

新  
釈

# 走れメロス

他四篇

森見登美彦



角川文庫

Through Kyoto Streets:  
*Run, Melos!* and Four Other Stories

By Morimi Tomihiko

Mochiguma Translations

Translator: koiabi

Editor: eerabbit

# The Moon Over the Mountain

*Original story by Nakajima Atsushi (1909-1942).*

*Li Zheng, a proud government official, forsakes the world in order to throw himself into the world of poetry. Based on Renhuzhuan, a Chinese tale from the Tang dynasty.*

There once was a haughty student who possessed great renown among a select few in the Yoshida neighbourhood of Kyoto.

His name was Saitō Shūtārō.

He lived in a wooden apartment building near Hōzenji, at the foot of Mt. Daimonji. He spent his days as the mood struck him: strolling down the Philosopher's Walk deep in thought; lying on the floor with cigarettes and coffee, imagining himself traveling around the world; conducting investigations into the mysteries of the gecko footprints left behind on the bathroom window; drinking centipede-infused *shōchū* and just barely living to tell the tale. Mackerel was a great favourite of his, and his love for it was such that he once set up a charcoal brazier at the laundry racks in order to grill fish and ended up nearly burning the apartment to the ground.

Perhaps the only thing besides mackerel for which he held such flaming ardour was writing. Seldom did he hold wild bacchanals; little did he care for worldly concerns such as sex or grades. He could most often be found with his pen flying across paper, writing Dostoevsky-esque epics. Not a single person read them.

"Is this really how you expect to get through life?"

During his third year at university his peers began to express concerns such as these, but none of them perturbed him in the slightest. Was he high-minded, or just an idiot? None of them were sure, and it is rather difficult to tell the difference between the two.

Eventually his social circle shrank considerably, for his friends were all graduating.

Rain drizzled from the sky as he headed to observe the ceremony. As his friends streamed out of the grey auditorium building, he stood in front of them all, cackling drily, and proclaimed the following.

"There is no doubt in my mind that one day I will make my name. Rather than waste my life in some dead-end job as a cog in the wheel of society, I will gain the fame and renown my skill so justly deserves, such that even when I am dead the name of Saitō Shūtarō will be spoken of 500 years hence! Four years is too long a period to spend idle, yet too short a time in which to accomplish anything. Fare thee well, normies!"

His friends forced themselves to smile. And then, they left him to become cogs in the wheel of society.

\*

By cunningly repeating years and taking leaves of absence, Saitō boldly managed to extend his time at school to lengths which many had once thought impossible. His was a solitary march, unpraised and unsung, as though he was alone on an arduous expedition far from home. His parents quickly tired of his idealism, and soon cut off his allowance.

Yet he remained a literary unknown, and day by day his life became more unbearable.

His fellow super seniors graduated; those who went on to graduate school finished their master's degrees; and even those who pursued their doctorates eventually left with diplomas in hand. He heard of people getting assigned jobs overseas, getting married, starting their own businesses, running for office in their hometowns: blockheads he had once scorned as being below his attention, now securing footholds in society.

It was during this period that his face became bitter and grim, and his bones began to poke through his skin. The fresh-faced, ambitious young man he had been was nowhere to be found; only a futile gleam remained in his eyes.

In mid-July of the eleventh year since he had entered college, he made a rare evening excursion into town to see the Yoiyama celebration of the Gion Festival. Testimony from other residents of the boarding house indicates that he returned to his room at nine in the evening, where he remained, unnaturally quiet, into the small hours.

In the still of the night, he suddenly burst through his door, screaming for some odd reason, "Somersault! Somersault!" and rushed out into the night. Galloping through the thicket behind the building he dashed off towards the mountains, never to return.

He was never found.

Because nobody bothered to look for him.

\*

A year went by.

One night early in August, a young police officer assigned to the Kawabata station by the name of Natsume Takahiro was on duty at the Ginkakuji police box. He had joined the force only a short time ago.

Officer Natsume headed for the sink. An old rice cooker puffed out steam as the officer used the muscles he had acquired through weightlifting and practising criminal apprehension techniques to chop ingredients for *oyakodon* with surprising dexterity. In a small pot he heated dashi and tossed in chopped chicken. Under the fluorescent lighting, another officer by the name of Corporal Maejima reviewed documents, sniffing in the scrumptious fragrance that filled the police box.

The canal that carries the waters of Lake Biwa up from the old temple of Nanzenji turns to the west at the foot of Mt. Daimonji. The Ginkakuji police box is built along its banks. East of the police box is the lazy slope that leads to the gate of Ginkakuji, tourist shops and restaurants jostling on either side. On weekends this slope was usually bustling with tourists, but now it was late at night, and the stream of foot traffic had petered out.

It had started to rain during the evening, and for a time the night was cool. But as the hour grew late a tepid breeze began to blow from the direction of the woods that loomed beyond Ginkakuji, and now there was a vague restlessness in the air. Every so often, Corporal Maejima would glance at the darkness which lay beyond the door of the police box.

At last dinner was ready. Having been kept too busy by their duties to eat a proper meal all day, the ravenous two gobbled up their food. After finishing half his bowl, Maejima stopped chewing long enough to say, "Delicious. Wouldn't mind you doing this more often."

"Thank you, sir!"

"I can feel something brewing tonight. Eat up while you can."

Maejima drained his cup of cold barley tea and smoothed the wrinkles on his blue summer uniform.

A series of strange incidents had been occurring on Mt. Daimonji since the summer of the previous year. People who approached the mountain had been assaulted by a mysterious

apparition, and just the other day a member of the Daimonji Preservation Society had come to the police for assistance.

But even supposing that there really was someone skulking on the mountain, smoking them out would be no simple task. Behind the famous Mt. Daimonji towered Nyoigadake, one of the Thirty-Six Peaks of Higashiyama, and the dense forest stretched all the way to the border of Shiga prefecture. If this phantom really was roving around those vast woodlands, it would take a massive manhunt to apprehend them. All the lowly patrolmen could do was urge hikers to exercise caution.

As Officer Natsume was clearing the table, he heard the rattle of the front door sliding open.

In piled a group of students, panting and gasping for breath, begging Corporal Maejima for help. "It attacked us at the firepits!"

Officer Natsume tossed down the utensils and quickly wiped off his hands.

"He's here. Grab the flashlights!" Maejima shouted.

\*

The trail up Mt. Daimonji begins north of Ginkakuji.

It was pitch black in the dense foliage, and the further they walked from the parking lot at the trailhead, the harder it was to make out anything. The two officers moved cautiously up the path, guided by the beams from their flashlights.

Rumours of strange phenomena occurring around Daimonji had already spread far and wide, and few were bold enough to brave the mountain at night. But these students didn't seem to have put much credence in those stories.

They belonged to an odd group known as the Sophistry Debate Society. Each spring they preyed on newly matriculated students, forcing them to swear an oath: *We sophistrize and doesn't afraid of anything!* Their crushing of budding hopes and dreams had become something of an annual tradition.

Each year this despicable event was capped off by a gathering at the firepits of Daimonji, where they would hock loogies at the lights of Kyoto below and whirl madly in the throes of the Sophists' Sashay. But just as one of the newly inducted students was on the verge of consummating this contemptible act, a gigantic gob of spittle fell out of the sky and

knocked him off his feet. Giant drops of spit rained from the sky, bowling the rest of his compatriots down like ninepins.

"What in tarnation!?" the club president bellowed, covered in sticky strings of spit, when all of a sudden he was picked up into the sky. The club members could only watch as he was twirled around like a yo-yo, bobbling up and down between the stars until he was bawling and drooling all over himself.

After a while the chief was finally lowered to the ground, and abandoning his dignity as well as the despicable, sophistry-encrusted ideals which he had espoused so proudly, he ran off between the fireplaces screaming, "Mooommmmyyyyyyyy!" The rest of the club members hastily followed behind. As they scattered and fled, they heard behind them a roar of laughter.

"It must be a tanuki playing tricks!" Corporal Maejima murmured as he walked along the dim path.

"How do we deal with tanuki?" Officer Natsume asked.

"That's a good question. The law doesn't extend to them."

Halfway up the mountain they came to the eerie Sen'ninzuka clearing, but saw nothing particularly out of the ordinary. Corporal Maejima shone his flashlight around the area, scanning the gloomy grove.

"Let's head up to the firepits."

Proceeding further up the trail, they emerged onto the firepits, where the view opened up before them.

Firepits dotted the steep west-facing slope in the shape of the character "dai". With no trees to block the view, they could gaze down on the lights of Kyoto below. A cool breeze swept across the vista, drying their sweat. Wiping their foreheads, the two squinted down at the twinkling view.

They searched the area around the shrine to Kōbō Daishi at the center of the firepits, but found nothing to arouse suspicion.

"Let's go a little further up."

Behind the small altar, a steep staircase led upwards forming the vertical bar of the “dai” character. At the top of the stairs the path led up to the triangulation point before vanishing once more into the darkness of the trees.

Just as Corporal Maejima stepped foot on the first stair, there was a great whoosh, and the corporal was laid out by a great gob of spit. It seemed to have come from the top of the stairs. Officer Natsume caught Maejima before he hit the ground, then unsheathed his baton.

Deftly avoiding another flying gob of spit, Natsume shouted into the darkness, “Police!”

The following gob of spit went awry out into the sky, the erstwhile spitter seemingly having been thrown off.

“Oh, what are *you* doing here?” a voice suddenly moaned from the darkness.

Officer Natsume seemed to recall having heard that voice before.

“Is that you, Saitō?” he asked.

For a moment there was no answer, only the occasional muffled sound of what seemed to be quiet weeping. After a short while, the voice answered in a low tone.

“Indeed, I am none other than Saitō Shūtarō.”

\*

During his student days, Natsume Takahiro had been mad about mahjong.

The word “mahjong” holds a frightening power around campus. Many are the students who, obsessing in their Chinese language studies day and night, end up inadvertently throwing their lives away. The alleys behind mahjong parlours are piled high with their corpses, which passersby can but look upon and sigh with pity.

It had been Nagata, a graduate student in the science department, who had first taught Natsume the thrill of mahjong. They had become acquainted while working on the parade at the Aoi Festival. Nagata was a levelheaded and easygoing fellow, transparent and guileless as a clear autumn sky, never allowing his love of mahjong to lead him astray from his scholarly pursuits.



Natsume and Nagata frequented mahjong parlours, and hung out at acquaintances' homes immersing themselves in the game. Nagata often broke away in the middle of a game to return to his laboratory, then came back to the table once his experiments had been completed, in a display of truly astounding willpower. Though he witnessed many of his friends succumb to the game, the sight of their corpses never seemed to interfere with his enjoyment of the game.

Natsume heard rumours of an exceedingly eccentric man the same age as Nagata. This man was known as one of the Four Lords of Mahjong, though no one actually knew who the other three lords were. Though Nagata was in the second year of his master's program, this man was still an undergraduate, and was apparently still a long way off from graduating. Then again, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he found it beneath him to even make any attempt to graduate. Natsume particularly admired how he had coolly told his friends at their graduation, "Fare thee well, normies!" This man's name was Saitō Shūtarō.

Natsume had first sat at a mahjong table with Saitō at the Ichijōji Cup, a competition held at Natgata's lodgings in a boarding house in Ichijōji. Saitō had showed up late at night, on a rickety bike that was more fit to sit in a scrap heap than for a human to sit on it; his face was as thin as a cucumber, reminiscent of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke in the last days before he took his own life, emanating a forbidding aura.

He was a devil of a mahjong player.

He smoked everyone else's cigarettes, downed everyone else's drinks, and after easily winning the cup as well as the prize money, quietly departed without so much as saying good night. The other players watched him go, deeply impressed. They couldn't even be angry at the contemptuous disregard he showed them in victory, for it felt almost like they had witnessed a mythical creature in their midst.

"Remember, Natsume. That is a truly great man," Nagata said happily as they walked down Shirakawa Street towards a *gyūdon* joint, the first rays of dawn peeking over the horizon. "He's the one guy in college I truly respect. Me and everyone else, we're all just half-assing it."

\*

The proud, independent-minded Saitō Shūtarō rarely socialized; perhaps the only person he could be said to be on friendly terms with was Nagata. Not only was Nagata the same

year in school as Saitō, but the depths of his heart were as vast and boundless as the waters of Lake Towada, and that was what enabled him to take Saitō's haughty arrogance in stride. Nagata truly respected Saitō, which Saitō seemed to take for granted, soaking in that respect as though he was drinking water from a faucet.

As he got to know Nagata better, Natsume began to occasionally visit Saitō Shūtarō's residence.

One night in late summer, Nagata went to deliver some of Saitō's favourite mackerel, so Natsume tagged along.

Saitō's door was thrown wide open into the corridor, and when they entered his room he welcomed them in, stark naked. His mind was ablaze with the fires of creation, and so he had taken all of his clothes off.

"I didn't want to die of heatstroke before I was finished, see."

"Is your novel reaching its climax, then?" asked Nagata.

"It's been climaxing the entire time," said Saitō matter-of-factly.

"Sit where you like," he told them, but it was rather difficult not to think about the fact that his bare bottom had been resting on those mats. Natsume gingerly lowered himself to the floor, thinking for the first time that perhaps he wasn't such a slob after all.

Saitō was overjoyed when Nagata took out the mackerel. Rummaging around in his closet, he brought out a charcoal brazier, saying, "Mackerel isn't mackerel unless it's roasted over one of these!" And succumbing to the allure he attempted to march out into the corridor.

"Don't you think you should put on some underpants first, Saitō?" Nagata reminded him.

"And at least make some rice to go along with it."

Given the task of carrying the brazier, Natsume followed Saitō out to the laundry racks. Cool air flowed towards them from the forest that pressed near behind the building, and he could hear the cicadas singing. Saitō placed charcoal in the brazier and lit the flame, his motions clearly practiced. Nagata went down to the shared kitchen and started the rice cooking before joining them at the racks. When he was at last able to put the wire mesh down on the brazier and begin to grill the fish, Saitō beamed at Natsume like a little kid.

"Life is nothing without fish, wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure," Natsume replied.

"My mother always used to say eating fish makes you smarter. And she was absolutely right. Just look at me."

Saitō suddenly closed his mouth, and stared at the corner of the balcony. There was a hint of anger in his voice when he continued.

"Cats are the cleverest of all the beasts, but it's eating fish that makes them so cunning."

Following Saitō's gaze, Natsume spotted a large black cat squatting in the corner, awaiting its chance to steal a mackerel from the grill. And just as Saitō had feared, the feisty feline eventually made an attempt to satiate its greed. Slipping through Saitō's outstretched fingers, the cat snapped at the fish tails, risking burning its tongue in its bold endeavour.

In his attempts to drive it away, Saitō accidentally knocked over the brazier. Red-hot coals spilled out all over the balcony. And most unfortunately, someone had laid out a grubby futon to dry that day. As soon as the burning coals landed upon it, ominous coils of smoke rose into the air.

While Natsume and Nagata rushed around trying to put out the fire, Saitō chased the cat through the building, trying to retrieve his mackerel.

\*

Even Saitō Shūtārō had once known love, Natsume heard from Nagata.

No one would think anything of it were they to hear that Saitō had spent night after night writhing in the throes of unrequited love. It seemed a cruel trick of the gods, then, that it had rather been the girl who had fallen in love with Saitō.

She was a mutual acquaintance of Nagata and Saitō, but in the end, her attentions to Saitō unavailing, she had ended up—after a series of delicate twists and turns—going out with Nagata instead.

"What does it matter to me?" Saitō had said to Nagata. "Be happy then, if it pleases you."

Whether his words truly came from the heart, Natsume couldn't say.

In any case, Natsume was glad for the girl, for having chosen the correct partner. He had seen her only once. Her face had been gentle, and she seemed a calm, kind person. He

assumed that she was not the type to bewitch a man with her beauty, but rather to soften him with kindness before going in for the kill. Whether or not this assumption was accurate was another matter.

Saitō refused to divulge the particulars of this romance, so it was Nagata who instead whispered the tale in Natsume's ear.

It was in a dim café on the path to Ginkakuji that the girl professed her love. The inimitable Saitō quivered like a leaf. The realization that he was quivering in turn made him wroth, and he furiously stirred his cold cup of coffee. At last, unable to bear it any longer, he indignantly stood and stormed out of the café. The girl paid their bill and followed him outside, finding him standing in the drizzling rain with his arms folded ostentatiously, gazing in the direction of Mt. Daimonji.

"Leave me alone!" he huffed, when she came up to him. "What do you hope to gain by being kind to *me*?" he growled. "What you have done, you have done in vain!"

\*

Thus did Saitō Shūtarō set aside his dabbings with the fairer sex and retreated into his castle.

His castle was built of his bookshelf, his desk, and a wooden cabinet with many small shelves which took up nearly an entire wall. This last Natsume found intriguing, and when he enquired about it Saitō pulled open a drawer and took out a sheaf of paper to show him, each page covered with minute handwriting.

"The universe on a shelf," Saitō said.

This peculiar cabinet contained the writings of Saitō Shūtarō pertaining to every subject imaginable, arranged in a classification system known only to the writer.

He always kept a bundle of papers on hand, which he called his traveling study, and whenever he was struck by inspiration he would scribble down the thought, quick as a flash. Whether he was soaking in a bath, or engrossed in mahjong, or eating a hotpot with Natsume and Nagata, this custom never wavered. He organized all of these accumulated writings and shut them safely in the cabinet. Then, whenever the need arose he would gather dozens of these fragments of writing and go to his desk, whether noon or night.

Even Nagata had never read the novel that Saitō was writing. An unfinished novel is naught but rubbish from beginning to end, he insisted, and unfit to show others. And his novel was always a work in progress.

An acquaintance of Saitō once said to him the following:

*Can you really write a novel just by sitting at your desk? If you never go outside and experience things for yourself to write about, it all amounts to nothing but hot air.*

Saitō laughed this off.

*The world is made of words. Hence, because novels are written with words I can write freely about everything that exists, and through this act I can uncover all the secrets of the world. When unconnected words are joined together, they sometimes burst into light, and what they illuminate are the secrets of the world. Human civilization, at its core, is built on words and mathematics. Of those who do not choose the latter, there can be none greater than one who masters words. And that means that I am the greatest of all.*

He said this all with supreme confidence.

Natsume didn't find any of it convincing at all.

In practice of this theory, Saitō would sometimes read the dictionary from cover to cover.

"Do you know how the somersault got its name?"

Saitō would occasionally pose these sorts of questions in the middle of a round of mahjong, perplexing Natsume.

"I have no idea."

"Does your ignorance know no bounds? A somersault is so named, because during summer in the olden days, people would tumble on the ground to coat their heads with salt, so that the sweat would evaporate faster."

"That's why it's called a somersault?" Natsume asked in astonishment.

Saitō burst out cackling. "Of course not, you idiot."

That was the kind of person Saitō Shūtarō was.

For the remainder of his time at college Natsume stayed close to Saitō, though not too close. He never could tell what this aloof fellow wished to accomplish, but at least being around him was never dull.

Nagata went on to enter his doctoral program, still as loftily devoted to his studies as ever, and Natsume began to ponder what to do after graduation. In the end, he decided to become a policeman.

He remembered very well the day he had last seen Saitō Shūtarō.

It had been a cloudy day, with two and a half months to go before graduation, and the whole town was frozen stiff. Snow began to fall as he strolled along the Philosopher's Walk. He reached the boarding house to find it desolate and seemingly deserted amidst the dancing snow.

Saitō was wrapped in a grubby blanket in his frigid room, glaring at a composition written on the back of an advert. Shivering with cold, the two smoked the cigarettes that Natsume had brought.

"Do you really want to graduate so badly? Why the rush, what on earth do you even intend to do?" Saitō said. "Really, you are very dull!"

Hearing that Natsume intended to join the National Police Agency rather put Saitō out. He did not hold with such things as duty and rule of law.

This was all very typical for Saitō, so Natsume didn't mind it one bit, but he had noticed that despite his rapier tongue, sometimes Saitō Shūtarō did sound a bit lonely. His novel seemed no closer to being finished than when he had begun, and in fact he had become mired in writer's block. Natsume had vaguely noticed that Saitō had recently begun showing an irritation that was out of sorts, even for him.

"Well, never mind," muttered Saitō, after spewing venom for a time. He stood up and pulled the blanket around him like a cloak.

"Graduate then, if it pleases you," he declared, looking down at Natsume sitting on the floor.

After that day, Natsume never saw Saitō again.

\*

Time flowed on.

As he stood at the firepits of Daimonji feeling the cool night wind whisper by, Officer Natsume thought back to the days he had spent in college, observing the outrageous arrogance of Saitō Shūtarō. Perhaps, hidden in the darkness, his counterpart was seized by the same memories.

Officer Natsume greeted him warmly like an old friend.

