside, telling myself that her sister or brother might arrive at any moment.

Yet no one came. At first I thought, "Perhaps Naomi is only pretending to be brave, and is now waiting for me to come and beg." That idea gave me some small hope, because if she was still acting with pride, then she had not yet cut herself off from me entirely. But as the hours passed, hope itself became a torture. I left the lights off until evening, then turned them all on in fear that the house might look empty and any visitor might pass by. After that I sat near the entrance for hours, listening, but even when nine o'clock became ten, and ten became eleven, there was still no sound.

I passed the night almost without sleep. By the next afternoon, when still no message had come, I could bear it no longer. I ran out of the house and hurried straight to Asakusa, thinking only this: if I could see her face once, I could live again. By the time I reached the narrow lanes behind Hanayashiki in Senzoku, it was about seven in the evening. I opened the lattice very quietly and said from the dirt floor, "I have come from Omori. Has Naomi returned here?"

Her older sister came out and looked at me in surprise. "Why, Mr. Kawai," she said, "Naomi? No, she has not come here." At first I thought she must be lying to protect Naomi, so I explained again and again that Naomi had left my house with baskets, bags, and bundles, and that I myself had told her to go straight home. The sister listened, but her face showed no hidden meaning. Then Naomi's brother came out too, and he only said, "If she has not come by now, then she may not come here at all."

The more they spoke, the clearer it became that Naomi had really not gone back to her family. In fact, they said she had not properly visited them in months. I was so desperate that I kept giving instructions like a madman. I told them that if Naomi came even for a moment, they must telephone my office at once, and if I was not there, they must send a telegram to Omori. I wrote down the address carefully, though it seemed to me that they hardly cared enough to use it. After

that, there was nothing left to do, and I went back out into the evening street feeling as if the ground had vanished beneath me.

Then a terrible thought fixed itself in my mind. “She must have gone to Kumagai,” I told myself. That would explain why she had carried so many things, and why she had shown such certainty even while leaving. Perhaps the two of them had planned it beforehand, in case the day should come when we finally broke apart. I wandered through the park in great misery, prayed at Kannon though I had never been a man of prayer, drank too much in a few bars, and finally went back to Omori after midnight. Yet even while drunk, I could not forget Naomi for an instant.

All that night I turned one worry after another in my head. If she truly had gone with Kumagai, then every hour mattered, because every hour would make it harder to bring her back. I lay there thinking until suddenly I remembered Hamada. “Yes,” I thought, “Hamada may know.” I had once written down his address, and now it seemed to me that in the whole world there was no one but him who might help me. So at seven the next morning, before I had even dressed properly, I ran to a public telephone and looked up his number.

The maid who answered said he was still asleep, but I begged her so urgently that she finally woke him. When his sleepy voice came to the phone, I said at once, “It is Kawai from Omori. I am very sorry to call so early, but Naomi has run away.” As I said those words, my voice broke and I almost cried. The morning was bitterly cold, and I stood there shaking in my thin clothes, gripping the receiver as if it were the only solid thing left in the world. But Hamada answered with strange calm. “Ah,” he said, “so it has come to that after all.”

When I heard that tone, I felt a new fear. “You already knew something?” I asked. Then he said, “I saw her last night.” My whole body shook even harder. He told me that he had seen Naomi at Eldorado, not alone, not with Kumagai only, but with several men together, and even with a foreigner among them. “She wore a splendid evening dress,” he said. “She looked as if she belonged to another world.” I was so shocked that for several moments I could hardly speak.

At last I said, “Please, Hamada, you must help me. I do not care about my pride

anymore. I only want to know where she is.” I told him that Naomi had still been secretly involved with Kumagai, that our quarrel had broken out over that very matter, and that after she left I had lost all track of her. Hamada listened and then said that if he made inquiries himself, he might learn the truth quickly. I begged him to do so at once and to come to my house as soon as he knew anything. “Even if it takes two or three days, I will wait,” I said. “But if you can find out sooner, you will be saving me.”

Before he put down the phone, I begged him for one more thing. “If by chance you speak to Naomi,” I said, “please tell her this from me: I will not blame her anymore. I understand now that I too was at fault. If she comes back, I will accept any condition she names. And if she will not come back, then at least let her see me once.” I wanted to say even more, that I would kneel in the dirt if she demanded it, that I would press my forehead to the ground and beg like a slave, but even in that state I could not quite force those words out. Hamada said only, “I understand. I will say what I can if I get the chance.”

After the call ended, my suffering changed shape, but it did not lessen. Now I had to wait for another man to move, another man to search, another man to bring news of the woman I loved more than life. There is no pain like waiting while doing nothing, and that pain becomes even worse when one is in love and has no power left at all. I sat in the house counting minutes like hours, and hours like whole lives. I thought that if Hamada did not come by evening, I might truly go mad.