Saitō Shūtarō did not show himself, and only his voice answered from the shadows, asking why Natsume was in Kyoto, when he should have been in Tokyo.

Natsume explained his story: he had briefly entered the NPA, then been temporarily transferred to a patrol beat with the Metropolitan Police. But after returning to the NPA he had realized that he was meant to be out on the streets, and after quitting the force joined the Kyoto Prefectural Police. Now he was posted at the Ginkakuji police box, and quite satisfied with what he was doing.

In the shadows Saitō Shūtarō *mhmm*-ed and congratulated Natsume on finding the path that he was meant to walk.

“What are you doing up here, Saitō?” Natsume mustered the courage to ask.

A gust of wind stirred the forest, causing Natsume to flinch backwards. The leaves rustled ominously, making a sound like a roaring waterfall. Discarded newspapers, perhaps that the students had intended to start a fire, flapping and swirling in the wind.

“I have been here now for a year,” Natsume heard Saitō Shūtarō groan after a moment. “I have become a tengu.”

And the voice in the darkness told him this tale.

\*

How did it come to this?

Perhaps it was all because I devoted myself to writing.

It matters not now what sort of novel I was writing. What is important is that I was writing.

Writing was all that sustained me in life. As I wrote I made many discoveries. At least, I believed that I was making discoveries.

Things that I had never considered before would pop up on the page, one after the next. The words that I blithely strung together would, without me having realized it, begin to speak of the world. It was quite a mysterious, surprising phenomenon, and I became engrossed in smashing words together and observing it in action.

Over the course of doing this many times, I came to believe that writing was the only way to penetrate the inner mysteries of the world. I made no distinction between reality and words. Words themselves *were* reality. But for all that, I had no reverence for words. I was terribly arrogant; I believed that I had all the world in the palm of my hand.

However, around the time that you graduated, I came to grapple with an unusual difficulty.

At first it was but a trivial impediment. When it happened I would think nothing of it and go to sleep. This would allow me to get through it without trouble. But eventually this impediment began to happen more and more often.

My sentences refused to come together.

Though I would sit at my desk, intent on setting ink to paper, the innumerable words in my head would only scuttle around, each attempting to push to the fore. I could only hold them back, unable to choose any one over the others. Was it “red” I wanted to write, or “crimson”, or “scarlet”? Or perhaps “vermilion”, no, “ruby”? Burdened by indecision, in the end I could never decide which word to use.

I am reminded now that the word “somersault” weighed on me heavily. Whenever I tried to recall the correct definition, my brain was filled with ridiculous visions of people mineralizing their pates. In time I found myself thinking that maybe the word did indeed stem from this practice. I shook my head in astonishment, but eventually I began to become convinced that the word “somersault” itself was merely a figment of my imagination.

In my confusion, all the words floating around in my brain began to seem untrustworthy, utterly unreliable. What was it that I believed in? Did I truly believe that I could speak of anything at all, merely because I sat atop this amassed hoard of words?

One day, after having spent over ten hours futilely wracking my brain at my desk, I came to the sudden realization that all I was doing was putting together endless strings of



unconnected words on the page before me: fast as a tortoise, love-hate relationship, lead zeppelin, human rights, caged bird, honest politician, etcetera.

These words were merely scattered on the page, with nothing to link them together. They were like a pile of cadavers, unmoving and lifeless. Was this string of gibberish all that my practice and privations had been leading up to? Impossible.

I abandoned writing, and let the moments pass by in disbelief. I pinned my thin hopes on the idea that by temporarily parting from writing, I would be able to regain my faculty again. But my trust in those words, once lost, was not easily regained again. The dead words that littered the paper would not leave my mind.

Yet I could scarcely imagine living on without writing anything.

I had believed with all my heart that I was a genius. It was the only way I should live. It was the only way I *could* live.

\*

I suffered alone.

Nagata was busy in his lab, and had not come to visit in a long time. Neither did I wish to see him. I couldn't confide to him the state in which I found myself. I understood very well that the Saitō whom he respected existed only in the past. I was not my past self. Rather than reveal to him the weak, spineless man I had become, I would rather disappear altogether.

I wandered the streets.

I was driven by the fear that perhaps I was just a normie after all. I took books in hand, yet all I found in them was flat, meaningless sentences, which I could not bring myself to read. Yet to my shame I could not write a single word myself.

And so the days passed.

I decided that I had to forget who I had been and find a new way to live. Yet doing that was akin to death for me. I had patterned myself too closely on the ideal life I had dreamed of, and could conceive of no plan to demolish it.

Even if I were to begin attending classes, it was unlikely that I could graduate. And supposing I did graduate, what would I do? When I lost my ability to write, I had feared that

I had become a normie, but now I was less than even the normies. Without my writing, I was nothing. The people I had once derided as normies now seemed to be standing high above me, in a place beyond my reach.

But I was not frustrated. I do not say this to boast. If I had been frustrated about the situation, there is no doubt I would have risen to the occasion. But I was so beaten down by this morphing world, that day by day my feeling of powerlessness only increased. I thought of having to look on this dreary world for the rest of my life, and despaired.

I no longer sought to become anyone; I no longer wished to do anything.

\*

I lamented staking all my college days on only a single thing. It seemed to me that in my impatience to carve out an identity for myself, I had brought all to ruin.

I reminisced fondly over that day in the café on the road to Ginkakuji, those many years ago. I wondered what she was doing now, wishing that I could return to those days and change the way I lived.

I would imagine another life, one in which I had gone out with her, and enjoy a hollow sort of happiness. You may laugh if you please. Sitting in my room, I would imagine this other me, who had left off his useless dreaming and begun to live a far more accomplished life than I ever had. I daydreamed in minute detail about this life that could have been, frittering the hours away.

Everything that I had accomplished seemed like a mistake.

Had I only spent all my time thinking about words to distract from my failings, my inadequacy? Had I ever truly intended on making my way in the world with my writing? I never told you this, but I submitted novels to literary contests many times. But everything I submitted was half-hearted, lackadaisical work. I smugly told myself that there was no need for me to waste any effort on such trifles, when in fact that was nothing more than an excuse to preserve my vanity. No matter how many contests I entered, how could anything ever have come of it? Say to me that I never truly intended to walk that path, and I could give you no reply.

I told myself that I hadn't had enough time, but I was only running in circles, afraid of being asked to produce results. Wishing to continue living in this sweet dream where no one

would disturb me, I kept pacing the diving board but never taking the plunge, and in the end I brought myself to ruin.

\*

One evening, after yet another of these wearying days, I went out to see the festivities of Yoiyama.

Karasuma Street was blocked off for pedestrian traffic, and the lights of an endless row of festival booths blazed into the night. An endless crowd of sightseers streamed up and down the road as far as the eye could see. I wandered the streets with no particular aim in mind. Looking at the parade floats that illuminated the narrow alleys with golden light and letting the sea of people sweep me along gave my mind a bit of respite. *How pleasant it would be, if only I could simply vanish into the tumult of the Gion Festival!* I thought to myself, as I passed by the brilliant Koiyama float which parted the streaming crowd on Muromachi Street.

There I came across Nagata and his girlfriend in the crowd.

"Now there's a face I haven't seen in a while!" Nagata cried out jovially, waving around a piece of fried chicken.

After earning his doctorate Nagata had been working as a researcher, but this summer he was going to a university in England. He was as cheerful and worry-free as ever. There was something new, different about the twinkle in his eye, but perhaps I was merely being perverse. The girl in the *yukata* beside him told me that she worked at a travel agency.

Nagata gave me a chicken skewer. We walked to the side of the road and stood there talking. Nagata went on about jellyfish DNA and other such things, and though I didn't understand anything it did seem quite interesting.

"I finally understand what it feels like to be doing your own thing. I've finally caught up to you, huh?"

"I suppose. It certainly took you long enough!" I laughed out loud for him to see.

It was there that I heard that the two were to be married. They were holding a small gathering to celebrate among friends, and asked me to come. I congratulated them in brief, and assured them that I would be there to bestow a grand speech upon them.

"Since it's been so long, why don't we go get a bite, just the three of us?" Nagata suggested.

"I'm afraid there is writing which requires my attention."

"You gonna climax soon?" Nagata asked me as I made to walk away.

I nodded vigorously, then turned away. "Until we meet again." I roughly pushed my way through the crowd, going north up Muromachi Street.

I looked at the blue twilight sky, and as I walked I began to weep loudly.

Even now he still believed in me. Yet I myself had lost my belief. Now all I did was despair at myself, curse everything that I had ever done, and go to bed each night having accomplished nothing. More than anything, I had been defeated by myself. This was what my pride and arrogance had led to!

I returned to my boarding house, sat at my desk, and let the anger flow.

But I couldn't move an inch, like a frog hypnotized by the gaze of a snake. Only the word "somersault" hopped up and down in my head; nothing else came to mind. I agonized deep into the night, until I heard someone whispering in the corridor as if to mock me, "Somersault! Somersault!"

Flying into a rage I burst into the hallway. There was no one there, but I could hear the voice coming from the woods behind the building. I was convinced they were making a fool of me.

I flew out of the building and entered the forest.

As I charged blindly on, my body began to get lighter and lighter. I ran so fast that I was fairly flying through the trees towards Mt. Daimonji. My body was so light that my feet hardly felt the ground, and just as I was realizing that I burst through the overgrown branches and floated up into the luminous night sky. I was gliding beneath the moonlight over the forest.

As I ascended towards the deserted Daimonji firepits, I turned around. Between the branches I saw the lights of Kyoto sprawling out below me.

I had never before seen anything so beautiful.

\*

I have lived here a year now, ever since that night.

During the day I sleep deep in the forest, and at night I spit at any humans who approach. Even if you were to see me you would not recognize me for the man I was. I said I was a tengu, but you might think me a caveman. In any case there is little difference. Having become a tengu I have gained the power to wield magicks, but that avails me of naught. I cannot even come down from Mt. Daimonji.

I once plotted and spent wasted effort attempting to come down from the mountain. However, whether I made for Shikagatani, or Ginkakuji, I would somehow always end up before the shrine to Kōbō Daishi. If I took to the air, I would find myself flapping in circles around Mt. Daimonji, like the swallows above the rice paddies. I eventually realized that I am trapped in this mountain prison. At present all I am able to do, day and night, is stare at the lights of the city which remain out of my reach, and aimlessly let time pass me by.

Whenever humans climb up here, I cannot help but to chase them away. It is true that I long for conversation with others, but whenever they enter my sight I find their foolishness so unbearably repulsive that I cannot restrain my wrath. Even as I speak to you, I am filled with an urge to drive you away.

At present I am only a misanthropic, hollow mass of arrogance, pulling the strings of this human shell. That is what makes me a tengu.

From time to time, I remember my former self. I remember how sitting in that dirty, cramped room, I believed that as long as there was white paper on the desk before me, I could write anything.

Could I put pen to paper once more, in the same fashion that I am speaking now? I do not know.

But even if I were able to write again, what use would that serve when I cannot come down from this mountain? In this absolute solitude, wishing to speak to others would only torment me to no end.

It is more fitting that I keep my silence, watching the city below.

\*

A cloud drifted across the serene night sky, and moonlight bathed the scene.

The two officers were alone on the steep slope of Daimonji, and even the voice that floated out from the darkness seemed almost like a hallucination. After it had finished its tale, the voice spoke no more.

"Saitō," called Officer Natsume. "Come with us down the mountain. It'll be alright. You can come down."

He glanced at Corporal Maejima next to him, who nodded silently.

The wind whistled over the firepits.

A strange figure emerged before the two beneath the light of the moon. It wore a filthy, tattered blanket like a cape. Its beard grew untamed, and long, stiff hair towered upward from its head, swaying slightly in the wind. This man, Saitō Shūtarō, gazed at the two officers, a terrible look in its eyes.

"Leave this mountain. This shall be the last time we meet," said he. "If you see Nagata, tell him I died and left my work unaccomplished."

Natsume perceived Maejima tensing his legs, preparing to tackle the perp.

But Saitō Shūtarō seemed to have read their minds. He tossed his head back and let out a wild cackle into the sky. "You seek to arrest *me*?"

"We're not going to arrest you. We just want to bring you down from the mountain," Natsume said evenly, offering a hand to shake.

At the same time Maejima threw himself towards Saitō, who easily dodged aside and floated up into the air, coming down on the roof of the altar. The way he moved was, as he had claimed, exactly like a tengu.

"I implore you, go down quickly. I say again, the sight of you makes my skin crawl."

"Saitō, come down with us. Come back to earth."

For a moment, Natsume saw a glimmer of sorrow in Saitō's eyes as he glared down, but it was soon masked by the colours of disgust and contempt.

Spreading his cape like a pair of wings, Saitō Shūtarō let himself be borne away by a sudden gust of wind, letting out a shrill cackle at the moon.

"Fare thee well, normies!"

And he flew away.

Officer Natsume could only watch in disbelief as the figure turned over several times in the air and disappeared towards Nyoigadake.

He pondered the fate of Saitō Shūtarō.

While Corporal Maejima looked on, Officer Natsume gazed down upon the nightscape for a long while in silence.

\*

Nagata returned temporarily from his studies abroad about a week after this incident. He had called ahead several days prior, so Natsume let him know he would be on duty at the Ginkakuji police box.

In the evening, Nagata sauntered up to the police box. He talked about what he had been up to after graduating, while Natsume told him about his career on the police force.

At length Nagata inquired after Saitō Shūtarō. After visiting his laboratory earlier that afternoon, the idea had struck him to visit Saitō's boarding house.

"Knowing Saitō, I'd thought that he'd still be holding out in his room there, but no one lives there anymore."

"I don't know exactly what happened, but he packed up and went back home," said Natsume.

"I see. And no one knows how to get in touch with him?"

"Apparently not. Saitō never was the type to worry about that kind of thing, was he?"

"I guess not. Well, I suppose I'll never see him again. He didn't come to the wedding, either. I went to see him a few times before I went overseas, but he was never in." Nagata smiled. "I never did get to read that masterpiece of his."

The pair began to swap stories about the infamous, aloof character who had climbed and set up his lofty throne atop those lofty peaks of solitude which none had reached before. His devotion to writing his neverending novel; the rain of disdain and spit that he showered

on everything around him; that overzealous craving for charcoal-grilled mackerel—each strand of memory led to another, and another.

“I have to say, Saitō really was an absolute idiot,” said Natsume.

“You got that right. A total idiot,” Nagata laughed. “Know something, Natsume? He’s still the only person I really respect.”

After a while Nagata wrapped things up and said he was returning to his hotel.

Before he left the police box, he looked up towards Mt. Daimonji. Officer Natsume couldn’t help but look up too. The mountain towered up into the cloudless blue yonder, sunlight slanting down upon it.

“I’m finally going to see the Daimonji bonfire this year,” said Nagata. “I’ve already secured a good spot.”

“You mean you’ve never seen it before?” Natsume asked in surprise.

“Nope. I always went home for Obon, so I never saw it when I was going to school here. My wife suggested we see it this year, since we don’t know when we’ll get the chance again.”

Nagata grinned, then disappeared into the throng of sightseers walking along the canal.

\*

The Gozan no Okuribi is held during Obon on August 16th.

After the Daimonji Preservation Society prepares the bonfire, a monk reads sutras at the Kōbō Daishi shrine in the light of a sacred flame. Normally the flame is transferred to the wood piles afterwards, lighting up the Kyoto night with a giant flaming “dai”, but things were a little stranger that year.

As the wood ignited and spectators cheered in the city below, another flame burst into life atop the roof of the altar. Amid astonished gazes it galloped down the slope, running pell mell along the bonfire on the face of the mountain and spreading confusion and shock. According to testimony from people at the bonfire, the flame seemed to be in the shape of a person, cackling shrilly as it ran.

Officer Natsume, down at the Kamo Bridge on crowd control duty, saw it.



Nagata and his wife saw it, having snuck onto a campus rooftop with his younger labmates.

Even after the bonfire had gone out, the flame continued to dash around mocking the onlookers, before finally ascending into the sky. It rose high into the heavens, and then flew off towards the east.

What with the disturbances that had been occurring since the previous year, many thought it must be the work of a tengu.

After that, the disturbances on Mt. Daimonji ceased, leading many to believe that that flame had been the tengu's last hurrah. The flame had hurtled through the sky like a shooting star in the direction of Lake Biwa, so some assumed that he had packed up and left Mt. Daimonji.

\*

Following this event, Officer Natsume climbed Mt. Daimonji and scoured the forests of Nyoigadake many times, but never a trace did he find of Saitō Shūtarō's whereabouts.

The only thing he ever came across was a sodden sheaf of papers, just off the mountain trail leading towards Nagarayama Onjōji. The papers had been carefully torn to the same size, and bound together with vines threaded through holes punched in the corners.

It looked as if there was writing on the paper, but it had all been drenched by the rain, and the words were impossible to make out.

# In a Grove

*Original story by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927)*

*A collection of testimonies, each contradicting the next, through which the author plumbs the depths of the human psyche. In the years since it was published, many theories have been proposed to explain the inconsistencies, but the truth of the matter remains hidden in the grove.*

## The Story of a Film Circle Member

*On a Rooftop* was the talk of the town before it was ever screened. Rumours swirled about the passionate, drawn-out kissing scene between the two leads, which was supposedly a torrid affair even by the circle's hardboiled standards. That got people talking, and on the day of the premiere during the campus festival the queue snaked all the way out the door.

There was a reason the rumours spread so widely.

From the moment cameras started rolling until the lights dimmed at the screening, the movie was produced in absolute secrecy. No one in the circle had received so much as a glimpse of the script, and so not a soul knew what was being filmed or where. That's why it was impossible to go watch the shoot. There wasn't even an advance screening. We only had the broad outline of the story.

It was only natural to assume that, with all that secrecy, they must have been planning something special. The more you try to hide something, the harder people will work to uncover it. So someone managed to get a peek during the editing process and started spreading the rumours. When you think about it, rumours are much more effective at advertising than putting up posters.

Just to be clear, it wasn't me that did it.

From my point of view, that last scene was just dumbfounding. Probably even more so, if you were one of the people who worked on it.

The whole thing was just awful. Both the film, and the people who made it.

I have no idea what Uyama, the director, was thinking; and I don't know what Hasegawa and Watanabe were thinking going along with it.

Neither of the actors showed up to the premiere.

Just Uyama.

The shoots must have been a bloodbath. But Uyama sowed those seeds himself. The plan he came up with was downright immoral. Two guys and one girl, filming practically behind closed doors: two of them going out, and the third person an old flame. Of course they'd fight. They *ought* to fight. In fact in my opinion they all should have beat each other to death.

I remember Uyama was standing by the film projector in the darkened auditorium.

It was a full house, and of course there was a stir when the kissing scene came on. I wonder what Uyama was feeling as he listened to them cheer. But how can you ever hope to understand what goes through the head of a guy who makes his lover make out with her ex, and films the whole thing? I can see why a lot of the younger members idolize him as the Fiend of Filmmaking, but that stuff is not to my taste at all.

What was it like, during those sessions those three spent filming by themselves?

I guess the truth lies in the grove.

Not that I really want to know what it is.

## The Story of Saitō Shūtarō

I saw *On a Rooftop*.

Hasegawa, the actress, had her charms, but otherwise the movie was uninteresting. If not for my meager acquaintance with Uyama I would never have gone to see such pitiful stuff. I put in an appearance, only to find it all a waste of my time.

I first met Uyama on the night of the Ichijōji Cup. The Ichijōji Cup is an all-night mahjong session, held at the boarding house where a friend by the name of Nagata has his residence.

I found Uyama to be a self-flagellating, unworthy man. He refused liquor, claiming that it would dull his senses, yet he lost miserably all the same. I explained to him in minute detail how he came to lose, yet he would only scratch his head and shrug. Everything he did, everything he said, exposed the poverty of his soul from top to bottom. Yet what I despised the most in him was the way he seemed to revel in his own contemptibleness.

Whenever there was a lull in the action, I would engross myself in writing in my traveling study. I always walk around with a bundle of papers, as you see here, sinking into

contemplation at every spare moment. Uyama expressed great interest in this. I inquired as to why this was so, and he told me that he made movies in his circle, and was in the habit of jotting down ideas in his notebook. He was quite vocal about asking for opinions about his ideas. In the course of our discussion he came up with a story about a man and a woman who by chance run into one another on a rooftop. I remember the obscene smirk on his face, like a conniving merchant in a period drama.

It was I who gave him the filming location.

He told me that he was a perfectionist about the set. Once, he boasted, he made a heroic effort to sneak onto Battleship Island, though as his attempt ended in failure I cannot say there was anything heroic about the matter. In any case, as he sought a backdrop for his idea I recommended he use that rooftop. The boarding house in which I reside is in a neighbourhood bordering the Philosopher's Walk, and beside it is a concrete apartment building about thirty years old. Its rooftop is a dreary place, which Uyama greatly found to his liking. I have snuck up there on several occasions in order to grill mackerel. The taste of grilled mackerel beneath a lofty autumn sky is truly exquisite.

As I recall, the filming took place from the end of September until about the end of October.

I remember the day they came marching into my apartment.

Uyama's foolish cavorting resembled a top strung up in the air, spinning uselessly. It was quite apparent in his grating display that he was enjoying himself very much, to the point that it almost gladdened the heart. Here was a truly sinful man. But he was at least consistent, which alone of all his traits I cannot fault.

The two actors were there as well.

Watanabe was a morose, brooding fellow, a lone-wolf type, and my impression of him was far more favorable than my opinion of Uyama.

I find it difficult to find the words to speak of Hasegawa. She made but little impression on me during that first meeting, but when I watched the movie...well. Only a bald-faced liar would deny the charm of the girl on screen. And yet she had seemed so ordinary on our first meeting. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that we did not exchange words then, but that is hardly sufficient to explain it. What was it that made her look so ravishing on the screen? You could come up with many reasons to explain it: the camera angle, the director, her skill as an actress. But I find each of those explanations too simple to be convincing.

The woman on the screen looked to me like an entirely different person.

The woman standing in my dim doorway that day in September, smiling but otherwise saying nothing, had seemed no more than a quiet, utterly ordinary girl.

## The Story of a Devotee of the Director

Director Uyama is an incredible man. He is the master of my soul.

Compared to him I am but a lowly worm. No, lower than a worm: garbage, rubbish, snot, unfit to live. I have been in the circle for only a year, but when I met Uyama I soon realized how incredible he was.

The leadership of our circle consists of the trio of Jōgasaki, Aijima, and Uyama; but Uyama is the most gifted filmmaker of the three. Everyone else talks a big game, but they are all pretenders. Uyama is the only one who truly makes movies.

Filming a movie is a lengthy process, but Uyama never takes shortcuts, and perseveres to the end. Once he has written a script he never changes it: not the scenes, not the lines, not a word. The likes of Jōgasaki and Aijima could never do that. When Uyama writes a script, he already knows exactly what it is he should film. He discards all the rest beforehand, putting only what survives into the script. That is why for Uyama, there simply cannot be anything in his movie that does not follow the script. For this reason he is called an eccentric, a degenerate.

But isn't that the way things ought to be? We don't make commercial movies. Nobody orders us to make these movies; there's no studio to go bankrupt if the schedule is delayed. What is the use of hiding your eccentricity? I find it despicable, the way Jōgasaki and Aijima compromise so nonchalantly. They mock Uyama's faithfulness to his script, claiming that movies are meant to evolve as they are filmed, and other such half-remembered film theory nonsense... Of course, it's possible for a film to grow over the course of its filming, if helmed by a great person. But I persist in saying that the movies which those other "directors" make do not grow during their filming. They flail around haphazardly, and whatever happens to come out they claim as their work. Have they no shame?

The ability to film your script exactly as it is written no matter what others may say is proof that Uyama grasps perfectly the movies that he wants to make.

Uyama is constantly thinking about movies, and walks around with a notebook. He is always writing in it, and I believe that he can see playing on its pages the movies that he ought not to be making. So he discards them, and keeps discarding, and discards some more, and when he is done discarding he films what remains.

I wanted to assist him with this movie. I would only be mocked by the higher-ups if I tried to make my own movie, anyways. But Uyama said that he was making a two-hander, that he didn't need anyone else, only the two leads and himself. It was a disappointment to hear this.

But he has talked to me many times about *On a Rooftop*.

I remember that he told me that the value of that film lies on the outside. That it lies on this side of the camera, this side of the screen.

I didn't understand what he meant.

## The Story of a Friend of the Lead Actress

I've known Hasegawa since freshman year.

A lot of people say that Naoko is a totally different person when she's on the screen. Most of the time she seems so nondescript and ordinary, but when she's in a movie she becomes so glamorous. Now I'm not like trying to badmouth her or anything, but Naoko's the type of person who has really big swings. Her highs are really high and her lows are really low. I mean, most of the time she's low. If that's all you filmed, you couldn't use the footage for anything.

But this Uyama guy turns into a fiend when he's filming Naoko. I mean, yeah, they're lovers, but it's kind of scary how intense he gets. He just keeps filming and filming, and he doesn't let up until he catches Naoko exactly at her highest point on camera. I don't think a normal person could do something like that. Without Naoko, Uyama can't exhibit his prowess, and without Uyama, Naoko can't be glamorous. When you think about it that way, I guess you could call them the perfect couple, but...it just seems, like, claustrophobic, and kinda gross you could say. I don't really like it.

The Naoko in the movies is basically something Uyama created, but I get the feeling that Naoko's starting to lose sight of the difference between the movie Naoko and the real Naoko. It'd probably be going a little too far to say she's getting full of herself. She told me when she was filming that movie that she wanted to break up with Uyama. She didn't say

much about why, but I think she looks down on him a little bit. Then again, if you ask me, the whole reason she's so confident now, the reason she gets all this praise now, is because of Uyama. She couldn't see that the ladder she's climbed to get up here was a special ladder, and now that she's done climbing she just wants to throw it away.

But what can you do? Uyama is the type of guy who ruins whoever he's with. He's earnest enough, sure, but he's also twisted. And no amount of earnestness can fix that.

But it really started with Watanabe, you know?

Everyone knows that he asked Naoko out at Kenrokuen during their first year.

They were there because the film circle was having a retreat there. I'd gotten separated from Naoko and was trying to find her, but apparently she and Watanabe had met up and were really hitting it off in conversation. Come to think of it, I did see Uyama wandering around with a camera. Maybe he was looking for Naoko too, but I guess Watanabe beat him to the punch.

But in the end, Watanabe lost Naoko to Uyama.

This might just be speculation, but I don't think that Watanabe tried that hard to keep Naoko from leaving him. It's not like he didn't really like her or anything like that, that's just the way he is. Whenever you talk to him, it's almost like he thinks that if he stays quiet and waits long enough, you'll eventually come around to his side. You could be generous and call him the strong and silent type, but I think that he's spoiled, in a way. Like he's protecting his dignity, or his philosophy of life, you know? That's why he's so stubborn. He pretends not to care. He always looks indifferent. And that's never gonna win against a freak like Uyama.

So, even after they broke up, the three of them hung out together, went out eating together, right?

When I found out, all I could think was, *what the hell is wrong with you, Watanabe!?* He thinks looking indifferent all the time is cool. He's like that with everything, so Uyama must've sweet-talked him into appearing in that movie.

So, the movie.

I can't believe anyone would film something like that. It's absolutely sick.

A love story with your girlfriend and her ex, and using dialogue from their actual conversations? I can't imagine what Uyama was thinking, making something like that. And

the actors; I can understand Naoko, but what I really want to know is why Watanabe agreed to appear in it. Wouldn't that just be really painful? He could have said that it was an invasion of his privacy, but he didn't. That's Watanabe for you, though: that sort of thing is unimportant to him, compared to friendship.

The premiere was a success, but mostly because of that final scene.

Neither Naoko nor Watanabe attended the screening, and Uyama didn't say a word the whole time.

Ever since then it's felt like it's impossible to talk about that movie.

To this day no one knows how that movie ended up being made, or what happened during its filming.

## The Story of Watanabe Shin'ichi, the Actor

When Uyama approached me about that movie in a Shinshindō Café, my first reaction was astonishment.

At the movie being about what it was.

Two former lovers meet on a rooftop, and as they reminisce about those shared days gone by, they begin to fall for each other again. But when I flipped through the script, I quickly realized that the couple was based on me and Hasegawa. Uyama had used our memories to write his script, and basically he wanted us to play ourselves.

*That's a hell of a request*, I thought to myself.

But when I asked for the details, I realized that he was serious. He may be a lying, jealous masochist that everybody hates, but when it comes to the things that he wants to make he's dead serious. Letting me read a script like that must have meant it was important to him. He was going to make that movie by any means necessary, and it was that devotion of his that sold me. He said to me, "I want to make the best movie that I possibly can," and I believed him.

Besides, I don't think I'll ever make another movie with Uyama again. Thinking about that does make me a little wistful. We've had our times, just the two of us making movies. I figured I might as well go out with one last hurrah to make things easier. And really, I didn't care anymore about whatever quarreling was going on between him and Hasegawa.

That's why I decided to perform in *On a Rooftop*.



Uyama caught a lot of flak in the circle for saying he was going to make that movie, but since me and Hasegawa had said we were okay with it, none of those people really had a leg to stand on. It might be hard for them to believe, but we didn't have any objections to acting together. We'd already been broken up for a while. Afterwards I got along with Uyama and Hasegawa like I always had, which everybody in the circle was aware of. I'm not the type of guy who gets bent out of shape over a petty quibble like that.

Whatever was written in the script, I wasn't going to let it shake me. Now that wasn't what Uyama had in mind for me. I have no doubt that he had specifically chosen me and Hasegawa to be in the film so that he could film us being dragged back into the past, overlaying the movie on top of reality.

But I wasn't about to play into his hands.

That thought cheered me up.

After coming to an agreement at Shinshindō we shook hands. I doubt he understood why I let out a laugh. This movie was going to be a battle between Uyama—who was trying to drag the past out from me—and myself—who was only *acting* as if the past was being dragged out from me.

Filming began at the end of September.

The set was on the roof of an old concrete apartment building by Philosopher's Walk. It was a terribly dreary place. So many weeds were growing out of the cracks in the concrete that it looked like a grassy field. There was a spherical water tank, and in the evenings the whole rooftop was stained golden by the setting sun. Uyama piled up rusty hunks of metal and concrete blocks to create a space for filming. He seemed to be enjoying himself quite a lot. I helped out, remembering my freshman days.

But the shoot didn't go as planned.

The reason was simple: Hasegawa kept making things difficult.

She wouldn't listen to Uyama, arguing with his directions and refusing to do retakes. When it came to do a take she'd start to complain about the script. She knew perfectly well that Uyama wasn't going to compromise there, and in the end she'd grudgingly do as he told her, so it was clearly a waste of time. But she kept at it, squabbling with Uyama and forcing Uyama into big detours, almost like it was some sort of ritual.

Yet Uyama never got angry. If he was patient long enough his view would eventually prevail, so maybe it was for the best. On the other hand, I was pretty sick of it.

It happens, petulant actors and directors can bring filming and editing to a screeching halt. I've seen it myself on many occasions. But Hasegawa took it way too far, and Uyama just played along with her diva tantrums like he was her slave. It was so over the top that it was comical. Maybe they were just playing around. If they were, I could only shake my head at how shameless they were.

Hasegawa irritated me a lot, but on the other hand working with Uyama was a delight. As far as filming movies was concerned, he was a consummate professional.

He explained the scenes we were about to perform as clearly if he'd already shot them. He never fumbled around once the take had started. He didn't get stressed over decisions. He simply walked forward with almost alarming precision, as if the path was marked before him. It was like he was piecing Lego blocks together according to an instruction booklet. It sounds dismissive when I put it like that, but you can't always just leave everything to passion and fly by the seat of your pants. There was something enjoyable about the simplicity of Uyama's style.

It was autumn, so the weather was perfect, and it felt wonderful being up there on the roof.

There'd be the occasional rain shower, but for the most part the days were pleasantly sunny. A splendid ginkgo tree towered beyond the rusted handrail, and as the shoot went on their leaves gradually turned a brilliant golden hue. During breaks we would eat together, watching the boughs rustle in the wind. Usually Hasegawa would force Uyama to make the bento boxes. It was a little bit like being on a picnic.

I kept an eye on Hasegawa's every move.

It must have been hard for me when we broke up, but during the shoot it rankled not being able to remember the way it had felt. I didn't understand how the pain could have vanished so cleanly. But I thought it was all because she had changed. In the movie, I started thinking back to those days. I kept asking myself why I had fallen in love with her.

One day, she started complaining yet again, and sat down on the concrete blocks. Unable to hold back my irritation, I snapped at her, which just made things worse. Eventually she ordered Uyama to get some ginkgo nuts for her to eat. It was plain that she was saying it just to say it. But Uyama dutifully went downstairs.

I leaned over the railing, watching Uyama walking around hunched over beneath the ginkgo tree. I wanted to ask him if getting to capture her on film was worth all this. What drove him to go this far, all to make some amateur film? I'm sure he wouldn't have been happy to hear it described like that.

I realized suddenly that Hasegawa was standing beside me, leaning on the handrail.

"Why are you being so selfish? Are you enjoying using Uyama like this?" I asked.

Hasegawa snorted. "I mean, he's doing it because he wants to."

She leaned over the railing dangerously, trying to pluck a golden leaf from a nearby branch. Seeing her very nearly lose her balance, I quickly grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back. She crushed the golden leaf in her hand, then said, "What's it to you anyways?"

I noticed then that Uyama was standing at the foot of the tree, looking up at me. It was hard to tell from his expression whether he was laughing or crying. He sort of looked like a little kid. For some reason I suddenly felt terribly sad. I wanted to say something to him.

"How come you just let us break up like that?" Hasegawa said unexpectedly. "You should have tried to stop me."

"I would never do something so pathetic," I answered.

Hasegawa sat back down on top of the concrete blocks. She placed the crumpled leaf between her lips. As she stroked her own hair, her face looked tired.

What was she up to?

Maybe it was nothing.

But her words lingered in my mind. Maybe, just maybe, she wanted us to give it one more try. No, I had to be reading too much into it. I no longer had any feelings for her. I was merely acting...

I kept on thinking about it.

As the camera filmed us gazing at each other, exchanging false lines based on true memories, I began to feel that the woman I had used to know was there beneath the skin. It was only a faint feeling. Just as I began to use this to revive those memories, the scene ended, and immediately Hasegawa returned to her usual self. My frustration only grew, and that led me to that final scene.

It was all because of the rainbow.

If Uyama really had sussed out that that rainbow was where my memories with Hasegawa had begun, and that it would drag me into the past—if he really had planned that out, I can only give him my respect.

The end of October had already arrived, and when it rained the air was unpleasantly chilly.

The shoot trudged along, and at last all that remained was the final scene. I hear that scene has become pretty notorious. Of course, I probably overdid it. Even just reading the script, I wasn't sure if I could go through with it.

But spending every day seeing how passionate Uyama was, I started to feel that it was okay, that I really could do it. People in the circle were always talking, but once I started filming with Uyama, all of those feelings of embarrassment went away. But the most important thing, the reason that I was so calm and confident going into that scene, was how calm Hasegawa was. Filming that scene was nothing to her. And if she was like that, I couldn't let myself be the only one hesitating. I would no longer only contend with Uyama's schemes, I was going to contend with Hasegawa as well.

Uyama wanted to shoot the last scene under a real rainbow. But he couldn't get one to show up. That was only natural. Rain doesn't guarantee that a rainbow is going to show up. It wasn't even a given that it would come out well on film. Nevertheless Uyama persisted.

Now that I'd come this far, I was planning to accommodate Uyama's stubbornness to the end, but Hasegawa said that she was done being patient. "Even if there isn't a rainbow, couldn't we just say that there was one?"

I agreed, this time logic was on her side. Uyama managed to talk her down a couple of times, but I could sense that she was reaching the end of her tether.

And then the day came.

We filmed a part of the scene where we were talking in the rain, and then took a breather to see how the weather would turn out. Hasegawa used a towel to wipe the raindrops from her forehead. Uyama looked up at the sky, almost like he was praying. I stood by the guardrail, smoking a cigarette and looking at the pall of rain that covered the town.

"If we don't get a rainbow within two hours, I'm done. You two can finish the movie by yourselves!" Hasegawa announced.

But as it turned out, there really was a rainbow. Uyama's persistence had paid off. It was so perfect that I was shocked. Uyama started barking out orders, and Hasegawa stood up.

"A rainbow," I said.

"I hate rainbows," she said, looking at her feet.

"Why?"

"They're scary."

"Really? Rainbows usually make people happy."

"It's kind of like there's a huge monster striding across the sky."

I reached out from beneath my umbrella into the light drizzle and took her hand.

At that moment, that rainy day in Kenrokuen appeared vividly in my mind.

I remembered now that she'd told me in that garden she hated rainbows.

I'd been holding an umbrella, trying to talk to her. I was buffeted by emotions: by an unbridled giddiness, and also by an opposing, unbearable misery. I emerged out onto a raised plateau where ancient pine trees grew. She was slowly walking through the drizzle as if in a reverie, not even bothering to open her umbrella. Raindrops rolled down through her hair like glass beads. It was almost like a movie. I looked on, as she passed between the pine trees, parted the gentle curtain of rain, and crossed over time and space, landing here on this autumn rain-slicked rooftop to stand beside me.

I'm not going to explain why I fell in love with her. I'm not sure that I could, and in any case the words of a person in love don't mean anything to anyone else. You'd be much better off watching the movie Uyama made. That is where her charm lies. And that is the only place that she exists. I really don't feel anything for her now. Where did the girl who charmed me go? Why does she exist only in Uyama's movie? I don't hate Uyama for going out with her. I hate him for spiriting her away into his movie.

Yet on the other hand, I figure that this is all in my head.

Maybe she never existed in the first place. I'd tried going out with her, but in the end we never really opened up to one another. I think I was only ever watching a hazy movie version of her that I'd created on my own. If that was true, then she hadn't been whisked away by Uyama into the movie: I'd only ever been looking at her image on a screen from the very start .

But at that moment, on that rooftop, there was no doubt in my mind that it was the Hasegawa of the past who was standing before me. Her dripping bangs swayed as she looked up at me with glistening eyes. I had found her, here in the middle of Uyama's movie. And that meant that I had lost to Uyama.

The scenes still play out in my head.

She looks up at me from beneath the umbrella.

Raindrops fall from the edge of the umbrella, wetting her hair.

Beyond her I see the buildings, soaked in rain.

The soft drizzle pitter-patters on the leaves of the ginkgo tree.

A sliver of blue sky peeks through a gap in the clouds.

A rainbow.

Golden sunlight gently shines on her face.

And her eyes gaze at me.

Dazed, I can hardly move—

She abruptly leans over and kisses me, long and slow.

But the moment Uyama yelled, "Cut!" the movie ended, and she vanished like smoke before my eyes.

Whispering simply, "The End," she departed, leaving me alone inside the screen.

## The Story of Hasegawa Naoko, the Actress

I never wanted to be in the movies.

I never was the showoff type, and I'm not one now. I'm just an ordinary, average human being.

Whenever my class put on a play in middle and high school, I always volunteered to do scenery and props. I prefer working behind the scenes to standing in the spotlight. I just get absorbed in that kind of thing. I've always been good with my hands, too.

I only joined this film circle because some friends from my program invited me to come check it out with them. It's not like I wanted to be in the movies. But somehow I ended up being cast as a lead actress, and then I ended up staying. I always let other people sweep me along.

I never got used to being an actress. Seeing myself on screen was embarrassing. My face and voice just seem weird. It's all clearly off. I don't have any acting talent either, and I don't really practice, so of course I'm terrible. It's agonizing having to watch the screenings with all these other people, so I'm always lurking in the corner. I don't know how people can be okay watching themselves on screen with other people in the room. So I only acted, I guess, because I got swept into it.

Uyama is a very passionate person.

I guess he has talent, but since I don't know much about movies, I don't really understand how good he is. But I think it's great, how he can devote himself to a single thing like that. Not like me, just stumbling along. He seems pretty stressed out when he's filming, but he also looks equally happy. I like watching him film. Maybe that's why I'm always in his movies.

I started acting because of Uyama. At first it was just supporting roles, but eventually I started getting cast as the lead. He was so passionate when he first asked me to do a role, he just bulldozed through me. He says that my face is made for the silver screen. I don't think so though, I think that's just how he sees me. Ever since then, he always invited me to be in all his movies, and so that's how we started to get close.

I heard that people don't like him because he's a little too passionate. He can be a little inflexible. What makes him hard to work with is how he'll do anything for a movie. And I got that a lot making *On a Rooftop*.

*On a Rooftop* is a two-hander drama. It's about a man and a woman who, after breaking up with each other, start running into each other on a rooftop, and gradually fall in love again. When I read it I was really shocked, because the couple was obviously based on me and Watanabe.

I used to date Watanabe.

Uyama is the really jealous type, so after we started going out he would ask me all sorts of stuff about our relationship. Like where we went, what we ate, what we talked about. And the weird thing was, he'd recreate those things. He'd take me to the same places that Watanabe took me. And if he was feeling really weird, he'd invite Watanabe and the three

of us would go there together. Honestly, I was not into that at all. But Watanabe never looked fazed. Things just went on like that because Watanabe was mature about it, and because Uyama and Watanabe had been good friends since freshman year. But doing that kind of thing on purpose was just so weird. Maybe Uyama was doing it to compete with Watanabe. Or maybe, he was just acting like a friend but didn't trust Watanabe completely, and wanted to keep an eye on us both.