Yet, to my surprise, he came much earlier than I had feared. About four hours after the call, around noon, the bell rang loudly at the front door, and then I heard his voice. I leaped up in joy and ran to open it, thinking for one wild moment that perhaps Naomi stood behind him and that all this nightmare would now end at once. Even while fumbling with the lock, I imagined that he might have spoken to her already and persuaded her to return. But when the door opened, he was alone.

“Well?” I asked at once. “Did you learn anything? Did you find her?” Hamada looked at me with a kind of pity that I did not then understand. “I learned enough,”

he said. "But Mr. Kawai, that woman is no good anymore. You would do better to give her up." Those words struck me like a hammer. "What do you mean?" I cried. "Have you seen her? Where is she?" He answered, "I did not meet her directly. I went first to Kumagai and heard everything from him. And what I heard was so terrible that I was shocked myself."

I clutched at him and asked again where Naomi was. He said she was not staying in any one fixed place, but moving from one place to another, among men I did not even know. On the day she left me, he said, she had first gone to Kumagai's place in a taxi, with all her luggage, causing such a scene that Kumagai could not possibly keep her there. After that, they had gone together to a cheap inn and then later separated again, while Naomi, far from being ashamed, had gone off boldly toward Shimbashi saying that she would spend the night in Yokohama. "The next evening," Hamada said, "she called Kumagai to Eldorado. When he arrived, she was dressed like a princess in a shining evening gown, with jewels and a feather fan, and she was surrounded by men, including a foreigner." As I listened, one shocking image after another leaped out before me, and I felt that the Naomi I had known was falling away into darkness where I could no longer follow.

Part 18

Then Hamada went on, and with every new detail I felt that another door was being opened into a darker room. He said that on the first night Naomi had not gone to Kumagai at all, but to the foreign man, William McCannell. At once I remembered him. He was the painted, smiling foreigner who had once come up to Naomi at Eldorado without being introduced and had forced a dance on her. Hamada said that Naomi had already liked the look of that man before, because she thought his side face resembled an American film actor, and because among the dancers he was said to be very dangerous with women.

"It seems," Hamada said, "that she and the man were not close friends before that night. But she had likely shown him some sign, and he had likely noticed it.

So when she went to him suddenly, he must have thought a rare bird had flown straight into his hand.” I could picture it too easily. Naomi, restless, bold, and full of self-will, would not hesitate where other women would stop. If she wanted to wear Western evening clothes and live one night in a bright false dream, she would go anywhere. Hamada even said that the foreigner himself had been surprised and later asked Kumagai what kind of woman she was.

I said, “Even so, it is hard to believe that she would go to a man for the first time and stay the night there at once.” Hamada answered quietly, “But Mr. Kawai, Naomi-san is exactly the kind of woman who could do such a thing without fear.” He told me that McCannell had dressed her in Western clothes, put bracelets and a necklace on her, and treated her like a toy from a fairy tale. Some things, Hamada thought, the man had bought. Other things he may have borrowed in haste from some woman he knew. Naomi, he said, had asked in her sweet spoiled voice to wear such clothes, and the man had been eager to please her.

Then Hamada described the dress itself. He said it had fitted her body perfectly, as if it had been made for her, and that she wore high French heels and glossy shoes with little shining stones at the toes. “She looked like Cinderella,” he said, “not like the Naomi-san we had known before.” When I heard that, a terrible thing happened inside me. For one instant my heart leaped with delight at the thought of Naomi dressed so splendidly. But in the next instant that delight turned into disgust, shame, and rage, because she had worn that beauty for another man and under such low and shameless conditions.

I said to myself, “So this was Naomi? This was the woman I had lived with for years?” It was one thing to think of Kumagai, hateful as he was. It was another thing to think of some unknown foreigner, some painted man without honor, drawing her into his house, keeping her the night, and dressing her like a kept woman. Until that moment, some foolish part of me had still clung to the idea that Naomi might yet be saved and purified. But now I felt that the dirt had gone too deep. A woman who could do this one day after leaving her husband was no longer merely wild. She was lost.

At last I turned to Hamada and said, “Please tell me again. Are you sure of all

this? Not only Kumagai, but you too can swear that it is true?" Hamada looked at my face with deep pity and nodded. "I would rather not wound you more," he said. "But yes, I believe it is true. I was there last night, and what Kumagai told me matches what I saw. There are still other things I could tell you. If you heard them, you would see that I am not speaking out of spite, and that I am not making the facts worse for sport." I said quickly that there was no need to hear more.