So why would such a jealous person want to make a movie like that?

I remember reading a short story called *Hell Screen*.<sup>1</sup> The artist in the story does terrible things without blinking an eye, all for the sake of inspiration. In the end he watches his own daughter burn alive in an oxcart, which allows him to finish his painting of hell. I think Uyama was planning on doing the same thing. I think that was how he wanted to extract reality.

Of course I didn't want to do it. That's a given. My acting was already shaky, and with that kind of script... Any sane person would say no. But of course I couldn't refuse, not when Uyama started sobbing in front of me. In the end I did it because I wanted to help him achieve what he was trying to do.

I was sure that Watanabe would be mad. But Uyama happily told me that he'd given his OK. Knowing how much more mature Watanabe was than Uyama, he'd probably agreed out of respect for Uyama's passion.

We used the rooftop of an old concrete apartment building for the set. It was moving deeper into autumn, the most comfortable time of the year in Kyoto, so the shoot felt very pleasant.

There was a big ginkgo tree growing beside the apartment, and the branches reached all the way to the rooftop. I remember once after shooting wrapped for the day Uyama and I gathered ginkgo nuts and made *hiryūzu* that night. Uyama loves ginkgo nuts.

As shooting went on, the leaves of the ginkgo tree turned yellow. The shoot used that as the backdrop. I thought it was symbolic, how the leaves change colour as the couple fall for each other again. Uyama hates that kind of analysis though, so I didn't tell him that's what I thought.

It was a very enjoyable time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Also written by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke.



Uyama said that this would be the last movie he made, and Watanabe was getting along with Uyama like they were freshmen again. It was all so nostalgic. I remember us eating our lunches together, looking up at the beautifully clear autumn sky.

But there were awkward times, too. Sometimes Uyama would move the camera, or fiddle with some adjustments, and while he was doing that Watanabe and I would talk about all sorts of things. And then eventually we'd realize that Uyama was done with whatever he was doing and was standing there glaring at us. I think Uyama suspected there was something going on between us. Maybe the whole reason he was making this movie was so that he could find us out. But would anyone really go so far as to make a movie to look into something like that? Anyway, the important thing is that I didn't feel anything for Watanabe.

The last scene?

I really wish it hadn't turned into a scandal. But I understand why it did.

I didn't want to do it, right up until the end. Even after Uyama pushed me into being in the film, I was still hoping that there'd be some way to get out of it. I knew that Uyama would be filming the script exactly as it was written, but if there wasn't a rainbow—

The script specified that there would be a rainbow. Seeing that rainbow, Watanabe and I would rekindle our relationship. Uyama was obsessed with the rainbow. Watanabe had noticed and pointed it out when he'd read through the script. No matter how attached to the idea you were, there was no telling if a rainbow would conveniently show up on cue.

I've been afraid of rainbows ever since I was little. Actually, I don't like big things in general. Mountains, water tanks, giant Buddha statues...I think rainbows are just another part of that. I've never thought they were pretty.

We waited on that rooftop for a rainbow to appear.

A chilly autumn rain was pouring down, and from atop the roof we could see the grey, misty outline of the city. Watanabe was patient at first, but gradually he started to get irritated. He paced back and forth, smoking a cigarette. Uyama was waiting to jump into action, while I sat just inside the open doorway to the rooftop looking up at the sky. It really felt like autumn now, and getting even a little bit wet chilled you to the bone.

We tried waiting for another day, but our luck was the same.

The shoot dragged on and on. The cultural festival was drawing near.

On the last day, Watanabe lost his temper and called Uyama out, and they had a big row. Watanabe said he was sick and tired of waiting, while Uyama was intent on waiting it out. I tried to get between them and smooth things over, but neither would budge an inch. "You got two hours, then I'm out of here!" Watanabe declared.

He strode to the edge of the roof alone, while Uyama fiddled with his equipment, and I stood by myself looking at the sky. The drizzle kept falling and falling on the bleak, weed-covered rooftop. The chill, lonely wind carried on it the scent of the rain, and the clouds tumbled through the sky. Finally a gap opened in the clouds and the sun shone through, but as my eyes focused on the sunbeams I realized that a rainbow had appeared. I shouted for Uyama and Watanabe, who looked up at the sky, startled.

Uyama called out a flurry of directions, and started to set up the shot.

"A rainbow," Watanabe said.

"I hate rainbows," I said, looking at my feet.

"Why?"

"They're scary."

"Really? Rainbows usually make people happy."

"It's kind of like, there's a huge monster striding across the sky."

Watanabe reached out and took my hand. The rain had let up, and only a little drizzle dampened our hands as we stretched our arms out from beneath our umbrellas.

At that moment, that rainy day in Kenrokuen appeared vividly in my mind.

The film circle had gone to Kanazawa for a retreat.

But we didn't actually do any filming; the trip was just to do some bonding. And when we were walking around Kenrokuen, I got separated from everyone else. It was drizzling a little, but since I didn't have an umbrella I just strolled around in the rain. I came to this plateau with a lot of magnificent pine trees, and who came walking towards me but Watanabe, holding out an umbrella for me. When I asked him about it later on, he told me that he'd been walking around the whole time, looking for a chance to give me an umbrella.

"But it looks like the rain'll let up soon," I told him.

"Mm," he said.

Rain sprinkled down as I looked up at the sky, when suddenly the clouds parted in the west, and a beautiful sliver of beautiful blue sky peeked through. Rays of light poked through like stairways to heaven.

"Oh," Watanabe exclaimed, pointing. "A rainbow."

This conversation was exactly the same as the one in the movie's last scene. After that we walked around Kenrokuen and chatted. That was the first time Watanabe and I had ever spoken to each other alone. Watanabe doesn't talk much, but I didn't think he was hard to talk to. He still didn't talk much even after we started going out.

Uyama might have been obsessed with the rainbow because he wanted to recreate that day in Kenrokuen. But what even would be the point? Was he doing it to test me and Watanabe? I've turned it over in my mind so many times, but I just don't understand what would drive him to the point of making a movie to do something like that.

The rainbow had come out. Beside the rooftop the leaves of the ginkgo tree were a glorious yellow, and golden sunlight shone through the clouds. Everything Uyama had wanted was in place. After saying my lines, I hesitated for a moment. Uyama was looking at us through the camera. I felt a wordless pressure. But I didn't have the slightest idea anymore what that pressure was pushing me to do. I'd always had the impression that Uyama wanted me to stick exactly to the script, but now it felt like he wanted me to stray from what was on the page.

Watanabe abruptly reached out a rain-soaked hand and touched my face, and then kissed me.

And then the movie ended.

The rainbow disappeared, and the clouds covered the sky again.

The sun had shone through for only a moment.

After Watanabe said he had to go to work and left, Uyama shifted the concrete blocks alone. He looked like a lonely little kid. After a while he squatted down like he was tired. The rain started to come down harder, so I stood next to him with an umbrella. I said we should leave, but he didn't say anything back. He held a leaf that he'd plucked from the ginkgo tree to his mouth, and stared straight at me.

There was a really frightening look in his eyes.

I knew that look well. Whenever I got caught up in talking to someone else, I'd glance back to see Uyama staring at me with that same look. Frightening might not be the most accurate word to describe them. Maybe lonely, or piercing; it's hard to describe.

It felt to me like Uyama was under a misapprehension. Like he didn't understand that I was only acting for him.

No matter how I explained how hard I had worked for him, no matter how I insisted that it had only been a performance, he only glowered silently at me with those eyes. A white mist covered the rooftop, from all the rain. I remember trying to shout over the beating of the rain. Finally he put the ginkgo leaf in his mouth and chewed it up.

I burst into tears.

My mind went blank. And then, I felt a great pity for him. If he kept doing these things he'd go crazy. I didn't want that for him. I'd done all of this because I loved him.

But it was too late, I knew.

I stood unmoving on the rooftop for a long time.

## The Story of Uyama Tōru, the Director

I started filming on the last Saturday in September.

It's a real minimalist movie, just me doing camera and sound, two actors, one set. I like watching walled garden-type movies like that, and filming them too.

The location which Saitō told me about was also pretty interesting. It's a concrete apartment building, built about thirty years ago, sort of has the '60s student protest atmosphere. I like how dreary it is. The set, the actors, the weather: it all went exactly as I planned it.

Now a lot of people seem to think that I love movies, that I'm extremely passionate, but that's completely mistaken. I no longer have any interest in making movies. The only thing I'm interested in is filming her. When I first joined the circle I was fairly interested in making movies, but once I got a taste of it I stopped caring about movies. Filming her allure was the only desire I had left.

Deciding to film in autumn, I spent the summer locked away in the library writing the script. *On a Rooftop* was the working title, but it ended up being the final one. Some people said it was a pretty dull title, but even the title didn't matter to me.

When I was writing the script I thought that this was going to be the last movie I made. And if that was the case, it had to be the best movie I could make.

That's why I asked Watanabe to star against her.

Why did I choose those two to be my actors? I got a lot of flak in the circle. They called me all sorts of things: immoral, pervert, lecher, inhuman, sadist, or rather masochist, peeping Tom, even stink bug. All of them are true. That's why it doesn't bother me at all.

Here's what *On a Rooftop* is about.

The two protagonists are members of a film circle, and former lovers. The woman, the younger of the two, has a lover. Her lover is an independent filmmaker: jealous, cringing, and enamoured of himself. As to why she would go out with such a person: some things are better left unsaid. Anyways he never makes an appearance, so it doesn't matter.

One day, the woman runs into her ex-lover on the roof of a building on campus. She had dumped him in order to be with her current lover. Following this encounter, the two continue to meet in secret. The woman talks about her troubles with her current man, and the man gives her advice. Before long the two start to talk about the old days when they were still together. The man attempts to win her back, and the woman feels a stir in her heart. But she is torn on how to respond. As they continue to meet, the wind blows, the rain falls, and the days move deeper into autumn.

A quiet, unremarkable film.

But in fact, the memories which the two share in the movie are all real memories. I talked to her, teased out episodes and fragments of conversations between her and Watanabe, and wrote them all down in my notebook. I enjoy reading over them. That became the basis of the script.

In other words, Watanabe is playing Watanabe, and she is playing herself. The couple in the movie who rekindle their relationship are none other than the real actors.

I was so excited when the script was finished that I could hardly wait to start filming. I was sure that I would be able to create something that would captivate me. I don't create movies to amuse and captivate other people. I only create them to captivate myself.

So I gave Watanabe a call.

I met him at the Shinshindō Café on Imadegawa Street just after he'd come back from visiting home for the Bon Festival.

Of course I was a little nervous. We'd remained friends even after I started going out with her, but I knew I was asking a lot. Taking a sip of coffee in the dim nook where we sat, I asked him to act in the movie and showed him the script. I even remember the exact words I used.

"This is probably going to be the last time we ever make a movie together, so I want to make the ultimate movie!" I had said. That really was how I felt, but there was no guaranteeing that *my* ultimate movie was going to be *his* ultimate movie. He didn't know that. And that was what I liked about him.

Watanabe flipped through the script, and considered for a while.

There was a cutting look in his eyes, which made me think that he really must have gotten angry. Anyone would snap if someone wrote a script based on their past love life and asked them to play themselves. I was perfectly ready and willing for him to hit me, though I preferred it if he didn't. I enjoy emotional torment, but not so much the physical kind.

I am very calculating though, and I was 90% sure that he would say yes. He can't resist when you tell him it's purely for the love of the craft. Lone wolves like him, they always roll over easy like that.

Watanabe nodded. He said that the script was good. He knew better than anyone that I was not the type of person to change the script no matter what anyone said to me. We're the closest of friends.

"There is one thing that concerns me." He pointed at the last page. "It says a rainbow appears. Is this exactly how you're going to film it?"

"Of course. There must be a rainbow."

"Alright. That's fine with me."

That's all he said. He's a pretty interesting fellow.

We shook hands. His lips were curled up in a small smile. I didn't know what that smile meant. I of all people probably shouldn't say things like this, but sometimes I have no idea what goes on inside his head.

I want to make this next point absolutely clear: I didn't use him in the movie in order to produce a sense of reality. I despise manipulative tricks like that. The question is not reality. Whether or not it is enough to stimulate me: that is what matters.

After that I showed the script to her. "Interesting. Let's go with it," she said.

She didn't seem to realize that it was based on her and Watanabe until much later on in the shoot. Rather scatterbrained of her, I must say.

We decided on a time and assembled on that rooftop that autumn. Hearing that the landlord was a crotchety fellow, I took pains not to be found out, but luckily we were never discovered. No one except us ever came to that rooftop.

We filmed all of the scenes in order.

The man and the woman reunite unexpectedly on the roof. As the ginkgo leaves in the background turn yellow with the passing of autumn, the two meet again and again on the roof. The passage of time in the film corresponds exactly with the passage of time in real life. The man still has lingering feelings for the woman. The two eventually open their hearts to each other, reminiscing over memories that only they share. I am not a part of those memories. I always remain behind the camera.

Each shoot was difficult, yet fun. Some people said that it must have been a bloodbath, but nothing could be further from the truth. Shooting went off without a hitch. She was completely focused on sinking herself into the role.

But Watanabe seemed to have other things in mind.

In the movie you can see a large ginkgo tree next to the building. She told me she wanted to try some ginkgo nuts, so during a pause in shooting I went down by myself to gather some. I made some hiriyūzu for her, though she didn't really eat much.

She and Watanabe stayed on the roof while I went to gather the nuts. During that short time I have no doubt that Watanabe was up to something. As I trudged through the yellow leaves that covered the ground, looking for those smelly nuts, I looked up and saw her and Watanabe leaning on the rusty railing and talking. I had no idea what they were talking about, but it seemed intimate.

But I kept gathering nuts.

Why would I do something so masochistic?

If I didn't, then I wouldn't know what it tasted like: that's just the kind of man I am.

If I don't experience things that make me feel shame, that make my chest tight with frustration, that make me feel slighted, it doesn't feel genuine. It doesn't feel real.

That's why I film her.

Other people gather to watch her on screen together. They praise her. I watch them from a distance. I don't feel proud. I feel frustrated. I feel like the audience is surrounding her, leaving me the odd man out.

But that feeling is just so irresistible.

With that in mind, that last scene is the crowning achievement of this movie. I think of it as one of my treasures.

She and he are on the roof, but a chilly autumn rain is falling. They both stand beneath umbrellas, hardly talking, just listening to the sound of the rain. After a while the rain turns into a drizzle. Looking up, the sun is shining through the clouds. A rainbow stretches across the northern sky. She approaches him, and says rainbows are scary. He takes her hand.

Watanabe was worried that there wouldn't be a rainbow. To be honest I was thinking to myself too that it might not work out. Just because it's raining doesn't mean a rainbow will appear. But I had to have a rainbow appear, because this was a recreation of that day in Kenrokuen during freshman year. I was recreating the day I had first seen Watanabe approach her with my own eyes.

We filmed in the rain, then took a break to see how the weather would turn out. She wiped her arm with a towel. Watanabe looked down over the haze of rain that covered the town, smoking a cigarette.

At last a break formed in the clouds, and a rainbow appeared.

Filled with excitement, I restarted the shoot.

"A rainbow," Watanabe muttered, looking towards Mt. Hiei. The film had already begun.

"I hate rainbows," she said, ducking her head.

"Why?"

"They're scary."

"Really? Rainbows usually make people happy."

"It's kind of like, there's a huge monster striding across the sky."

Watanabe reached out and took her hand. Raindrops glittered on their outstretched hands.



Watanabe put out his hand and touched her face.

She responded, reaching out and touching his face.

She looked from beneath the umbrella up at Watanabe. Rain dripped from the edge of the umbrella, wetting her hair. She stared motionlessly at Watanabe. I hadn't seen her look so beautiful since Kenrokuen. Flames of envy burned within me, their light reflected upon her face. That's what made her even more beautiful.

Their umbrellas rolled to the floor, and the two embraced each other. The leaves of the ginkgo tree blazed behind them. Beyond the branches, in the half of the sky where the clouds had broken, stretched the rainbow. The remaining drizzle gently fell upon them. A golden light shone upon it all.

I screened this cliched masterpiece at the campus festival.

A large crowd watched it.

I stood in the darkness of the screening venue. You could never understand how deeply satisfied I felt as I looked through the bright screen. But I don't think you need to.

I realized then, that in a way so deep that even I couldn't fathom it, I was in love with her.

# Run, Melos!

*Original story by Dazai Osamu (1909-1948)*

*Heedless of his own impending death, Melos runs on to save his faithful friend Selinuntius, in this tale of unwavering friendship.*

Meno Shirō was enraged. He resolved to do whatever he must to knock this wicked, tyrannical Director down a peg.

Meno was a slacker who spent his days lazing around at his filthy boarding house, flunking class after class. But vexingly, he was a man who felt the sting of injustice more keenly than most.

One afternoon, like a lion awakening from his slumber, Meno made a momentous decision. *Maybe I ought to go to class for once*, he thought. So he left his boarding house in Ichijōji and set off for campus. A chill, lonely wind brushed his cheeks as he walked along the tracks of the Eizan railway. It was deep in autumn. He didn't have the faintest idea what lecture he would be attending, but in any case having resolved to let the moment take him where it would, he stepped onto campus, only to find it engulfed in a carnival mood. Unbeknownst to him, today marked the beginning of the campus festival, and as a result all classes were cancelled, leaving him with no way to satisfy his sudden burst of scholastic impetus. Meno pouted and licked a candy apple; kicked away a *daruma* that had rolled into his path; became aroused during a kiss scene at an independent film screening; viewed an odd avant-garde art installation entitled *Elephant Butt*; and ended up enjoying the festival much more than he had expected to.

After some time he thought to himself, *I wonder how Serina is doing*.

Meno had been fast friends with Serina Yūichi since he entered college. They were both members of the Sophistry Debate Society, each regarding the other with great respect. The Sophistry Debate Society was a penal colony composed of oddballs who, unconcerned with the scorn heaped upon them by society, willingly chose to walk the thorny path of spouting sophistry. But Meno and Serina stood head and shoulders above the rest, boasting, "Meno and Serina run this club!" The idiot duo were so incoherent in their ramblings that even their peers in this kooky assembly considered them unintelligible.

The two had not seen each other for a long time.

While Meno closeted himself in his room and spent his days plumbing the vast reaches of dreamland, Serina spent his time on campus exploring the far hinterlands of the course list, attending all sorts of peculiar lectures and telling anyone who would listen that he was taking Latin as his third foreign language.

Meno made his way through the refreshment booths lining the campus and toward the society's clubroom, only to find a group of students huddled around a *kotatsu* erected on the path in front of the tightly locked door. Shivering shoulder-to-shoulder in the chilly autumn wind, and defiantly refusing (or simply unable) to join the campus festivities: these could only be the members of the Sophistry Debate Society. But Serina was not among them.

"Oh, look who decided to show up!"

"I thought you'd already dropped out."

"What've you come to muck up this time?"

Seeing Menos, the members of the club welcomed him into the *kotatsu*.

Menos asked them, "Why have you set up a *kotatsu* here? Why aren't you inside?"

His comrades' faces clouded over as they poured him a drink.

"We've been locked out!"

They filled him in on the peril in which the Sophistry Debate Society now found itself.

The other day, a gang of burly men calling themselves the Cheery Bicycle Cleanup Corps had burst in, and expelled the society members from the room before they could so much as spout a single word of sophistry. The time-honored society plaque was ripped down and replaced with the plaque of the Raw Beancurd Skin Research Society. Naturally the debate society members were indignant at this outrageous treatment and attempted to resist. But their gutless leader quailed at the enormous might that lay at his fingertips and, with his hair falling out from the stress, fled over the Ōsaka no Seki checkpoint to Ōtsu.

"What sort of idiocy is this? Why don't you fight back? This is no time to be burying yourselves beneath a toasty *kotatsu*!" Meno said angrily, but the society members just shrugged.

"If we resisted, we'd only be putting ourselves in danger. We'd be going up against the Director of the Library Police!"

"And who exactly is that?"

"You don't know? How can you not know, after having been on this campus for so many years!"

Meno's friends roundly castigated him for his ignorance.

The Library Police is a student organization founded for the purpose of punishing those who keep library materials past the due date, as well as retrieving said materials. However, in recent years the Library Police had begun to utilize the unique intelligence network it had spread around campus and environs to siphon up information on every single student, utilizing this clandestine power to expand its influence. At the apex of this organization was the Director, the true power behind the curtain, who used the Cheery Bicycle Cleanup Corps as his own Praetorian Guard to eliminate anything that did not suit his whims. Rumour had it that he bathed in pools of wine and feasted upon mountains of meat. Display even the tiniest hint of defiance, and every secret you ever had—your first crush, your embarrassing hobbies, the time you pocketed a bit of change during your shift at the co-op cafeteria, the time you begged your ex on hands and knees to take you back—would be posted on every bulletin board on campus for the world to see. The mere sight of him was enough to send tough guys running and crying for mummy.