But those words caught in my throat before they were fully spoken. Suddenly, in spite of myself, thick tears began to fall. I felt ashamed to cry in front of a younger man, yet I could not stop. In that misery, I did the strangest thing. I threw my arms around Hamada and pressed my face against his shoulder like a child. Then I burst out sobbing and cried, "Hamada-kun, I have given her up. I have truly given her up forever." Hamada, perhaps moved by pity and perhaps by his own old pain, answered in a rough shaking voice that this was only natural.

He then spoke with a bitterness that cut deeper than anything else he had said. "Even if Naomi-san comes back to you one day with a calm face," he said, "it will mean nothing. No one serious takes her seriously anymore. Men only use her for fun now. You do not know how much shame has already been put on you without your knowledge." He said that cruel nicknames were used for her, names too dirty to repeat. Hearing that did something strange to me. It was horrible, but it also cleared my head a little, as if a painful operation had finally cut away rotten flesh. The worst had already happened. There was nothing left for me to protect.

Then Hamada said, "You must not stay shut in this house. Come outside for a while." So, after two days in which I had hardly washed, shaved, or properly eaten, I cleaned myself and went out with him at about half past two. He first suggested walking toward Ikegami, but when I heard the direction, I stopped at once and said, "Not that way. Akebono-tei lies there." So we turned away from it. Even the train line frightened me, because at any station, in any street, I felt we might suddenly see Naomi with Kumagai or with that foreign man. We moved through side roads and over a crossing into open fields, like two men avoiding ghosts.

The late autumn sky was bright and high, and the strong wind stung the swollen edges of my eyes where I had cried. After a long silence I asked Hamada whether

he had eaten. He said no, and I told him that I had lived for two days more on drink than on food, but that now, strangely enough, I felt very hungry. "That is good," he said. "It means you have come back to yourself a little." I answered, "Thanks to you, I think I have at last woken from my foolish dream. Tomorrow I will go to the office again. I will begin life as a different man."

Still, as we walked, I had more questions, and drink soon loosened my tongue. We ended up in a beef restaurant in Kawasaki, sitting over a bubbling pot, exchanging cups as I had once done with him at another time of pain. When the heat of the food and the drink had entered our bodies, I leaned closer and said, "There was one thing you would not tell me. You said Naomi has some horrible nickname among those men. I do not ask now from jealousy. I ask from curiosity. Tell me at least how such a name came to be." Hamada resisted at first, saying that even the story behind it was filthy. But I insisted.

Then he asked me, "During that summer in Kamakura, how many men did you think Naomi had?" I answered, "As far as I knew, only you and Kumagai." Hamada looked down and said, "You must be ready, then, because that is not the truth. Seki and Nakamura as well." Though I had been drinking, I felt something like an electric shock pass through me. "All of them?" I said. "Every one of the men in that group?" Hamada nodded and said yes. When I asked where such meetings had happened, I thought at once of Kumagai's uncle's villa. But Hamada said, "No. In the little house you yourself rented from the gardener."

For a moment I could scarcely breathe. That small house by the plants, the place where I had imagined Naomi and I were quietly spending the summer, had become a secret den right behind my back. Hamada said the gardener's wife had likely suffered most, because she knew what was happening, felt ashamed before the neighbors, and feared every moment that I might learn the truth. Then he said something worse still. These men had not all been deceived separately. They knew of one another. Sometimes two of them came at once. In silence, without even needing to say it aloud, they had made a kind of alliance and treated Naomi as if she belonged to them all.

Hearing that, I could only laugh in a dry broken way. The trick had been too

complete. "So I was thrown clean over by a fine move," I said. "The skill of it is almost beautiful." Hamada answered that Naomi had a strange magic over men, and that once a man came too close, he was drawn in and lost his judgment. I said the same. Whatever else she was, Naomi had some dark power. We sat there repeating her name again and again, Naomi, Naomi, tasting the sound of it with drink and bitter memory, as if even now it were sweeter than the food before us. Then I said, half to Hamada and half to myself, "Still, what will become of her in the end?"

Part 19

While I was suffering in that lonely way, another sorrow came down on me with sudden force. A telegram reached me at the office two days after I had spoken with Hamada. It said that my mother was dying. I ran at once to Ueno and took the first train I could catch. But when I reached my home in the country at evening, she was already past all understanding and could no longer know my face. A few hours later, before the night was over, she died.

Until then, I had never known what it truly meant to lose a parent. My father had died when I was still a child, and my mother had raised me with patient hands and a heart full of kindness. I could not remember a single time when I had seriously gone against her, nor a time when she had spoken harshly to me without reason. Even after I left for Tokyo, she never complained that I had gone far away. She trusted me, prayed for my future, and accepted many things from me that another mother might have refused.

That was why her death struck me so deeply. As I sat beside her body through the long hours after her last breath, I felt as if two different men were fighting inside me. Only yesterday I had been burning with desire, shame, jealousy, and madness over Naomi. Now I was kneeling before my dead mother with incense in my hands, crying like a child. The two worlds had no bridge between them. I kept asking myself which of these men was the real one.