"He's a despot!" shuddered the society members.

Meno slapped the top of the kotatsu. "What a fellow, trampling on the private lives of others! Does he think he can get away with it? Even the most degenerate undergrad has a right to privacy!"

"The Director doesn't trust a soul. He possesses the secrets of every student, on and off campus."

"But why would he seize the clubroom? I don't understand."

"Apparently the Director's first love has a weakness for raw tofu skin. He founded this research society in order to find out why. Apparently they picked our room to take over by lottery."

"What an outrage! This cannot stand," Meno erupted. "I shall speak with him directly."

"Please, don't do anything rash!" pleaded the society members, but Meno was beyond hearing.

Meno was a simple man.

Downing his cup, he stomped up to the locked door and set about tearing down the plaque of the Raw Tofu Skin Research Society. Seeing this, the remaining society members hastily fled the kotatsu, their last remaining bastion, and scattered far and wide.

Before long a group of brawny men came up and surrounded Meno.

"What are you doing?"

"Piss off!" Meno glared back at them, but in a moment he was whisked off his feet, and chanting "Hey! Ho!", the men carried him off through the campus festivities.

Meno was brought to a dreary room on the top floor of the ancient building which housed the literature department. Two broad-chested men stood guarding the door.

Meno was sitting alone on a dusty sofa when a chubby man came huffing and puffing through the door.

"Oh, how hot it is," he muttered to himself, rattling the window and trying to slide it open, but he was so clumsy that he found it difficult to manage. "It won't open," he mumbled, taking a short breather before returning to his labour. As Meno looked on, the man finally managed to pull it open, and retrieving a handkerchief from his pocket wiped his face before turning to glance sheepishly at Meno. "I am the Director of the Library Police," he declared, in a shrill, unearthly voice. His skin was smooth and slick. "What were you planning to do with the plaque, eh? Speak!"

"I am going to rescue the Sophistry Debate Society from dissolution!"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. That room is to become the headquarters of the Raw Tofu Skin Research Society."

"I won't let you have your way!" Meno burst out. "I have heard that you use the students' secrets to bend them to your every whim. Perhaps the university president allows such lawlessness, but I will not!"

"I trust no one."

"To doubt the heart of your fellow man is the most shameful depravity of all!"

The Director shook his head condescendingly.

"You understand nothing. It is my presence which maintains order on campus, and allows you filthy peasants to live in harmony. It is because I possess all of your secrets that those who would do evil dare not stir. The campus is at peace. You could not hope to understand

how wearing it is to hold such responsibility!" He smiled sadly. "It is a lonely road, being a paragon of justice."

"As if an oily slimeball like you would know anything about justice!"

"Shut up!" The Director's face reddened, and spittle flew from his mouth. "Trust, love, friendship: speak what pretty words you like, but you could never understand the sorrow I bear. I, too, once trusted when I first stepped onto this campus. I was a bottomless fool who believed in love and friendship from the depths of my heart. But my friends were few... men looked down upon me, and women wouldn't even look my way at all. Yet that troubled me but little. I still had someone I counted as my best friend, and one woman who was kind to me. I would have gone to any lengths for them, because I saw them as friends."

Here the Director flushed crimson with the fury of his recollection. "Ah! And yet, they tossed me aside and began an illicit carnal relationship, all behind my back. They only ever intended to use me. From what I have heard, the bastard I once counted my friend even said, 'He's useful to keep around.' When I found out, I lost both my best friend and my first love in one fell swoop. So I made up my mind: from then on, I would never trust a soul again, and live on through this hellish solitude! It is from that sorrowful decision that I have made it to where I am. It is because I trust no one that I have surpassed all others and become Director of the Library Police!"

"I feel like you've made some very poor decisions as a human being!"

"A simpleton like you could never understand!"

The two glowered at one other.

Finally, the Director wiped the sweat from his glistening face and smiled. "However...I suppose it must be cruel, losing your clubroom so suddenly. Allow me to make a proposal. If you truly wish to save the members of the Sophistry Debate Society, I am sure you will accept my terms."

"Intriguing. Name them!"

"Tonight, to cap off the festivities, you will mount the stage which is being constructed on the campus grounds, and dance as an orchestra plays *The Beautiful Blue Danube*, clad only in your underpants!"

"Dance *The Beautiful Blue Danube*, in only my underpants! The disgrace! I had rather dance naked!"

"Say what you like," smirked the Director. "But are you willing to dance for your friends?"

Meno drew himself up and stared down the Director. "Of course I will dance. But—" He paused for a moment and dropped his gaze to the floor. "But if you truly wish to show me compassion, I ask that you give me a day's postponement. For you see, I must return to my hometown to attend my sister's wedding. I swear to return by tomorrow evening, and dance in my underpants for the finale."

"I suspected as much," the Director sneered. "No doubt you have no intention of keeping your promise. Preserving your self-dignity means more to you than your friends. You ought to admit it. I will not be betrayed again!"

"You're wrong!" Meno insisted earnestly. "I will fulfill my promise. Think about it. My big sister has finally found happiness. I have an obligation to celebrate her joy at her wedding. If you cannot bring yourself to trust me, then fine. I have a friend in the Sophistry Debate Society by the name of Serina. He has been a friend to me like no other since I entered college. Keep him here as a hostage. If I flee, have him dance in his underpants."

Hearing this, the Director sank into thought.

*This fellow seems sincere. Surely he will keep his promise, and prove that friendship yet lives. I have fallen into this hellish solitude, but if he keeps his promise, perhaps I will be able to trust again. Yes. Tomorrow evening, when he returns as he promised, I will greet him warmly with open arms, and absolve him of everything. And in doing so we will become friends. For the first time, I will have a friend in whom I can trust—*

As these thoughts went through his mind, a faint ray of warmth seemed to shine on the cold, dead heart buried within his plump physique. In truth, the Director of the Library Police was thoroughly sick of this hellish solitude.

"Very well. Bring this man Serina here," commanded the Director.

In a short time that peerless friend was brought into the room from the library, where he had been cramming Latin declensions into the folds of his grey matter. After Meno explained the whole situation, Serina nodded silently, his spectacles glinting. The two exchanged a firm handshake in that cold room. No more was needed between the two friends.

"Heed my words. If you run away, I will have your man dance in his underwear, and the Sophistry Debate Society will be disbanded. If you wish to avoid these things, prove to me this friendship of yours," the Director commanded.

"See if I don't!" Meno said, before sprinting out of the building. Beneath the clear, cold autumn sky, Meno dashed through the festivities and soon vanished into the distance.

Only the Director and Serina remained in the room. Serina sat on the sofa and crossed his long legs, regarding the Director coldly from behind his spectacles. The only sound in the still room was the soft burbling of the coffeemaker. The Director poured a cup and offered it to Serina. "All there is to do now is wait until tomorrow. Once he returns you will be freed. Just believe in the power of friendship, eh?"

"He's not coming back."

"Don't be absurd. He promised. Once his sister's marriage is done with, he will return."

"He doesn't have a sister," Serina said haughtily.

The Director was struck dumb. Then he screwed up his face in fury. "You mean, he *lied*? He turned his devoted friend over as a hostage and simply ran away? What of friendship? What of love? What of fidelity?"

"I fear that I have no answers to give you."

"EEEEEEEEEE!! How dare he! How dare he lie to me!" In his anger the Director trembled so violently that hot coffee spilled all over his hand. He let out a yelp, and furious at himself for embarrassing himself like this trembled even more uncontrollably. His paunch jiggled as he stalked around the room, spraying spit indiscriminately.

"He dares do this to me!? The Director of the storied Library Police does not know the meaning of impossible! I will find him, and force him to keep his promise, and then make him dance in a pair of underpants tomorrow night. And those underpants will be the most lurid shade of pink imaginable!"

Serina sat there calmly drinking coffee, unfazed by the Director's display of anger. "I would not expect it to be easy, making my best friend fulfill his oath."

Now let us turn our attention to said best friend.

Meno had dashed out of the campus, but there were really no pressing matters that he needed to attend to.

He boarded the Keihan train at Demachiyanagi Station and rode it down to Sanjō, though he didn't have any particular goal in mind. The sun had not yet set. He crossed the Sanjō Bridge into the bustling city center, then dashed into a manga café and caught his breath.



He wanted to read the latest installment of *Fist of the North Star*. In fact there was a mountain of other manga he wanted to read as well. "Come to think of it, I really do have a lot on my plate!" he murmured to no one in particular, and set about his task. As his eyes skimmed over the pages, he began to think that he might like to stay here for the rest of his life, eating potato crisps and reading every volume in this repository. And so he set out to do just that. Meno was a man who felt the sting of injustice more keenly than most, but he also tired of things more quickly than most.

He forgot to eat and sleep; forgot his fears for the future; forgot the sputtering out of his first love; forgot the peril which even now threatened the Sophistry Debate Society; forgot about his best friend, who would be forced to dance in his underwear should he not return by tomorrow evening; forgot about the passage of time.

When he looked up the hour hand on the clock had made a full rotation, and dawn was breaking.

Meno, who had sunken so deeply into his reading that the entire world looked as if it was in 2D, finally felt fatigue overtaking him. Putting down his book and began to doze off, but then he noticed that he was surrounded by several strange figures. They were the same four members of the Cheery Bicycle Cleanup Corps who had whisked him off to the Director the previous day. The Director had scoured his intel network to sniff out Meno's whereabouts, and dispatched them to bring him in.

"You're going to keep your promise," they told him. The instant he heard these words, the long-since forgotten oath he had sworn sprang into his mind.

*That Director is really trying to hold me to it*, Meno realized. Though he had no intention whatsoever of keeping his promise, Meno put on a feigned show of indignant fury. "I put my best friend up as collateral, and yet you still don't trust me! Your director is despicable! There's still plenty of time left until evening!"

Putting them off their guard with a long, mocking yawn, he abruptly hightailed it out of there as fast as he could.

Sprinting out of the manga café he ran down Kawaramachi Street, and without a moment's hesitation darted into an alley by the Kawaramachi OPA department store and threaded through the narrow back streets. Passing by the Kyōgoku Tōhō and Yachiyo-kan movie theaters he entered the Shinkyōgoku arcade. From behind he could hear the heavy footsteps of his brawny pursuers. If they lost Meno the wrath of the Director would fall upon them instead, and so they chased him as if their lives depended on it. Falling away

one moment only to come up on his tail the next, Meno and his four pursuers knocked down unaware passersby, the white-hot pursuit proceeding south down the arcade beneath the midday sun.

Coming out onto Shijō Avenue, Meno darted down the stairs at the foot of a building into an underground passage.

Though you wouldn't think it to look at him, Meno was the very picture of speed, pumping his lanky legs down the deserted corridor. When it came to love, or studies, or debts, he was always quick to abscond, if nothing else. He had spent his college days lazing around and letting his body atrophy, yet you would hardly think it to look at him now, sprinting past the Daimaru shop windows at astounding speed. The gap with his pursuers swiftly widened; two of them slammed into the thick pillars that lined the corridor and knocked themselves out cold. Feeling the pressure on their broad shoulders double, the remaining two huffed and puffed like bellows and ran on with looks of suffering.

As the corridor crossed from Kawaramachi into Karasuma, Meno spotted the ticket barriers of the Hankyū Karasuma Station in front of him. There were also stairs leading south to Shijō Station. Dawdling in Kyoto when the Director's grasp was closing in on him would be the height of folly; the best thing to do was to get out of Kyoto and lie low until the heat had died down. While he was considering whether to head southbound on the Karasuma subway line, or to take the Hankyū to Umeda in Osaka, Meno recalled that a friend from his high school days lived in an apartment in Jūsō in Osaka.

Off he went then, towards Osaka.

Purchasing a ticket for the Hankyū he walked through the barriers, just in time to hear roars of frustration behind him. Paying them no attention he strolled down the stairs towards the platform. As luck would have it, an express train was just pulling in. Thanking his lucky stars, Meno exhaled through his nose triumphantly and boarded the maroon-coloured train, then sinking down deep into his seat finally let out a sigh of relief.

The train glided off. The next stop was at Katsura.

Passing Sai'in, the tracks emerged onto the surface, and the train car was flooded with white daylight. Meno screwed up his face. His eyes were bloodshot from reading manga late into the night, and he had an intense headache, probably in part because he had had nothing to eat. After grabbing a bite he would barge into his friend's home, and then he would only have to wait until sundown for it all to be over.

*Serina, I have no doubt you'll make it through brilliantly!* Meno thought to himself.

As he nodded off, Meno thought back to his first meeting with Serina.

The two had hardly been close friends when they first joined the Sophistry Debate Society. It was only after the historic struggle known as the War of the Underpants that each acknowledged the other as a worthy opponent.

The Chief Underpants War was a form of endurance training conducted by a certain university club. It was a simple, inhumane competition: whoever was able to wear a single pair of underpants the longest would earn the title of Chief Underpants. The prestige which was bestowed by this title was close to nil, and even if you won this pointless battle people would only snigger and point at you behind your back. But for some men, the unprofitability of it all lit a fire in their souls. Long after the rest of their society fellows had dropped out, Serina and Meno kept their fierce clash going, until the stench caused such an outcry that in the name of public interest the rest of the society declared it a tie. In the history of the Sophistry Debate Society there had never been a tie, not that anyone in particular was complaining, but Meno and Serina felt it must be fate.

*This guy's special*, they each thought.

Whereas Menos was lackadaisical and prone to flights of fancy, Serina had a frighteningly keen intellect, as one might guess from the spectacles he wore. Meno was apt to fly into a passion, while Serina always remained cool and collected. The two seemed polar opposites, yet following the War of the Underpants, the two would often become infatuated with the most esoteric matters. When one began to let himself slip into the banal or mundane, the other would chastise him, and in this fashion the two built each other up on towards greater heights. This quest was all that linked them, this pursuit of things which everyone else thought utterly meaningless. Excepting the case of one particular woman they spurned relations of the flesh, and derived joy from meaningless training; by the older students they were mocked, by their classmates they were avoided, and by the younger students they were feared. And in time they came to boast of themselves: "Meno and Serina run this club!"

Meno reminisced fondly over those days with Serina as the train swayed over the tracks.

"I can't afford to keep the promise. Doing something so mundane would be disrespectful to Serina. I must not let him down!"

So Meno's resolve to escape only hardened.

At that moment, two men walked up to Meno.

As he looked up in surprise, the two grabbed one arm each and hauled him to his feet. Meno had thought he had lost them at Karasuma Station, but in fact they had managed to squeeze through just as the train doors were closing. "You're not getting away!" they growled, still winded from the chase.

*Mercy*, Meno thought.

The train finally arrived at Katsura Station. The three debarked onto the platform.

The train back to Kawaramachi was on the other side of the tracks. Meno reluctantly ascended the stairs amidst the throng, sandwiched between the two brutes like a captured alien. The men's hands were clamped as firmly as vises around his arms. In this fashion they approached the stairs that led down to the platform for the train to Kawaramachi. To Meno, that maroon train meant a one-way trip directly to a pair of pink underpants.

"I have to go to the bathroom!" he suddenly whimpered.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're just trying to escape!"

"I can't do it, I can't hold it anymore. I'm going to wet myself. I'm going to piss my pants!"

Every person on the platform turned to stare at the brazen fellow sandwiched in between two other men who had just screamed in broad daylight that he was going to piss himself. Their looks were cold with disapproval, and even the station workers poked their heads out from the staff room to see what was going on. Brawny as they might be, even his captors quailed. Reluctantly they let him go to the bathroom, but once set loose Meno was not going to make it easy to capture him a second time.

After making a show of walking towards the ticket barrier Meno abruptly sprinted towards the Umeda platform. His guards ran after him, but having anticipated this Meno suddenly turned and ran back up the stairs. In their haste to grab him the guards lost their balance and tumbled down the stairs. Meno gave up on going back to Umeda and instead made for the Arashiyama-bound train. The guards woozily crawled back up the stairs, but by the time they realized which way he had gone it was too late. As they stood on the platform shaking their fists at the departing train, Meno looked through the window and stuck his tongue out at them.

The train was filled with tourists on their way to see the autumn leaves.

The rain of the past few days had let up, and the boundless autumn sky was as clear as if it had been washed clean. The peak of the season was behind them, but Meno assumed that

the leaves still looked beautiful against the blue sky. Though he hadn't exactly planned on going on this impromptu leaf viewing excursion, even the Director's grasp didn't reach all the way to Arashiyama, or so he naively thought.

Moving with the crowd out of Arashiyama Station, Meno arrived on the bank of the Katsura River.

Tourists sat on seats in front of the tearooms that lined the river, resting their feet. Leaf aficionados streamed in both directions over the famed Togetsu Bridge, and buses loaded with sightseers rumbled up the road. Standing at the center of the bridge, the mountains loomed up on the other side of the Ōi River, so gorgeous and lush with crimson foliage that they didn't seem real. After leaning on the handrail and admiring the leaves for a while, Meno went around the souvenir shops; perused a music box museum and a museum dedicated to the late pop idol Misora Hibari; took a stroll past the Keifuku Arashiyama Station; and before he knew it he was wandering along a dim, narrow path through the cool confines of a bamboo forest. At the end of the path lay Nonomiya Shrine, which was reputed to bestow blessings of matchmaking: certainly not a shrine to be missed for any man escorting a lovely maiden!

As he walked along the path through the bamboo grove, Meno reflected on a love of his that had ended at this very location.

The romance had ended before it began. Her name was Suma, and in the scant two months she was a member of the Sophistry Debate Society, she had captured the hearts of just about every man in the society.

Her face was intelligent, her gaze penetrating. She was a chainsmoker with an insatiable appetite for raw tofu skin and cola; her little purse was always bulging with cola bottles and long Peace cigarettes, and she ate raw tofu skin no less than once every three days. She could often be found sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest, a cigarette dangling from her lips, swigging cola like she was drinking whisky straight from the bottle, and composing poems in the black leather notebook which she always carried with her, looking a bit like a witch inscribing curses. But behind that hard-boiled appearance she was surprisingly caring, whipping up a wok of her incomparably scrumptious *neko* fried rice whenever someone was feeling down. Needless to say, that feminine kindness sank its claws into the hearts of the artless youths of the society, who jostled to present her with offerings of tofu skin.

Meno had been among their number, with Serina right behind him. Neither guessed that the other had the same scheme in mind, for love is a game oft played in the dark. The two

continued their furtive, fruitless maneuvers to little avail, and late in the fall their respective plans to invite Suma to go leaf watching both unceremoniously fell flat.

The despondent Meno proposed to the equally despondent Serina that they go harass the couples who had descended on Arashiyama to view the leaves. "We could always rekindle our own relationship at Nonomiya Shrine," they were muttering unconvincingly to each other when, who should they see walking towards them on that narrow path through the bamboo but Suma, holding hands with a man. They passed by pretending not to notice her, but neither of them failed to perceive the adoring look on Suma's face as she gazed up at her companion. They both felt the same stabbing agony in their hearts, and looked away from each other at the bamboo with the same sour expressions.

The two silently proceeded to Nonomiya Shrine and, after bowing their heads before the offertory, furiously ripped off handfuls of red leaves from the surrounding trees in the shrine and stuffed them in their mouths, before simultaneously galloping off with anguished looks on their faces. Coming to the bank of the Katsura River they let out howls of sorrow. Serina removed his glasses and put them in his breast pocket, while Meno folded his arms. Then, each seeing that the other was in dire need of a kick in the pants, they threw (gentle) punches at each other until passing tourists dragged them apart. Henceforth, the two cut out romance from their lives altogether.

Following this incident, Suma left the Sophistry Debate Society, though it was unclear why she had ever been a member in the first place. Her lover was apparently something of a big shot in the rock music club on campus.

Having ended up once more in Arashiyama—the site of his heartbreak—after quite a strange series of events, Meno paid a visit to Nonomiya Shrine, stewing over that bitter memory. The revelation of that double heartbreak among the crimson leaves was, to Meno, the greatest regret of his life. At any rate it was over and done with, yet Meno still felt a sense of penitence towards Serina.

"Oh, Serina, my friend! How I regret that day!" he groaned. "But the fault was yours as well!"

Exhaustion, both physical and mental, suddenly came over Meno, and heedless of the eyes upon him he squatted down by the road before the entrance to Nonomiya Shrine. It was hardly surprising that he would be tired, being that he'd stayed up reading manga all night, not to mention having sprinted all the way from Kawaramachi Street to Karasuma Street. His eyes rolled up into the back of his head from hunger and sleep deprivation. He had planned to see the autumn leaves, then flee north from the JR Saga-Arashiyama Station, but he didn't have the strength to stay on his feet. Meno's sole desire now was to get home

as soon as he could and faceplant onto his grubby futon. He had half a mind to give up on his flight.

As Meno's chin drooped towards his chest, a young man wearing the garb of an Arashiyama rickshaw driver hailed Meno from his parked cart in front of the shrine. "You all right? Not feeling well?"

Meno shook his head.

"How about I give you a ride over to the station?" the rickshaw driver said kindly, without a moment's hesitation. Meno had never encountered such kindness on the streets of Kyoto before. Tears sprang to his eyes, but at the same he silently rejoiced at this stroke of luck, he readily assented and asked the driver to take him over to JR Saga-Arashiyama. Putting his fate into the hands of this burly driver he got into the rickshaw, and no sooner had he done so than he fell into a peaceful slumber.

He woke with a start some time later, vaguely feeling that he had been sleeping for quite a long time, only to see that the rickshaw was still racing along. The road seemed to be quite crowded, and to his horror he realized that he was in front of Kitano Tenmangū Shrine, far to the east of Arashiyama. Something wasn't right. While he slept he had been borne from Arashiyama towards campus. *It's a trap*, Meno thought in horror.

"Let me off!" he howled.

But the rickshaw driver ignored him and continued east down Imadegawa Street. Though the streets were quite level and smooth, the youth pulling the cart along was panting with exertion, having run quite a distance.

"The Director ordered me to bring you to him. If I fail, I'll be in a lot of trouble. Now sit down, unless you want to break your neck!"

"Never!"

Meno leaned out from the cart and screamed bloody murder. Distracted by him, the youthful cart driver failed to notice a bicycle whizzing down Onmae Street. Naturally, there was an almighty crash. The student on the bike flew into the air, grabbing onto the rickshaw driver, while Meno went rolling from the cart.

The rickshaw driver attempted to apprehend Meno, but as we have already seen, once Meno was loose he wouldn't easily be caught again. Shaking off his pursuer, he leapt into a bus, which happened to be headed for Ginkaku-ji. Going east down Imadegawa Street

would take him to the Karasuma Street intersection, and the Karasuma subway station. The subway would take him to Kyoto Station, where he could hop onto the JR line, or the Kintetsu Railway, or any of the myriad lines which would allow him to escape Kyoto and the Director's manifold traps.

At Imadegawa Karasuma he got off the bus and headed towards the subway entrance.

Just then, a passing woman grabbed onto his arm desperately and sobbed, "Please! I need your help!" Startled, Meno turned to see that she was a startlingly lovely young maiden, her eyes brimming with tears. Meno was certainly not the type of person who would become flustered simply because a girl grabbed his arm, but before he could ask what was going on his own eyes were already brimming with sympathy.

The girl told him that she was currently in the midst of a scavenger hunt known as the Kamo River Race put on by her school circle, and she needed to bring back her assigned item to the Kamo Delta. And it so happened that Meno fit the description of her item perfectly. According to the draconian law of the club, anyone who failed to retrieve their item would be punished severely and be forced into a state of near slavery for the next six months. It was a heartbreaking tale, and forgetting his own current predicament completely Meno resolved that if he could rescue this poor maiden simply by walking over to the Kamo Delta he would do it in a heartbeat.

Meno was a righteous man, when he wanted to be.

"Say no more! I'm your man!"

Grabbing her hand, he dashed north past the palace.

As he crossed the Kamo Bridge a triangular strip of land at the confluence of the Takano and Kamo Rivers came into view beneath the golden rays of the setting sun. This was the Kamo Delta, and Meno could see a group of students there carousing about. The recent rain had swollen the rivers, and the delta was shrunk to half its normal size. The students erupted in cheers when they spotted Meno and the girl running across the bridge.

When Meno arrived on the delta half a dozen people from this unnamed circle offered him drinks. He asked the girl what her item was.

"It's a person from the Sophistry Debate Society who has to return to campus by this evening to dance in pink underpants as the campus festival finale," she told him.



*Where in the world are you supposed to find someone like that?* Meno thought to himself, before realizing that the description fit him to a T. But wasn't that a little specific for a scavenger hunt? With a start he realized that all around people were staring at him with a strange gleam in their eyes. Even the girl who had pleaded so desperately for his aid with glistening tears was licking her lips and slowly backing him against the water.

"I never cared about the Kamo River Race!" she panted, greed blazing in her eyes. "There's 500 grand on your head!"

It had all been part of the Director's plan. Meno had slipped through his fingers in Shijō Kawaramachi, again at Katsura Station, and a third time at Arashiyama with the rickshaw driver. With evening drawing near and his plans no closer to fruition, the Director had fumed and fumed and finally put a 500,000 yen bounty on Meno's head. The announcement had spread like wildfire. Students short on tuition, circle members looking to fund their activities, wastrels who simply craved good eats: no sooner had the word gone out than the whole of Kyoto became a very dangerous place for Meno to be.

"Curse that Director, is there nothing he will not stoop to!?" Meno lamented. But just as his enemies were closing in around him to secure their payday, a voice rang out.

"Meno!"

He turned around. Suma, dear Suma, was standing on the opposite bank of the river, waving her arms.

"Swim!" she yelled.

But behold: the Kamo River which lay between them was swollen from the recent rain, its turgid, muddy waters groaning as they thundered along past the delta. Meno looked up to the heavens, and passionately implored the gods to whom he normally paid so little heed.

"O Gods! If I am taken back to campus before the sun goes down, I must dance clad in only a pair of underpants in order to prove some piffling friendship!" he cried out. But the only reply came from the hungry eyes of his enemies. As Suma had said, the only way out was to swim. With what cruelty do the gods amuse themselves! But Meno would not let these turbulent waters defeat him: he was determined to escape this conundrum. And so, he threw himself into the freezing autumn river.

By the time he reached the other side, soaked through and through, his pursuers were racing across the bridge.

"This way!" Suma shouted, racing off before him.

Chilled and shivering Meno followed along the embankment after her. They passed the temple of Demachi Benzaiten. As they went along, a passing student pointed at Meno and shouted, "There he is!" On Kawaramachi Street a motorbike roared to life, and came straight at Meno. Suma and Meno dashed into the Demachi shopping arcade. The motorbike came in hot on their trails. Just as it was about to run them down, Suma yanked Meno out of the way into a narrow side alley. Whisking him into a cramped apartment, she closed the door behind them and let out a sigh of relief. This was where she lived.

"Stay here 'til the heat dies down," she told him, shaking out her long hair. "It's too dangerous outside."

She closed the curtains, shutting out the golden late afternoon sunlight, then looked sharply at Meno.

"The whole campus is buzzing about you and the Library Police Director. The orchestra is already setting up on stage. I hear they're even taking bets, and most people are betting that you'll be there by sunset. Everyone's waiting for you, to prove your friendship."

"You think I'm going to keep my promise, too?"

When she heard his question Suma laughed. "People can say what they like, you just do what you believe in. Don't listen to them, just keep walking your own path. Me and Serina are the only ones who really understand you."

Her kind words nearly brought Meno to tears.

"The Director's a tough cookie, isn't he? He always was a weirdo," Suma remarked.

"You know him?"

"We were in the same class. I called and asked if he would just let it go, but he refused. Not too surprising, considering that he hates me."

Suma handed Meno a pink bath towel and told him to take off his drenched clothes. He removed his shirt, but Suma insisted that he take off his pants as well. Meno complied, wrapping the bath towel around himself. Suma threw his clothes in the washing machine. A loud grumble issued forth from Meno's stomach, so Suma set to work making her famous neko fried rice. Why was it called neko fried rice, and what was the secret to its scrumptious flavour? Suma refused to tell. Meno had once believed himself the only one to have eaten her home cooking, but in actuality everyone else, including Serina, had eaten it as well.

Sprinkling pepper on the rice, Meno's thoughts drifted back to the wild years. The neko fried rice was just as delicious as he remembered, but it was tinged with a slight, melancholy bitterness. Serina would probably have liked a bowl, he thought. After Suma had broken his heart, the lovelorn Serina had thrown himself into the single-minded pursuit of recreating neko fried rice. Meno had joined him in this pursuit, and now he remembered the many bowls (both delicious and not) of fried rice they had eaten together in that endeavour, reminiscing over the time he had once screeched at Serina, "*This is bland!*"

As Meno ate, he and Suma caught up with each other. Suma sang and wrote lyrics in the rock music club. She mentioned that she was still going out with the man whom Meno and Serina had seen at Arashiyama, the man who had been responsible for their bitter heartbreak.

"He's been having it rough lately too."

"Something going on?"

"Sort of," she replied vaguely, staring at Meno's lower half. "You really should change your underpants too. I've got a fresh pair right here—" Standing up, she started to rummage through a drawer of clothes.

That same moment, Meno heard the sound of a car pulling up in front of the apartment. The footsteps of many people ascending the spiral staircase thundered raucously through the building. *Can you keep it down?* Meno thought to himself, but then Suma held up a pair of pink underpants in front of his eyes, and it all made sense. "Argh!" he groaned, raising his eyes to the ceiling.

The footsteps drew closer, and now he could hear the men shouting.

"There's no getting out of this one," Suma remarked.

"Yet another blunder! How I loathe myself!"

He glared at Suma, who glared right back at him.

"The Director told me that if I sheltered you he'd report my boyfriend's plagiarism. I'm sorry." She smiled faintly as the door burst open.

Who should come charging in but his friends from the Sophistry Debate Society. "Lovely to see you!" they greeted Suma, before all at once flinging themselves upon Meno. Yesterday's

friends are today's enemies, and in no time at all they had bundled him out of Suma's apartment and stuffed him into the waiting car.

"If you don't fulfill your promise, the society is toast! And we were told that if we don't bring you in, the story of our first loves will be published for all to see! Sheer insult to injury. We're in a bind!"

"Fulfill your promise, we urge you! Take responsibility for your words!"

"You will be stripped naked, just as agreed. Onwards to campus!"

The car sped off.

Because Meno wouldn't stop struggling, the interior of the car was a confused melee of hands and feet. Faces were smashed into windows and nosebleeds flowed; throats were choked and faces swelled up purple like eggplants; eyeglasses were smashed, and their owners cried like babies. Hellish scenes played out in the light of the setting sun, yet the car drove inexorably forward. Over the Kamo Bridge they went, down Imadegawa Street, drawing ever nearer to campus.

Pinned down in the back seat by three others, Meno shed manly tears.

*It's all over*, he thought, resigning himself to his fate.

*I ran so long, despite my drooping eyelids, despite my rumbling belly. It's because of who I am that I was able to come so far. But all of my efforts were for naught. Look at me now. Ere the sun sets I will be thrown before the Director, and everyone will be moved at how I kept my promise. They will praise it as true friendship. The thought of it makes my skin crawl. Serina will smile, I don't doubt. I suppose you think yourself a shining paragon of friendship, he will sneer. Was ours only ever such a sniveling relationship? he will lament. What good is ordinary friendship to us, to us, to we who declared, Meno and Serina run this club! Serina, you believed that I wouldn't keep my promise, that I wouldn't satisfy myself with being ordinary. That's why you stepped up and agreed to take my place. You always believed in me. And I always met your expectations. What splendid friends we were. Ah, but now, how shall I escape this quandary? I cannot meet his expectations. Oh, Serina, forgive me. Now that it has come to this, I will boldly fulfill my promise. In doing so I will establish that proof of friendship and be showered with praise. How the ladies will shriek my name, how the love letters will come pouring in. Perhaps the Director will even be so moved that he will release me from my bond of dancing in my underpants. All will be satisfied. That accursed plagiarist of a boyfriend will be saved, and Suma will be thankful. The Sophistry Debate Society will escape its disbandment. By betraying Serina's*

*expectations and displaying a humdrum kind of friendship, everything will be wrapped up without a fuss. Yes, that would be for the best—*

Facing the groaning Meno, one of the society members said, "Have you no conception of friendship? Side by side we faced the stones cast by the world, and yet here you are perfectly willing to let your sophists-in-arms suffer!"

"You think that's friendship!?" Meno shouted with rage. "You only pity yourself. If you consider yourself a true friend, be silent and witness me!"

"Enough with your sophistry!"

"And you call yourself a member of the Sophistry Debate Society!"

Shouts filled the car as it approached the Hyakumanben crossing.

Meno clenched his teeth. The sun would set soon. If he managed to hold out a little longer, he just might be able to buy himself a little more time. He wasn't going to let these lily-livered lumps have their way. Summoning one last spurt of energy, he threw off his erstwhile friends.

"Just give it up already!"

"Would it really be so bad dancing in your underwear?"

"Well, I suppose it probably would."

His friends berated him, but with the little space he had earned Meno thrust his hand into his pants.

"What new depravity is this!" As they recoiled from him, Meno held out high before their eyes a jar of ground pepper. He had just managed to sneak it into his crotch before he was set upon in Suma's apartment.

"Agh! So that's why your package was bulging!" one of them screamed, just as Meno opened the jar and emptied its contents into the car. Gagging, the driver brought the car to a screeching halt, whereupon Meno flung the door open and tumbled out into the street at the northwest corner of the intersection.

"Run, Meno!" he exhorted himself.

He dashed off, nearly naked, clad only in his underpants and a pink bath towel that flapped around his neck like a scarf. Pachinko parlours blazed brightly in the evening gloom,

illuminating the naked form of the pervert that gallantly ran past. But Meno no longer cared about appearances. The Sophistry Debate Society had left the car and were now pursuing him, hacking and coughing. Passersby shrieked. A passing patrol car flashed its lights on and blared, "Shimogamo Police! Stop right there!" Hearing this, Meno for some reason shouted the phrase, "Freedom of speech! Freedom of speech!" running through the intersection and fleeing towards the engineering school.

The campus clock tower thrust into the twilight sky that lay over campus, gleaming in the last rays of daylight. The sun had not yet set. In his haste, Meno ran bang-on into someone who was in the midst of painting a billboard. A paint can balanced at the top of a ladder toppled over, staining Meno's white underpants pink. Behind him the Sophistry Debate Society gave chase, their faces contorted and demonic; before him, the Cheery Bicycle Corps stood blocking his way, eager for a rematch. Meno immediately swung around and sprinted off towards the economics building. In hot pursuit of the swift-footed fugitive, one of the society members yelled, "You're already down to your skivvies! It's perfect! Why don't you just dance!"

The others joined in.

"What are you running away for?"

"You're finished, kaput. You'll never make it!"

"Meno! Curse you, you loon!"

With this abuse of torrent being hurled from behind, Meno ran on through campus.

A younger acquaintance of Meno's who had been waiting at the stage for Meno to arrive ran towards him. Overtaking the out-of-breath pursuers, he soon caught up with Meno. Keeping pace just behind Meno as they passed between the towering engineering buildings, he shouted, "Meno! What are you doing here?"

"Witness me!"

"But you won't make it. The sun is going down. You're out of time. "I knew you were that kind of person. You're awful. Serina knew, he never counted on you to come. He was cool and collected even when they led him to the stage. The Director teased him something horrible, and yet all he would say was, *Meno isn't coming—*"

"That's why I'm running. Serina understands that. He understands *me*. Ours is a trust that looks like mistrust, a friendship that doesn't look like friendship."

"That's just sophistry! There's no such kind of friendship!"

"I tell you, there is. Not all friendships conform to stifled definitions. Not all friendships require you to sing sickly sweet paeans to mutual aid, or hold each other tight in mutual embraces. I reject such humiliating friendship! The friendship between Serina and me is different. The relationship we have built is subtle and esoteric, untrammelled by prosaic expectations. It is not like baking cookies!"

Dashing inside the clock tower Meno began to climb the stairs. His friend lunged at him from behind, and the two rolled down the steps into the corridor, where his pursuers piled on top of him. Struggling even more fiercely, Meno continued to shout.

"To be faithful or not to be: that is not the question. Nor is it to trust, or not to trust. What matters it whether we inconvenience one another? Whether we betray each other, or help each other is of no consequence. All that matters is that we set our sights on the same goals. And the reason for that, the reason that is so, is that our friendship is incomparable!"

The hands that pinned Meno down suddenly slackened their grip, and his surroundings became quiet.

Meno sucked in a huge breath and looked around to see his pursuers all hunched over and sobbing. They'd realized that they wouldn't make it to the stage in time. The Director of the Library Police would scowl his fleshy scowl and bring down the hammer of fury upon them for failing to retrieve Meno.

"We're finished! We're all done for!" they howled, tears streaming down their faces.

The second day of the campus festival was coming to an end. The food stalls were packing up, and the students that aimlessly milled about assumed that the odd fellow running about clad only in his briefs and a pink bath towel was some sort of butoh dance performance or other. True, it was a performance. For the orchestra arrayed around the stage had already begun to tune up, readying to play a rendition of *The Beautiful Blue Danube* as they waited for the star of the show to arrive.

In the green room by the stage, Serina sat on the bench with a blue robe draped over his shoulders like a boxer waiting for the opening bell. He breathed calmly as he awaited the impending sunset. Crack troops from the Cheery Bicycle Corps were posted around him to prevent his escape, but he was so sanguine that their presence was hardly needed.

The Director's jowls began to quiver from rage at having allowed Meno to slip through his fingers. Yet he was intrigued by this odd man, Serina Yūichi, who was being forced into

dancing in a pair of pink underpants yet remained so unperturbed. Standing beside him, the Director inquired, "How can you people put so little faith in each other? From what I have seen I can hardly believe that you trust one another. You are not faithful to your promises, you have no intention of helping each other. How can you call this friendship?"

"This is just another form of friendship."

"But what is the point?"

"I do not know. But even so, I have no intention of acting out the insipid friendship that you so desire."

"Even if you must dance in pink underpants?"

"Just so."

"You two truly astound me," said the Director, unmoving, murmuring almost as if to himself, "Once, I too had friends."

"They were in the same class as me. We'd known each other since our first year. I gave everything for them. When he had to practice for a show I would take lecture notes for him; when his guitar was broken I lent him money; when he was hungry I fed him. And I gave even more to her. No matter how selfish her demands, I listened. I praised her oddball poems to the heavens; I provided her with raw tofu skin, cola, smokes. I must have bought a third of all the long Peace cigarettes she's smoked in her life. I did it because I was scared of losing my friendship. It made me happy that they counted on me."

Serina squinted knowingly from behind his spectacles at the Director. In his eyes there was a glimmer of sympathy.

"But they were using me, no more. They betrayed my friendship. In the end what did I gain for all my lavish offerings? I will tell you: the sorrow of losing both my best friend and my first love at the same time, and the memory of her delicious fried rice!"

"I like delicious fried rice," Serina murmured quietly.

The Director shook his head. "But the *memory* of fried rice is not at all a fair trade. How worthless friends are—"

"HA!" Serina suddenly shouted.

The Director jumped and took a step back, his belly wobbling.



"Is that what you regard as friendship!?" Serina snarled.

"Don't shout like that, you startled me!"

"Pitiful fool!" Serina gazed into the azure sky. "You pitiful fool!"

The Director could say nothing.

After a moment Serina breathed out quietly and adjusted his glasses, then flung the blue robe draped around his shoulders into the sky. He stood up, clad only in a pair of underpants, dyed an outrageous shade of pink.

"Gentlemen: it is sunset," he declared.

The arrival of Serina Yūichi onto the stage was accompanied by a shower of boos from the crowd, many of whom were young ladies. As Serina whirled madly to the tune of *The Beautiful Blue Danube*, a shadow crept into the square. The figure was so grotesque that the assembled students recoiled in horror, before realizing that it was dressed in exactly the same fashion as the one that twirled upon the stage. Nearby women shrieked and fled as the figure advanced wordlessly towards the stage, like a pink-gartered Moses parting the Red Sea. Realizing that Meno had blithely showed up after leaving his promise unfulfilled, some of the crowd hurled insults at him.

"How dare you show yourself here!"

"Oathbreaker!"

Meno made his way onto the stage and walked up to Serina.

"Hit me, Serina," he suddenly exclaimed. "Just don't hit me too hard. For a moment during my flight, I spinelessly thought to myself that it would be easier to just keep my promise. If you do not hit me, I will never be worthy to dance alongside you."

Serina hit Meno, restraining his hand just a little. Then he said this.

"Meno. Hit me. Hit me about as hard as I just hit you. I knew that you would not come, but I spinelessly thought to myself how I would rather not dance in a pair of pink underpants. This is the proof that my spirit is still weak. If you do not hit me, I cannot dance with you."

Meno hit Serina, restraining his hand just a little.

"Thank you, my friend."

The two lined up and began to prance madly. They no longer had to dance, yet they danced just the same. Groans of disgust echoed throughout the square as those two scrawny bodies squirmed obscenely on stage, clad only in pink underpants.

From the side of the stage the Director of the Library Police watched them intensely, but before long he approached them quietly, and with his cheeks flaming red spoke thus.