Then another thought came to me again and again. "This is no mere chance," I

told myself. "My mother has died now in order to warn me. Heaven is speaking through her death." Whether such a thought was wise or foolish, I cannot say. But in those days it felt true. I climbed the hill behind the house and cried among the old trees and fields of my childhood, and as I cried, I felt that something dirty inside me was being washed away.

For a little while, at least, Naomi seemed far away. If this great sorrow had not come, I might still have been wandering through the city in shame and desire, unable to free myself from the thought of her. But my mother's death rose above everything else. I even thought of leaving Tokyo forever, giving up the company, staying in the country, and living simply among the fields as my family had done before me. My uncle and the others said I must not decide so quickly, so after the first services were over, I returned to Tokyo for the time being.

Yet when I went back to the office, nothing felt right. My reputation there had already been damaged by the stories connected with Naomi, and now even my grief seemed to some of them no more than another excuse to stay away from work. In the evenings I went straight back to the house in Omori and shut myself in. I still feared meeting Naomi in the city, so I avoided busy places and bright streets. After a poor supper at some small shop, I came home to that empty house and listened to the silence.

At first I slept in the upper room again, and there the smell of Naomi still remained. Her boxes, her clothes, and the disorder of our old life seemed to cling to the walls themselves. Later I moved down to the studio sofa, hoping to escape that smell, but it followed me there as well. When I lay awake at night, it seemed to me that the whole house still held the mark of her body. I thought, "If I stay here much longer, I will either lose my mind or else go running after her again."

By the start of December I had made one firm decision at last. I would leave the company at the end of the year. Once that was settled, I felt a little calmer. I read books now and then, or took a walk, but I never went near the dangerous places where I might meet her. One evening I entered a moving picture house by chance, and when young American actresses appeared on the screen, I felt again the old wound open in me. "No more Western films," I said to myself, and left at

once.

Then, one Sunday morning in the middle of December, I was lying upstairs when I heard movement below. I knew the front door had been locked, so the sound seemed impossible. Before I could rise, I heard feet on the stairs, quick and familiar, and then the door opened wide. Naomi stood there before me. “Good morning,” she said in a bright voice, as if nothing in the world were strange. I stared at her and answered coldly, “What have you come for?”

“For my things,” she said. She told me she had let herself in with a key she had kept. I ordered her to leave that key behind, and she agreed without trouble. Then I turned my back and lay still while she began gathering things in the room. After a little while I noticed that she had started changing clothes there in the corner where I could see her. She had come wearing a poor, worn kimono that looked dirty and tired from daily use, but now she slowly changed into better things that had once belonged to her happier days with me.

She knew very well what she was doing. She let me see her bare feet, her calves, and the smooth quick movement of her body as she slipped from one layer into another. I tried not to look, because her feet had always been my weakest point, yet I could not keep my eyes away. Once she had finished dressing, she picked up her bundle and said, “Good-bye.” I reminded her again to leave the key, and she said lightly that she might need to come once more because she could not carry everything in one trip. I told her that if she did not collect the rest soon, I would send it all to Asakusa.

She answered that Asakusa would not do, because she had “other reasons” now. When I asked where I should send it instead, she only said that nothing had been settled yet. Then she went away. I thought the matter was finished. But two or three nights later, while I was sitting in the studio reading the evening paper, I heard the front door open again. When I called out, “Who is there?” a voice answered, “It is I.” Then the door flew wide, and a dark figure rushed in from the night.

In the next moment that dark outer wrap fell to the floor, and before me stood a young Western lady in a pale blue evening dress. At least, that was what I

thought for the first few seconds. Her shoulders and arms were white beyond belief. A shining necklace lay at her throat, and under a black velvet hat I saw a face so changed that I could hardly trust my own eyes. Only when she spoke again did I understand that this strange beautiful woman was Naomi.

I cannot fully explain what had been done to her. Her hair had been cut and arranged in a new foreign style. Her eyebrows had been made thin and curved. Her lips were a living red, and something in her eyes made them seem larger, deeper, and less Japanese than before. Even her skin looked different, not powdered in the usual way, but naturally pale, like fruit or smooth white stone. She moved lightly in high shoes with shining stones, turned her waist, lifted her shoulders, and stood before me with a pride that was almost cruel.

“Joji-san, I came for my things,” she said. I asked why she had come herself after I had forbidden it. She answered that she had no one to send. All the while, she kept moving, making little turns, setting one foot before the other, showing each line of her body without ever coming close enough to touch me. Then she smiled and told me, almost in mockery, that she had made several copies of the house key long ago, so taking one from her had meant nothing. After that she ran upstairs to fetch only a few books and small things, leaving me below in a kind of dream.