"I finally understand what it is you two seek to do. Friendship is a far more unfathomable thing than ever I had imagined; it could never be constrained by the ordinary. But then, I had never known a true friend before. Hence, I have a request for you. Would you admit me to your number?"

And the Director threw off his clothes, to reveal that he, too, was wearing pink underpants.

Thus was a new dance troupe born, dubbed the Pink Briefs. But presented with their sultry moves, the crowd neither cheered nor applauded, instead moving towards the exit in unison like an ebbing tide. The dark veil of night came down, and the cold November wind whistled through the emptied venue. Those three men, linked by the bonds of friendship, danced on silently, elegantly beneath the spotlights to the lilting tune of *The Beautiful Blue Danube*, played by a now rather nonplussed orchestra.

Suma eventually appeared on the scene. She walked directly up to the stage and thrust out three bath towels at them.

"How about you cut that out now?" she said.

Only then did a scarlet blush rise to the heroes' cheeks.

# Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees

*Original story by Sakaguchi Angō (1906-1955)*

*A fantastical portrayal of a terrifying beauty capable of overpowering even the most brutal bandit.*

There are many places in Kyoto famous for their cherry trees.

The tunnel of cherry trees at Keage Incline is well known, and during cherry blossom season Maruyama Park becomes a sea of humanity. One hardly need mention the cherry willows at Heian Jingū which Tanizaki Junichirō wrote of in *The Makioka Sisters*. The trees which line the Kamo River near the Kamo Bridge are a popular spot for students to throw cherry blossom viewing parties.

Let us consider the cherry trees of the Philosopher's Walk.

The Philosopher's Walk is a path lined with trees which follows the canals of Lake Biwa from Nanzenji to Ginkakuji. It is so named because long ago, there lived nearby a distinguished professor who would amble along here deep in thought. Of course, it may not necessarily be the case that the thoughts going through the professor's head were strictly about philosophy. Even a professor will from time to time give himself to licentious fantasies, or be prompted by the rumblings of an empty stomach to ponder what is for dinner.

But what if that professor was strolling along the Philosopher's Walk in the pre-dawn hours of spring? All is still under the blossoming cherry trees; beneath the unbroken canopy of flowers not a sound can be heard. As he passed through that scene, perhaps the distinguished professor would forget all thoughts of philosophy and lust and his empty stomach, and quicken his steps, trembling in fear.

Remove humans from beneath the cherry trees, and the scene becomes a frightening one.

People gather beneath the boughs of the cherry trees, thoughtlessly cry out, "How beautiful! How beautiful!", hold banquets and leave the surroundings strewn with the remnants of their festivities. Perhaps this is because they cannot bear the terror of a forest of cherry trees without humans. By eating delicious foods and drinking until they vomit, they can forget that terror.

When the cherry trees on the Philosopher's Walk bloom, droves of people come to see the flowers, the gaiety rivalling that of the Gion Festival. Spectators munching on *yatsushashi* throng the Philosopher's Walk, the scent of cinnamon filling the air as they cry out joyously at the sight of innumerable cherry blossom petals floating down through the air. At night young couples walk hand in hand, through the white petals falling through the darkness. Not for a moment til the break of dawn are the cherry trees devoid of human presence. It is as if the sightseers gather in their multitudes to hide away the terror of that cold, silent forest of cherry trees.

\*

Along the Philosopher's Walk is a large concrete apartment building.

It was erected about thirty years ago; according to some it still retains the smell of the student protests of that earlier age, and is well known for bearing an aura of gloom. There are always birds perching on the rooftop water tank; clothes which more resembled old rags dangling from drying racks which protrude from the windows; and at night, the bare lightbulbs that flicker in the hallways only make the scene more eerie. The massive ginkgo tree that towered beside it casts the building in shadow. In autumn, the residents of the building crawl around on their hands and knees under the tree, gathering up wrinkled orange ginkgo nuts, and eat them until they make themselves sick. On top of its creepy appearance, there always seemed to be something rotting in it.

In the room adjacent to the front entrance, there lived a fellow whose expression was always as gloomy as the building in which he resided. He had lived there for nearly three years, ever since he learned about the place from the university co-op association.

He was just another college ne'er-do-well, all but swept aside and forgotten by the world. He would attend classes only occasionally, and study only as the mood struck him; the money which he earned working at a small bookstore on Shirakawa Street would disappear almost as soon as he had earned it.

The man enjoyed buying anime DVDs and old books, as well as cheap odds and ends from the flea market. In the three years that he had lived there, the man had filled his 4½ tatami room with shining DVDs, smudged books with difficult titles, and unsettling bits and bobs. Surrounding himself with these things was the man's life, the man's dream, the man's everything. There was a large ceramic frog whose wide open mouth was stuffed with old *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman* DVDs, and behind a heavy curtain was a large television.

What pleased the man more than anything else was sitting in his room for days on end and writing novels. He had always written good prose, but when it came to writing full novels it was a different story, and the tales which he produced were always dreadfully dull. None of his friends thought that his writing was interesting, and Saitō Shūtarō, whom he revered as his mentor, mocked him as talentless, but the man did not give up. The reason was that when he sat in the midst of his odd collection of belongings, hushed his breathing, and let the words flow from his pen, he would occasionally be overcome by an almost overpowering happiness. He always wished that those moments could go on forever.

Neither was there a shortage of things for him to write about.

"It feels like I've got the whole world in the palm of my hand," he once said to his mahjong friends.

Some might have called it a solitary life, but to him it was a precious existence he wouldn't have traded for anything. Wherever he looked in his room, there was nothing he saw that wasn't worth talking about, there was nothing that wasn't beautiful. It was a universe unto itself. In order to preserve this little universe, the man always cooked his own meals to save on eating out, and rather than paying for a cell phone made do with the pink pay phone by the entrance to the building.

The man thought nothing of going a week without speaking to a solitary soul, but even he was loath to go see the cherry blossoms at dawn alone.

The window of his room faced out onto the Philosopher's Walk, and he needed only open it to see the rows of cherry trees. In spring he would sometimes open the window for fresh air, only to have a flurry of flower petals dance on the wind into his room. During this season, he avoided looking out his window at times of day when there were few people about.

He had acquired this dislike of blossoming cherry trees during the spring of his freshman year.

One day in April, he woke up early in the morning, goosebumps on his skin. The room was still bare as he had only just moved in. Not wanting to go back to sleep, he decided to take a walk to Nanzenji. And so he left the apartment and strolled down the Philosopher's Walk, where the cherry trees were in full bloom.

Being in the shadow of Higashiyama, the Philosopher's Walk was still dark, and there was no one else on the path. The air was chilly and taut, and in front of the man, delicate,

snow-white blossoms continued on as far as the eye could see. As he went along, a strange feeling came over him. He stopped and turned around, only to find that the cherry blossoms stretched on endlessly behind him as well. The unnerving beauty of those innumerable petals was almost like the clashing of a cymbal in the man's mind. But in reality, all was silent, as if time itself had stopped. Standing there unmoving, the man stared fixedly at the row of cherry trees. All of a sudden, he became terribly afraid. Unable to bear being beneath those trees a moment longer, he fled the Philosopher's Walk out onto Shirakawa Street.

From then on, the man would occasionally think about those blossoming cherry trees.

What had that strange feeling been? It was not that he rued the falling blossoms, yet being under flowering cherry trees by himself made the man feel strange and uncomfortable. He thought nothing of going to flower viewing parties. What made him afraid were those seemingly frozen, glorious cherry trees he had seen that morning all alone.

"Maybe it's a repressed childhood memory," the man mused, though he never came up with a satisfactory explanation.

Perhaps one day he would go sit under the blossoming cherry trees and think about this mystery. He often thought about solving the mystery of the cause of that uncomfortable feeling, but in truth he didn't really want to find out.

And so the spring of the man's fourth year in college came around.

\*

One evening, the man picked up his pen to write a novel.

When next he looked up from the page, the faint light of dawn shone through the gaps between his dusty blinds. He pulled up the blinds and cracked open the window, letting cold air come rushing in. The cherry trees along the Philosopher's Walk were in full bloom. He could have gone to sleep again, but suddenly the man thought of how he had been avoiding the blossoming cherry trees all this time. He rarely left his bed this early in the morning, but if he let this chance slip away, another year would pass without him seeing the cherry blossoms alone. This thought vexed him for some reason, and so he made up his mind to go out.

As might be expected, the Philosopher's Walk was devoid of people at this hour; the only presence was that of the silent cherry blossoms. That uncomfortable feeling welled up

again, but the man continued to walk resolutely through that tunnel of flowers. Eventually he fancied that he could hear a great wailing sound coming from right by his ear that grew until it was almost too much to bear. It felt as though no matter how far he walked, the cherry trees continued on forever.

That was when he met her.

She was wrapped in a pure white coat, sitting on a stone bench at the edge of the canal. Her swan-like neck was bent down, her head drooping, and she looked as if she were asleep.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

The woman gave a small moan. She seemed to be drunk. Though it was spring, it was still quite cold. If she were to fall asleep here, she might even die. It was fortunate that she had survived so far.

"If you fall asleep here, you're going to die."

"I'm fine. Leave me alone," she said, looking up at him. The man was taken aback. Perhaps it was only because they were surrounded by the unsettling whiteness of the cherry blossoms, but the woman's face was so perfectly smooth that she looked almost like a porcelain doll. "Leave me alone," she slurred, her eyes unfocused, before her head drooped down again. The man looked at the white nape of her neck.

Even more determined now not to give up, the man continued to insist, until at last he got the woman to stand. She didn't seem capable of walking on her own, so the man lifted her onto his back and began to walk. Her limp body weighed on his back, and walking back up the Philosopher's Walk to his apartment was no easy task. Ordinarily the man wasn't the type of person who would do such a thing, but for some reason he felt strangely compelled.

The woman obediently came into the apartment and drank tea in the man's room. She couldn't be bothered enough to refuse. Her black hair was tangled, but she couldn't be bothered enough to fix that, either. Warming his hands by the heater, the man stared at the woman. She was looking around wordlessly at the refuse that was piled up around the room. Reaching out and taking a Shigaraki-ware ceramic tanuki and placing it in her lap, she began to stroke it, looking strangely pleased.

After a while, the woman slumped down to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut and fell asleep.

The man watched her sleeping visage for a time. Having woken up in the middle of the night, he too began to feel drowsiness overtake him, and still leaning against the wall, dozed off.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was high in the sky, and the woman had vanished as if she had never been there at all.

\*

The one person whom the man respected was Saitō Shūtarō, who lived in the neighbouring wooden apartment building. He had met Saitō by chance at a mahjong tournament to which he had been invited by an acquaintance from his university department.

He had never come across such an eccentric person in his life. Saitō was the very epitome of a college ne'er-do-well. His tongue was a venomous barb, and there was hardly a being in this world whom he did not disdain. Because the man was such a meek, ordinary human being, he looked up to Saitō, and often wished to be more like him. But such a demon was Saitō that when he learned how the man respected him, he only mocked him all the more.

As they played mahjong late into the night, Saitō's tongue grew ever more venomous.

Glaring at the man, Saitō said, "You claim to respect me. What exactly is it that you hope to gain by saying so? There's nothing so dull as a person who respects someone. Keep your distance from me. And stop being misled by false idols which may be smashed by a hammer!"

The man scribbled down each of Saitō's words assiduously. Though this was all just a ripoff of Nietzsche, the fact that it was Saitō who was quoting these words gave them tremendous importance in the man's mind.

Saitō was famous for writing an ongoing work which he had never allowed anyone to read. The man also longed to read it, but Saitō would never allow this. From fragments of Saitō's sayings the man reconstructed in his mind this phantom epic, and though he had never read a word of it was awestruck all the same. The reason the man wrote his novels so fastidiously was that he believed by undergoing this arduous training he could one day become like Saitō Shūtarō, the only lodestar the man had ever had in his life.



Each time he finished a novel, the man would call upon Saitō Shūtarō's boarding house and beg him to read it. The bilious Saito was always loath to agree, and the man would have to bow and scrape and offer gifts of food and tobacco before he would say yes. As he read he would slash the manuscript to pieces with a red pen before returning it. Seeing this the man would fall into a nearly suicidal despondency, but oddly enough he actually enjoyed that distress, seeing it as a noble kind of suffering. Reviewing the manuscript in his own room would have been too painful, so he would put it in his bag and go out to a cafe, or the campus library, and spend around half a day inscribing each of Saitō's crimson pearls of wisdom into his brain. The man considered it a form of training.

One Sunday afternoon, around the time when the blossoms had largely fallen from the cherry trees, the man was sitting in a cafe on Shirakawa Street, glaring at a manuscript which he had received back from Saitō.

A woman sat down at the table beside him. He glanced over, and realized that it was the same woman he had met underneath the cherry blossoms. She was with a man who appeared to be her boyfriend, but their conversation was listless, and she frequently yawned with boredom. The man assumed that she didn't remember him. But to his surprise, when she finally noticed him she stood up and walked over.

"Mind if I join you?"

She sat down across from him. The man glanced over at her boyfriend only to see that he was glaring at him balefully. Quailing, the man waited just long enough for her to thank him for helping her, then urged her to quickly return to her table. But she just pursed her lips and refused to get up. Peering at the manuscript on the table, her face lit up. "Is this a novel?" she asked. "I love reading novels!"

Her eyes scanned the page, and after a moment she pointed to a sentence which Saitō Shūtarō had bisected in red ink. "Why would you delete this? I think it's good," she declared.

"You do?"

The man was taken aback. This was the first time anyone had complimented his writing.

"These corrections are terrible. They take out all the good parts."

Picking up a pen which lay on the table, she drew a big X over Saitō Shūtarō's long-winded criticisms, laughing breezily once she was done.

"Hey!" the woman's boyfriend called threateningly, tired of waiting.

"Okay, okay," said the woman, getting up and returning to her table. Eventually the couple left the cafe, the woman's boyfriend almost pushing her out the door. But after she was gone, the man couldn't get the ring of her laughter out of his head.

After that, the man would occasionally see her around campus, or out and about in town.

She was usually with someone else, so they rarely spoke to one another. But every time she noticed him, the woman would always nod her head and smile. And each time after he nodded back and they had passed each other by, the man would wonder what he would do if he could never see her face again. Before he knew it, he'd begun to look forward to each meeting. Each time they met, her expression seemed a little kinder, though he told himself it was his imagination. The man refused to allow himself to have hope for things such as romance.

One day after class, he worked his shift at the bookstore on Shirakawa Street. After organizing the receipts he closed up shop, and by the time he reached the path toward Ginkakuji it was late at night. A dark rain was falling, and the reflections of the streetlights glimmered on the slick asphalt. There was no one around. Passing the Ginkakuji police box, he arrived at the Philosopher's Walk, where all was still.

Suddenly, in the midst of the sound of the rain pelting down on his umbrella, he heard the voices of a man and a woman.

A lone streetlight stood in front of him, illuminating the new leaves on the cherry trees. Beneath it stood a couple facing each other, having a furious row, with the man holding an umbrella over the woman. From the looks of it he was ready to cry, while the woman only stared at the rain that fell into the canal, seemingly bored. Her long, rain-dampened hair was plastered to her white porcelain cheeks. The man realized that it was her.

Feeling uncomfortable, the man hid his face under his umbrella and quickened his steps.

A few steps after he had passed them, he heard the woman's footsteps running towards him. He turned around, just in time to see her jumping underneath his umbrella, soaked.

After that, the other man who had been arguing with the woman approached, and as to what happened after the man wasn't entirely too sure. After exchanging just a few words, he abruptly found himself shoving the other man into the canal. His opponent stood there

in the dark water, looking utterly lost. The petals which still floated in the canal clung to his body, making him look like a beast made of cherry blossoms.

The woman took the man's hand and ran off.

The two dashed through the rain all the way to the man's apartment, which towered up in the darkness like a fortress. Running into the entranceway they stifled their breathing, looking into each other's faces beneath the lightbulb, listening to the rain that fell outside. There was no sign of pursuit. With her hair drenched by the rain, there was a childlike innocence to the woman. The man stared at her transfixed, and when she noticed him she stared back, her own eyes filled with surprise.

After a moment she took out a handkerchief and wiped the man's face off, unable to hold back her giggling.

\*

The man and the woman began to live with each other at the end of the Gion Festival, a happening which sent shockwaves through his very small circle of friends.

It had come completely out of the blue, and it all seemed so odd. When you considered the certainty with which they knew he had lived his life, it just didn't make any sense. *At least my life is more meaningful than his*, they had all been sure, and the shock and dismay which they now felt was considerable. The man's miraculous comeback shook them to their core.

"This cannot stand!" some of them even went so far as to declare. "It violates the laws of thermodynamics!"

"You don't think he kidnapped her, do you?"

Though they all were very concerned, their worries were apparently unfounded.

They interrogated the man thoroughly, trying to discover the truth behind this miracle.

But no matter how they pried, they were unable to extract a clear answer from him. This was hardly surprising, for the man himself had no idea how this state of affairs had come about. Of course, he believed himself to be smitten with her, and whenever he saw her sitting in his room reading the things he had written, he was filled with a contentment he had never felt before. But as to why she would content herself with this, the man was unsure. All he was sure of was that he was in love with her.

The woman would whisper as she embraced him, "Your dream will come true. You're going to become a famous novelist."

Whenever he heard those words, an indescribable feeling would come over him. *So this is what it's like to feel confident in yourself*, the man marveled. *Does Saitō Shūtarō always walk around feeling like this?* It felt like for the first time in his life he'd met someone who believed in him. Because of that, the thought of losing her terrified him.

When they first began to live together, the man thought of moving. But the woman told him there was no need for that yet. Instead, the man sold all of his anime DVDs. This gave him enough money to buy an air conditioner, as well as making his room just a little more spacious. The man also quit smoking.

That summer he watched her living comfortably in his room, hardly daring to believe she was real. Her voice was so soft, so enchanting. Her movements were so elegant that the man was bewitched. Whenever he picked up one of the many objects which were crammed in his room, she would listen raptly, her eyes sparkling. The man wished that moments like that would last forever.

But even he was dimly aware that her actions were driven by a resolute purpose. What that purpose was he did not know, but it was frighteningly firm, and he was just only conscious of the fact that no matter what he did it he could not change it. Whenever he bumped up against this immovable bedrock he would feel as though he had awakened from a dream, and in those moments the woman's face looked like that of a complete stranger.

At the end of August, the man and the woman had a huge fight.

It was about Saitō Shūtarō.

The man still held Saitō Shūtarō in high esteem, and even after he had the woman to compliment his novels, it remained his custom whenever he wrote something to first go to see Saitō to get his opinion. This displeased the woman. She was of the opinion that Saitō only ruined everything that was good about the man's writing. She also did not like how Saitō would haughtily belittle him. But the man refused to hear a word against Saitō, which infuriated the woman more and more. She began to talk in an obnoxiously polite tone like she was a saleswoman dealing with an annoying customer, and all the emotion vanished from her face. Not only did she badmouth Saitō, but she began to speak ill of his other friends as well. The blood rushed to his head, and he stormed out of the apartment.

As luck would have it, that night he was planning to attend the Ichijōji Cup, a mahjong tournament that was being held at an acquaintance's residence. His friends were all taken aback when he showed up, looking surlier than they had ever seen him. "Quite the spat," said Saitō Shūtarō, when he arrived fashionably late. "I could hear you two going at it from my apartment."

His friends yawned when they heard that, not pursuing the matter any further.

"Just a lovers' quarrel, then?"

"Bo-ring."

The man smiled bitterly. But after passing the night there, he began to feel a terrible sense of unease.

As he rode his bike back from Ichijōji under the summer sun, he felt a pressing need to hurry. He returned to his apartment building covered in sweat and went inside, only to find the door to his room thrown wide open. When he looked inside he was rooted to the spot with shock.

The woman was sitting inside.

Dazzling light filled the room. The windowblinds were gone, and the sunlight of late summer lanced directly into the room. The blinds weren't the only things that were missing. The carved wooden decorations, the ceramic pottery, the glasswork, the artwork, most of his old books—everything that he had spent the last three years painstakingly accumulating was gone. Without that collection, his room was as stark and dreary as a jail cell. The woman sat there in that bare room leaning up against his empty bookshelves, lazily fanning herself with a round *uchiwa*. He could see beads of sweat on her collarbone. The woman smiled at him as he stood there wordlessly, and told him, "I did a little cleaning. Someone graciously agreed to take it away for me." She patted the tatami mat. "Come here," she said softly. "Sit beside me."

Despite the fact that she had just thrown away all of the man's treasured belongings, that was all she said. She simply sat there indolently, gazing slackly into a corner of the room. Though it was summer the man felt a chill, as if the surroundings were frozen. They were both facing each other, yet it felt as though there was no one in the room at all. *This seems familiar*, the man thought to himself. *I felt something similar before, once. But what was it? Ah, yes, that's what it was.* The man suddenly made a sudden, surprising realization.