While I waited, I felt no ordinary desire. It was something stranger and colder. The Naomi who had shamed me, lied to me, and run wild with other men seemed to vanish, and in her place stood a creature almost too beautiful to approach. It was as if a village man had suddenly met his lost daughter again after she had become a great lady of the world, or as if a poor student had seen a woman who once rejected him return from Paris as a shining foreign queen. I was not thinking of love, or even of possession. I felt only wonder, shame, and worship.

When she came down again, she said that she had taken only a few books and would return in a day or two for the rest. Then I noticed a faint scent in the room, a scent I knew at once. It was the same perfume I had once smelled on Madame Shlemskaya. The trace of it hung in the air like a memory from another country. Naomi slipped back into the night, and even after she was gone, I kept breathing

that fading perfume as if it were the last sign of some impossible dream.

Part 20

Any reader who has followed our story this far will already have guessed what was going to happen. It was no miracle, and no sudden change of fate. Naomi and I were moving toward each other again as naturally as fire moves toward dry paper. Still, it did not happen at once. Before we reached that point, I had to go through many foolish moments, many useless hopes, and many small humiliations that now seem almost laughable when I look back on them.

After that night when she appeared before me like a strange Western lady, Naomi became much freer in the way she spoke to me. Yet she did not return in a simple or open way. Instead, she came again the next night, and the next, and then almost every night after that, always with some small excuse. She would go upstairs, wrap up a few things in a cloth, and come down holding only a little bundle that could not possibly have been worth the trouble of the trip. When I asked, “What did you come for tonight?” she answered, “Only some small things,” and then, as if that were the most natural matter in the world, she would ask for tea and sit beside me for half an hour.

One evening, while she was drinking tea across from me, I said, “Naomi, are you living somewhere near here?” She did not answer the question directly. Instead she smiled and said, “Why do you want to know that?” I told her that there was no harm in asking, but she kept turning the question back on me. “If you want to know so badly,” she said, “then follow me like a detective. That has always been your special skill.” Even when I pointed out that she came almost every night and so must be staying close by, she only laughed and said that trains and motorcars existed for a reason.

Then she changed the subject with the quickness she always had. “What is it?” she asked. “Do you dislike my coming?” I said that it was not exactly that, but that she had started coming whether I wished it or not, so there was little use in discussing it. “That is true,” she said. “If someone tells me not to come, I only

want to come more.” Then she leaned back and laughed brightly, showing her white throat. “Are you afraid of me?” she asked. I admitted that I was, at least a little, and that answer pleased her greatly.

“You need not be afraid,” she said. “I am not going to do anything wicked. More than that, I want to forget the old days and be only your friend from now on.” I answered that such a friendship would be a strange one. But she insisted that there was nothing strange in it at all. “Why should it be strange?” she said. “Once we were husband and wife. Now we can be friends. That is more modern, more free, and much better than living in the old heavy way.” She even declared, with one of her half-mocking serious faces, that if she truly wished to tempt me, it would be easy, but that she had no intention of doing so.

When she said that, I understood that she was playing a careful game. I could not tell whether she truly meant to return to me little by little, or whether she wished only to keep me near her as one more admirer under her control. It was even possible that another man still existed somewhere in the background, and that she wanted me only as a safe second rope to hold. For that reason, I did not dare open my heart too quickly. If I had said, “Then let us stop this foolish play and become husband and wife again,” she might easily have laughed at me. Worse than that, she might have enjoyed seeing me lower myself before her.

So I answered her with caution. “Very well,” I said. “If the choice is between friendship and being made miserable again, then let us be friends.” Naomi looked at me sharply, as if testing whether I truly meant it, and then said, “But remember, only friends.” I answered, “Only friends.” “No ugly thoughts,” she said. “No old claims.” “None,” I answered again. She watched my face, smiled through her nose in that familiar way, and then seemed satisfied. What she did not know, or perhaps knew perfectly well, was that in accepting her offer, I too had a plan. I hoped that if we stayed near each other, I might learn her true mind, and perhaps win her back under safer conditions than before.

After that agreement, she began coming even more often. Some evenings she flew into the house as lightly as a swallow and said, “As my friend, you must feed me tonight.” Then I had to take her out for Western food and watch her eat well

and laugh as if the past had never existed. On rainy nights she knocked on my bedroom door and said, "I have come meaning to stay here tonight." Sometimes she went straight into the next room and made her bed there without waiting for an answer. On other mornings, I woke to find that she had already spent the night under the same roof, sleeping heavily as if it were her own house again.

Her excuse in all such cases was always the same. "As friends, this is harmless," she said. Yet I soon realized something important about her nature. Though she had given herself to many men and did not seem troubled by the thought, she still knew how to guard her body in a very deliberate way. In daily life she kept it hidden carefully, almost more carefully than a modest woman might have done. A courtesan protects the value of what she sells, and Naomi, whether she knew it or not, had that same instinct. Even before a man who had once been her husband, she covered herself and rationed each sight of her skin like a miser counting coins.

But at the same time she teased me without mercy. If I was in the room, she changed clothes nearby, letting a sleeve slip, or a shoulder appear for one instant before she ran laughing into the next room. Sometimes she came back from the bath and stood before the mirror, half dressed, pretending only then to notice that I was present. "You must not stay here," she would say. "Go away." Yet before the door closed, I would already have seen some small bright piece of her body: the back of her neck, the line of her arm, the clean curve of her calf, the little white heel rising from her slipper. Those brief sights were enough to torment me for hours.

Once, while she was changing, I said, "Your body seems even fresher now than before." She answered from behind her clothes, "How shameless. A gentleman should not stare at a lady." I said that I did not need to stare directly, because even through clothes one could judge certain things. "Your hips have grown fuller," I said, "but your legs are still straight and fine." She drew her robe around herself and stood up to show me in profile. "Yes," she said proudly. "They still meet properly when I stand." Then, when I asked whether I might see her fully, she answered at once, "Certainly not. You and I are only friends," and shut the door in my face.

So my desire grew sharper every day. At night, after she had gone, I saw her in my mind more vividly than if she had still been in the room. I imagined her body coming out of darkness under a strong white light, each part clearer than life, like a great moving image on a screen. Sometimes the picture was so strong that it made me dizzy, and I had to rise from my chair and walk wildly about the room. I breathed the empty air as if it held the scent of her mouth, and in my thoughts she became less a woman than an evil spirit who filled the world around me, laughing while I suffered.

One night she looked at me long and said, "Joji-san, you are becoming strange. There is something wrong with you." I answered, "How could there not be? Anyone would become strange after being tormented like this." She laughed softly and said, "I am keeping our promise exactly." I asked how long she meant to keep it. "Forever," she answered. I told her that if things continued in that way, I would lose my mind. "Then pour cold water over your head," she said. "That may help." When I begged her at least for a friendly kiss, she answered that perhaps she would grant one if I behaved myself. But even while she said it, her eyes were already laughing at me, and I knew that she was enjoying every moment of my misery.

Part 21

"Then let me at least have a friendly kiss," I said. Naomi laughed at me and said that perhaps she would give me one if I behaved well, but that I must not become even more foolish afterward. I answered that I no longer cared what happened to me, because I could not endure that life any longer. She watched my face with great pleasure, as if my suffering were a show prepared only for her. Then, very late that night, after she had talked and laughed for a long time, she suddenly said, "Joji-san, I am staying here tonight."

I was glad at once, but she spoiled that gladness in the next breath. "Do not misunderstand," she said. "Staying here does not mean I will do what you want." I answered bitterly that I had already learned well enough what kind of woman

she was, and that I expected nothing. She only laughed again, told me to go upstairs first, and said that I must not talk in my sleep. Then she went into the next room, shut the door hard, and turned the key.

I lay awake for a long time after that. In the next room I heard her spreading bedding, pulling things about, and making far more noise than was necessary. Every sound seemed to tell me that she was undressing, loosening her hair, and preparing for sleep just on the other side of a thin wall, where I could do nothing. At last I heard the great soft fall of her body dropping onto the bedding. “You make enough noise for ten people,” I said aloud, half to myself and half for her to hear.

“Are you still awake?” she asked at once from the other side. I told her I could not sleep, and that I had too many thoughts in my head. She answered that she knew very well what kind of thoughts they were. Then she said, very calmly, that long ago, when she had first come to my house, things had been just like this, with the two of us sleeping in separate little rooms and still being pure and innocent. That memory touched me for a moment and almost made me sad enough to cry, but it did not quiet my body or my mind.

“You were innocent then,” I said. “And you are not innocent now.” She answered at once that she was still innocent, and that I was the one with a dirty mind. I told her she could say what she liked, but that I would chase her to the end of the world if I had to. She only laughed and laughed. When I struck the wall with my hand in anger, she told me to be quiet, said the house was not standing alone in the middle of a field, and mocked me by saying that a terrible old rat was making noise in the walls.

At last she fell silent, and before long she seemed truly asleep. I lay awake until almost dawn, and only then did I fall into a troubled sleep. When I opened my eyes again, Naomi was sitting by my pillow in a loose sleeping robe, looking fresh and bright after a bath. She asked whether my great attack had ended, and when I said yes, she told me that she had gone out for a morning bath because the day was so fine. Then she leaned her face close to mine and asked whether any little hairs were growing on it, as if nothing serious had happened between us at all.

She said that women in America now shaved their faces and even changed the shape of their eyebrows, and she showed me how hers had been made thinner and more curved. Then, in the most natural tone, she said that she had a request. “Do not go into another attack,” she said. “I want you to shave my face for me.” When I said that she could do such a thing herself, she answered that she meant not only her face, but also her neck and the back of her shoulders, because evening dresses showed all of that. As she said so, she carelessly moved her robe and let me see a little white part of her shoulder before hiding it again.

I knew perfectly well that she was doing this to trouble me, yet I had no power to refuse. I heated water, prepared the basin, changed the blade in the razor, and arranged everything she needed. Naomi set a small mirror by the window, sat down before it, and wrapped a white towel around her neck. But just as I moved behind her to begin, she laid down a condition. “You may shave me,” she said, “but you must not touch me anywhere with your hands. Not even once.”

I said that such a thing was impossible, but she insisted that a skilled barber could do it and that I must do no less. So I obeyed and began with great care. She sat still and seemed to enjoy the cold silver touch of the blade moving across her skin. In the clear winter light, with her face so near mine, each line and shadow of her beauty seemed larger and more powerful than I had ever known before. When I moved from her chin to her neck and then lower to the smooth white slope of her back, I felt that my mind was beginning to break.

She told me to be steady, because my hand was shaking. Still I went on, until suddenly she raised one arm and said, “Now under here.” When I heard those words and saw that movement, I threw down the razor and leaped at her like a madman. She had been waiting for that very moment. She thrust me away hard with her elbow, sprang to her feet, and turned on me with a face as pale as my own. I cried out that she must stop torturing me, that I would do anything she ordered, that she must say some word and save me.

When she still said nothing, I fell to my knees before her. I begged her to answer me, to kill me, or at least to command me. Then, in my madness, I cried, “Make me your horse again, as before. Ride on my back if you will not grant me anything

else.” And I dropped onto all fours on the floor. For a moment she looked at me with something close to fear, as if she truly thought I had gone mad. Then her face changed. She became bold, hard, and almost proud, and she sat down heavily on my back like a rider mounting a beast.

“Will you obey me in everything?” she asked. I said yes. “Will you give me money whenever I need it?” I said yes again. “Will you let me do as I please and stop interfering with my life?” Again I said yes. Then she said, “And from now on you must not call me Naomi like that. You must say ‘Naomi-san.’” I agreed to that too, and when she had heard enough, she said that she would treat me like a human being again out of pity. After that, we came together at last, and I felt for one moment that we had finally become husband and wife again.

But Naomi did not let that moment stay simple. As soon as I said that now, surely, she would not escape from me again, she asked whether I had truly understood how dangerous she was. I told her that I had understood more than enough. Then she calmly began adding new conditions to the surrender I had already made. She asked whether she could still go dancing, whether she could keep many friends, whether I would stop questioning her every step, and whether I would believe what she said when she said it. To every question I answered yes, because by then there was nothing left in me that could resist her.

She said she had already broken with Kumagai, and that now she would rather spend time with foreigners, because they were more interesting than Japanese men. Then she asked what I would do with my future, since I had meant to leave my company. I told her that if she had truly abandoned me, I would have gone back to the country, but now I would stay and bring my property to Tokyo. That pleased her, but not enough. She demanded that a large part of the money must be kept for her comfort and pleasure, and then she said that we could not possibly go on living in that poor house any longer.

“I want a finer house,” she said. “A Western house, in a place where foreigners live.” When I asked where such a house could be found, she answered at once, “In Yokohama. There is one on the Bluff, and I have already seen it.” At that moment I understood the whole truth. Naomi had not simply yielded to me

because of pity, love, or sudden feeling. She had planned far ahead, laid out the road in secret, and drawn me back into her hands in order to lead me exactly where she wished.

Part 22

So, in the end, that was how our new life was settled. Naomi did not return to me out of repentance, or out of the quiet love of a faithful wife. She returned on terms that she herself had written, and I accepted every one of them. Only then did I fully understand how deep her plan had been. She had not merely wandered back to my house on a whim. From the beginning, she had meant to draw me in again, make me kneel, and then lead me to the life she wanted.

Some three or four years have passed since then. As Naomi wished, we left Omori and moved to Yokohama, first into the Western house on the Bluff that she had already chosen in secret. But even that soon seemed too small for her growing taste. After a while, we bought another house in Honmoku, one that had belonged to a Swiss family and came with its furniture still inside. When the great earthquake later destroyed the houses on the Bluff, this one survived with only cracks in the walls, and so, by strange fortune, it became our lasting home.

As for me, I did exactly what I had promised. I left the electric company in Oimachi, settled the family property in the country, and brought the money to Tokyo. With two or three old school friends, I started a small firm for making and selling electrical machinery. I provided the largest part of the money, while the daily work was mostly done by the others. In truth, there was no need for me to go to the office every day. Yet Naomi disliked having me in the house all day long, so I go because she wishes it.

My life now runs by her liking, not by my own. Around eleven in the morning, I leave Yokohama and go up to Tokyo, where I sit for an hour or two at the office in Kyobashi and then return around four in the afternoon. In earlier days I had been diligent and an early riser, but that is no longer true. Now I do not get out of bed until half past nine or ten. By then Naomi is still asleep, or half asleep, in her

own room.

When I wake, I go quietly on tiptoe to her bedroom door and knock very softly. Sometimes she answers only with a faint sound, hardly more than a breath. Sometimes she does not answer at all, and then I go away without seeing her. We have, without quite deciding it, come to sleep in separate rooms. This too began as Naomi's idea, for she declared that a lady's bedroom was a sacred place and that even a husband should not enter it carelessly.

She took the larger room for herself and gave me the smaller room beside it. Yet even those rooms do not open directly into one another. Between them lie a bath and a lavatory, so that to pass from one room to the other one must go through that middle space. It is a small distance, and yet it feels greater than many roads I once traveled in search of her. In the old days, I used to think that once I had her back, no wall could truly divide us. Now I know that a wife may sleep near enough to hear her husband breathe, and still be far away.

Naomi remains in bed until after eleven, neither fully asleep nor truly awake. She lies there smoking thin cigarettes, drinking tea with milk, glancing through newspapers, and turning the pages of foreign magazines to look at dresses and styles. Her bedroom faces east and south, and beneath the veranda the sea of Honmoku lies close at hand, so that morning light fills the room very early. In the middle stands a great white bed with a canopy and fine hanging curtains, bought from some embassy in Tokyo. Ever since that bed came into the house, Naomi has become even fonder of sleep and even slower to rise.

Before she washes her face, she drinks tea in bed. Then the maid prepares the bath, and Naomi goes there first of all. Afterward she lies down again for a while and has her body rubbed and massaged. Then begin the long ceremonies of hair, nails, skin, face creams, powders, scents, and all the many little bottles and tools that seem never to end. By the time she has chosen clothes, rejected one set, chosen another, and finally come out to the dining room, it is usually half past one.

After luncheon she has almost nothing to do until evening, yet she is never idle in spirit. In the evening she is called out, or receives guests, or goes to a hotel dance, or prepares for some visit where she must be admired. Then she changes

again, powders herself again, and if there is to be a party, she often goes back to the bath and has the maid powder the whole of her body for a low evening dress. All of this is done with the seriousness of high business. To Naomi, beauty is not a decoration added to life. It is life itself.

Her male friends have changed many times through the years. After our move to Yokohama, Hamada and Kumagai stopped coming altogether. For a while, the foreigner McCannell seemed to be her favorite. After him came another man named Dugan, and after Dugan came Eustace, who was even more hateful to me than the others. He was wonderfully skillful at pleasing her, and once, in a rage at a dance, I struck him and tried to chase him down in front of everyone while the crowd held me back and cried, "George! George!" because foreigners call me that instead of Joji.

The result, of course, was not victory, but another defeat. Eustace stopped coming to the house, but Naomi at once brought me fresh conditions, and I had to submit to them just as I had submitted before. After him there were still other men, a second Eustace and a third, no doubt, though I no longer trouble myself to count them. Strange as it may sound, I am now quieter than ever. Once a man has lived through one great terror, that terror remains inside him as a lasting spell, and he fears above all things that it may happen again.

Even now I cannot forget the time when Naomi once ran away from me and left me wandering like a madman. Her words from that time still stick in my ears: "Do you understand now how dangerous I am?" Yes, I understood, and I understand still. Her selfishness and her faithlessness have been plain from the beginning. Yet if those faults were taken out of her, perhaps the very value she has for me would disappear as well. The more I think, "She is selfish, she is faithless, she is impossible," the more dear she somehow becomes, and the more surely I fall into the trap she has set.

When a man loses confidence in himself, there is no end to his weakness. Naomi's English, which once I worried over like a teacher, has now gone far beyond mine in daily use. By living among foreigners, hearing them night after night, and speaking without fear, she has grown quick and smooth in that language.

Her pronunciation was always fine, and now, when she laughs and chatters with ladies and gentlemen at a party, there are moments when even I cannot catch what she is saying. At such times she looks more foreign than many foreigners, and now and then, smiling a little, she calls me “George.”

This is where I will end the record of our married life. Anyone who reads it and wishes to laugh may laugh. Anyone who finds in it some warning may use it as a warning. As for me, I am in love with Naomi, and because that is true, there is nothing more for me to say in my defense. Naomi is twenty-three this year, and I am thirty-six.