Under the blossoming cherry trees. This was just like what he felt when he passed beneath them.

A shiver went through his body.

The woman stared at him blankly from within that empty room. The man sat down in front of the door as the strength left his body. He sat there, and said nothing. Because at that moment, he truly felt that he loved her.

\*

It was after this event that the man began to write novels for the woman.

His whole life changed. He became engrossed in his writing, and stopped going to play mahjong with his friends. His relationships all crumbled. But the biggest change of all was that he stopped showing his drafts to Saitō Shūtārō. This novel was one that he had never before dared to write, and it seemed to him that Saitō would just throw it in the garbage. For the first time, he wrote about the woman. He wrote with reckless abandon, wrote as it came to him.

Whatever he set to paper, the woman would immediately read. Whenever the face of Saitō Shūtārō reared out from the page, the woman would tell him, "You don't need this." What's more, she deftly drew out the kind of writing Saitō had once derided. The Saitō within the man was gradually uprooted; he no longer paid calls to Saitō's apartment.

Six months passed.

In February, the man received a notification that he had won a prize for best new writer. It had been the woman who had encouraged him to submit an entry, and they rejoiced together hand in hand.

"I knew you'd get it!" she told him. "You've got the talent."

That day was one the man would never forget.

They went into town to celebrate, taking a walk around Shijō Kawaramachi.

Grey clouds covered the sky and scattered snow fell through the chilly February air, but as he moved through the crowds which bustled through the streets the man felt that there was a cheerfulness in the air. He bought some clothes which the woman had been wanting. When he saw the look of delight on her face, he felt happy as well. The couple ate dinner at

a restaurant, browsed through a few stores, then went into a cafe. As evening fell, they sipped coffee and talked about the future. The man had continued to write with the woman after entering the contest, so he'd amassed quite a stack of new work. But he was apprehensive, uncertain how long it would be before someone bought this work. Yet the woman said to him with a strange certainty, "You don't have to worry."

Her cheeks were ruddy over her red scarf as they walked hand in hand between the tall buildings. The man spotted a mystical ray of light piercing the grey ceiling of clouds. Looking up at it, the woman said, "It's an angel's ladder." As they stared up at the sky together, a flock of birds flew overhead, shimmering silver, through the falling snow.

The couple walked down Sanjō Boulevard towards Karasuma.

Eventually they passed in front of a charming brown apartment building. The area was lit by sunlight from between the clouds. The woman suddenly stopped, looked around vaguely, then stared up at the apartment.

"I feel like it's time to move," she said. "Let's move here. Yes, I've decided."

\*

After leaving behind the fortress-like building on the Philosopher's Walk and moving to the apartment in the middle of town, the man's life took yet another turn.

Doubting that work would come in any time soon, he was rather surprised when editors came flocking to his apartment. He could hardly make sense of it all, and if the woman hadn't been there to give him advice, he just might have fled, unable to bear the strain.

He stopped going to class entirely, and no longer paid tuition. At any rate there had been little hope of him graduating.

The man set himself to carrying out each of the commissions. The work kept coming in, at an almost frightening rate. Before long the man became used to having work, and gradually he came to believe in himself. But at times, like when he went out on the veranda at nightfall and looked down at the streetlights twinkling below in the darkness on Sanjō Boulevard, he would suddenly grow uneasy. It was as if a wave of homesickness would overtake him, making him feel quite sad. It was the woman who chased away that anxiety.

That spring, the man didn't see the cherry blossoms.

He sluggishly applied himself to his work. In this manner, the seasons passed.

In the spring of the following year, the woman said that she wanted to move to Tokyo.

It hadn't been a year since they had moved to this apartment, and the man was reluctant, feeling that he was finally settling into his new life. He didn't understand why they should move all the way to Tokyo now. "There's no point in moving," he argued. "We can always head there if we need to, and I can work here in Kyoto just fine." The woman shook her head and argued back forcefully. "If you want to realize your dream, you can't stay here in Kyoto."

After countless arguments, the man slowly came to think that perhaps she was right after all. It wasn't that she persuaded him with irrefutable logic. He was simply worn down by her persistence. She had an inflexible will, and the man did not. That was all that decided it.

"You're going to become even more famous, more accomplished, than you already are. I just know you will," she assured him.

But there was one thing that bothered the man. The woman always said "your dream". But the man had never been really sure if it really was his dream, if he was pursuing the goals that she described because *he* really wanted to.

"Will I really?" he wondered out loud. "Is that really what I want to do?"

"What are you talking about?" the woman laughed. "Have a little faith in yourself!"

"That's not the problem."

"Then what's the problem?"

The man struggled for an answer. As he thought and fumbled with his words, the woman wrapped her arms around him from behind. "It's alright," she said. "It's going to work out. You've got the talent."

In the end the man folded, and they moved.

As he packed and struggled to keep up with his crushing workload, he constantly had in the back of his mind the cherry trees in full bloom. It was already April, and all over Kyoto the cherry trees were blossoming. The man was set on gazing upon the cherry blossoms of the Philosopher's Walk before he left Kyoto, alone. Though he didn't know how, he felt that now that he understood a little bit why those cherry trees were so frightening, and so he felt that he had to go.



On the day he was to leave Kyoto, the man snuck out early in the morning without telling the woman to go to the Philosopher's Walk.

As he rode his bicycle through the still-dim streets, the man was already afraid. Throughout the city cherry trees were blooming. The thought of those blooming flowers made him want to run away. Yet he continued to pedal down Marutamachi Street onto Shirakawa Street, arriving at last at the Philosopher's Walk.

The tightly packed white flowers bloomed in the pale blue air. The man left his bicycle and entered the empty path beneath the cherry trees. The morning was chilly, but beneath the cherry trees it was so cold that it felt as if the air was frozen. All sound vanished, and it was almost like he was standing in a vacuum. The uncomfortable feeling from long ago returned, sharp and distinct. He came across the bench where the woman had been sitting that long-ago morning, but he couldn't bring himself to sit there. He couldn't stop himself from walking on. In the end he was unable to bear it after all, and ran off down beneath that deserted row of cherry trees.

Eventually he came to the front of the old, fortress-like apartment building where he had lived for so long, and caught his breath.

A figure stood in front of the entrance to the neighbouring apartment, looking out at the cherry trees and smoking a cigar. It was Saitō Shūtarō. The man sucked in his breath, overcome by nostalgia. He could no longer remember the last time he had talked to Saitō.

Saitō Shūtarō stared at him as he approached, as if he was looking upon a complete stranger. The man told Saitō that he was going to Tokyo. He spoke of how well his novel writing was going. He went on floridly about his accomplishments, rather in spite of himself, hoping, waiting for Saitō to use that sharp tongue of his to pop his balloon and bring him down to earth. But "Good for you," was all he said. "Go on then, see how far you can go."

Not hearing the words he had been expecting, the man kept blathering on. Yet Saitō Shūtarō remained aloof. He seemed to be losing interest in the man. Finally unable to contain himself, the man burst out, "The way you do things, no one will ever read what you write!" No sooner had the words left his lips than the man realized what a foolish thing he had said, but it was too late to unsay it.

When he came to his senses, the famously venom-tongued Saitō Shūtarō was gazing down at him, but said not a word.

"I have work to do," Saitō said at last, stubbing out his cigar. "Good day to you."

The man watched as Saitō turned on his heel and returned to his Masterpiece in Progress. Petals fluttered down around him, and he remained there long after Saitō had gone, standing alone beneath the cherry trees.

\*

After moving to Tokyo, the man became ever busier.

The warm, comfy days he had spent in that apartment surrounded by his collection of knick-knacks seemed no more than a distant memory now. Everything that had happened seemed like a dream: no one, including him, would ever have guessed in the old days that things would turn out like this—no one, that is, except for the woman. When he considered how she had brought all of this about, he was filled with gratitude. All of these dramatic changes, he owed to her.

Everything that happened since his move to Tokyo seemed miraculous to him; to all appearances he was a bona fide rags-to-riches success story. The man published book after book, some of which were even optioned for TV shows and movies. The man became rich. While he was gratified, it felt as though the creations he had dreamed up on his desk were leaving him to scrounge up money from who-knew-where. All of this money that flowed in from places unknown made his life quite comfortable, but also uneasy.

Now he could buy whatever he wished, yet there was nothing that he truly desired. On rare occasions, he would find himself wanting to start buying up a collection of bits and bobs as he had before, but whenever he did, he would remember the scene of the woman sitting in his empty apartment that summer day. Afterwards, the act of going out to collect things would seem tedious to him.

The woman wanted all kinds of things. The man loved seeing the smile on her face when she received something that she wanted, so he would do as she told him and go out with her into town, round all the shops. The woman walked serenely around high-end boutiques which the man hardly dared enter. She picked out objects in those glittering, resplendent stores, so aloof and self-assured, that the man fell more and more in love with her. He did not understand the pleasure of buying beautiful clothes and jewelry, but when he looked at her putting together outfits and adorning herself in all sorts of ways, he could not tear his eyes away.

"There's still something missing," she would sometimes mutter to herself as she prepared to go out. To the man what she had seemed more than enough, but the woman could discern precisely what she was missing. He didn't understand how it worked. It seemed a strange power to him.

The couple moved whenever the woman thought it necessary for the sake of beauty. Each new residence was more gorgeous, more splendid than the last. And each move was preceded by the woman saying, "There's still something missing." Eventually the man began to feel as if this was all a pie-in-the-sky exercise, a spiral that would never end. But the woman seemed so full of life, so free as she was doing it, that the man didn't have the heart to complain. In any case, all he owned was stationery and a few books, so packing up to move posed little difficulty. All he had to do was obey her instructions and help with her move.

If there was one thing that he could not stand, it was the little parties that she would throw at the residence.

She loved to invite acquaintances over, and was always bustling around making preparations. Some of them the man knew, but most of them were strangers. After moving to Tokyo the woman had taken a job at a friend's jewelry store, where she had met many people. The man didn't like meeting people he didn't know, and whenever the woman threw one of her parties he always felt uncomfortable. "You need to be there too. After all, they're all here to see you," the woman told him.

"I'm afraid I'd just bore them."

"All you need to do is be there. I'll take care of the rest."

Though he was an accomplished writer, the man was awkward when it came to the quick back-and-forth of conversation, and he would spend those nights wishing that the guests would go home soon. He hated how easily the woman chatted with these slimy, disingenuous people. He also hated being fed clearly insincere compliments when he was already tired and testy.

Sometimes when he found it too much to bear he would escape to the veranda and gaze out at the lights of the city. If he listened, he would sometimes hear amidst the animated chatter the woman's laughter tinkling like fine china. That laugh seemed like it belonged to another person entirely.

He sometimes asked her to stop inviting people home. "We're expanding your connections, aren't we?" she would reply calmly. "It's for your own good."

That was true.

The woman was a social butterfly with a silver tongue, who seemingly made friends wherever she went. She could reel anyone in with only the slightest acquaintance, something that the man could not do at all. And what she said was true: the people whom she invited brought in new work for the man.

But honestly speaking, the man wasn't so eager for more work as to do all this.

What worried him most was that he was losing the ability to write about anything except her. The man had in his mind a mold from which he created all his stories. Every so often, a thought would flicker through his mind: *I've written this story before*. Whenever this happened he would sit blankly at his desk, thinking that he must have been able to write about many more things than this, once. He felt that he used to think more freely. Once he had spoken of this to the woman. "It's better this way," she had replied, sounding completely unconcerned. "The things you used to write never would have sold. You just have to put up with it. That's what work is, after all."

What she said seemed correct. The man chided himself for being so self-indulgent. Yet however correct the woman may have been, something about them just didn't sit right with him. Each of her words was like a stone in his belly. The more he swallowed, the more they weighed him down.

When he couldn't bear it any longer, he would leave the house and not come back for several days.

He would spend that time seeking out old neighbourhoods, just wandering around without a destination in mind. Alleys lined with potted plants; old-fashioned shopping arcades steeped in the aura of decades gone by; small temples and shrines: these were the places that made the man feel at home. And that was because they reminded him of Kyoto. Though he would spend days walking around these places, the man never once thought of going to Kyoto. He felt that if he went there without the woman, he might never come back. In the evenings as he ambled around the old streets that remained in Tokyo, he often dreamt that the dark, narrow alleys led to somewhere in Kyoto. Perhaps this slope led down to the foot of Mt. Yoshida; maybe this little alley led to the Philosopher's Walk, he

would imagine. The cherry trees were in full bloom, and he would stop and stand beneath the flowering boughs.

Whenever he returned home from his days-long sojourns, the woman would always gently welcome him home.

She never remonstrated with him when he brought home little knick-knacks he'd bought on the way. "You must be exhausted, with how busy you've been," she would say, brewing coffee for him. "I'll put in sugar for you." Whenever she comforted him, she always put sugar in his coffee, seeming to think that would brighten his mood. She would take time off work, and the two of them would spend all day at home doing nothing at all.

The man felt calmer when he saw her just sitting there beside him. He secretly wished that she could always be like this: kind, comforting, his and his alone. *If only she would let me write new novels*, he sometimes found himself thinking, with a twinge of guilt.

\*

Time flowed on.

Both became quite busy, the woman coming to own a store of her own, and the man with his usual writing activities. Sometimes the woman wouldn't come home until late in the night, and left in the morning before he was awake. There were times that he supposed she was at her shop, but there were other times when he wasn't sure what she was doing. "You're just being jealous," she told him when he voiced his displeasure. "Why don't you write about it? I'm sure it would be interesting material."

On occasional days off, the woman would take the man into town. As they walked around, she would talk about whatever came into her mind. She did that to get him to write. He could no longer write about anything except her. All he did was stitch things that happened, things that she talked about, into facsimiles of novels. As he observed her every move and worked out sentences onto the page, he felt as if he was merely her personal biographer. This did not make him happy at all. He felt he had become utterly powerless. The feeling of rapture he had had when he first wrote about her was gone now. "I'm tired of using you," he protested. But she wouldn't budge. "There's nothing wrong with that," she told him. "Nothing at all."

She kept herself busy running her business, giving the man ideas, going out for fun, reading his novels with delight. She was quite satisfied with her own life. Her exploits were even featured in magazines, such did she attract the spotlight. She was the woman of the hour,

and paired with such a famous novelist one might think that they were the perfect couple. But the man always threw a wrench into the woman's perfect works.

"I hate who I've become. All I do is repeat the same thing over and over!"

"That's just life. Don't be such a child. You can't pretend you're still a student forever, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"You can be so selfish," she told him. "Throwing tantrums, turning down work, it's like you're trying to throw away what we worked so hard to build together. Wasn't this always your dream?"

"Was it? I thought it was yours."

"My dream is your dream. And your dream is my dream."

What she said always seemed correct. The man was keenly aware that he often refused to face reality, which made putting up with it even harder. The woman's will was so unwavering that he wondered just how high her ambitions went. Every time they had these back-and-forth conversations the man felt as though he was just repeating the same thing over and over, and he grew sick of it.

One spring night, the man attended the wrap party for a TV serial drama. As it was for an adaptation of one of his novels he had no choice but to attend. But feeling out of place amongst the jubilant throng of production staff and cast members, he just sat in a corner. He wondered how many of them had actually read his novel. It wasn't the idea that some of them hadn't read it that made him sad. It was the fact that he didn't care if they had. Before long he couldn't take it any longer and left the event hall. As he wandered blankly down the street, his editor chased him down and flagged down a taxi.

They both got inside and directed the driver to the man's home. Headlights streamed by silently outside the window. It was very quiet inside the cab, cut off from the hubbub of town. The man slumped down into the seat, staring blankly at the dazzling lights outside. Suddenly the sadness became too much to bear. Covering his face with both hands he let out a moan.

"Are you feeling alright? Shall I stop the taxi?" his editor asked.

"No, I'm ok."

The man had no idea where he was. He didn't know what he should do, or even what he wanted to do. He didn't know where the woman's powerful ambition was directed towards. He dimly suspected that it was a hollow ambition, but then again he felt hollow himself.

"The cherry blossoms are blooming. Quite a sight, isn't it?" murmured the taxi driver.

The man raised his head and looked out the window, to see that the taxi was passing beneath a tunnel of cherry blossoms, illuminated by fiery spotlights from below. It was then that he finally felt that the mystery of the cherry blossoms he hated so much had finally been solved. He decided to go see them.

"Excuse me, I'd like to go somewhere else," said the man. "Take me to Tokyo Station."

\*

Parting from his bewildered editor, the man returned to Kyoto late that night.

Buying sake and food at a convenience store, he strolled towards the Philosopher's Walk. His fortress-like apartment building he had once lived in was just as he remembered it.

He wanted to visit his old neighbour Saitō Shūtarō in the adjacent building, his erstwhile mentor, but he no longer lived there. Staring at the blank nameplate, he reminisced about the many times he had visited Saitō, enduring insults and scribbling down sentences on paper. He thought about the last time they had seen one another. Now he understood why Saitō had said nothing. But now that he wanted to talk about it, the man he had looked up to was nowhere to be found.

He despondently exited the building and walked to his old apartment, which was just by the building entrance. It was empty. He quietly crept in and sat down on the bare tatami mats. The streetlights on the Philosopher's Walk shone in through the window. He ate the cold food, drank the sake, and spent the night wrapped up in his coat and in his own thoughts.

When he opened his bleary eyes again there was pale light in the window, and he could hear birds chirping. The room was freezing, and he shivered so violently that his knees knocked together. He threw the window open, and cold, bracing morning air came rushing in. Outside the window the cherry trees were in full bloom. *I have to go*, he thought.

Suddenly a shadow loomed up in the doorway. It was the woman. She stared straight at him, her eyes puffy. Finally she sat down in front of the open door. "Thank goodness," she sighed. "I heard from your editor. Why did you abandon me?"

The man didn't know what to say.

"You're tired. I'm tired too," she said. Let's just take a break from work and stay in Kyoto for a while."

"That might be a good idea," the man murmured.

The woman came over to him and sat down on the cold tatami. She placed her hand on his knee and looked up at the opened window. "Why is the window open?" she frowned.

"Because the cherry trees are blooming," the man replied.

"Shall we go see them?"

Together they left the room.

In the dawn Philosopher's Walk was as still as it always had been, and the cherry blossoms seemed to go on forever. "Give me a piggyback ride," the woman suddenly said. The man obliged. The woman placed her cheek onto his shoulder. "You did this for me too, the first time we met," she said.

"I was just thinking of that," he said. "You were drunk."

"I told you to leave me alone."

"You remember?"

"Of course I do."

As he walked along silently carrying her on his back, the man felt that the world he had once grasped so firmly had vanished. And try as he might to get it back, he no longer knew where it was anymore. At some point during his time with the woman, he had thoughtlessly let it go. He couldn't bring himself to say it was her fault, yet on the other hand he didn't have the courage to bear this loneliness any longer. Neither would opposing the woman's wishes bring back what he had lost, for the man had no idea what he ought to restore. The only thoughts in his mind were how pathetic he was, and how he wanted to disappear.



Under the blossoming cherry trees, all was quiet in the taut, chilly air. The warmth of the woman on his back faded from his mind. The man and the woman were alone in that long tunnel of cherry trees, but in his mind even they disappeared, leaving only cherry petals fluttering to the ground. The arguments they'd had, the woman's tinkling laughter, the babbling of throngs of unknown guests—he could hear none of it now. Under the spectacular cherry blossoms, all was desolate, like he'd arrived at the end of the world. At last he realized that this place, the place that he had always feared, was the end of his journey.

The man let the woman off his back. They were in front of the bench where the woman had been sitting alone that spring. She sat down there that same way, looking innocently up at him. "Tell me," she said. "After we've rested a while in Kyoto, will you go back to writing novels again? I want to read something new from you."

The man shook his head. He had no intention of writing about her again. And if he wasn't going to write about her, he had nothing else to write about. "What will you do then?" she asked, after he told her this.

"I don't know. I just don't know."

"But...we'll still be together, won't we?"

The man shook his head again.

The woman's slim neck bent, casting her face downward. A petal fell onto her shining hair in the pale light of dawn. As the man reached out and plucked it off, the woman said in a small voice, "What did I do wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong," the man told her. "It was me who was wrong."

\*

There are many places in Kyoto famous for their cherry trees.

The tunnel of cherry trees at Keage Incline is well known, and during cherry blossom season Maruyama Park becomes a sea of humanity. One hardly need mention the cherry willows at Heian Jingū which Tanizaki Junichirō wrote of in *The Makioka Sisters*. The trees which line the Kamo River near the Kamo Bridge are a popular spot for students to throw cherry blossom viewing parties.

But now, let us turn our attention to the cherry trees of the Philosopher's Walk.

All is still under the blossoming cherry trees; beneath the unbroken canopy of flowers not a sound can be heard.

Beneath the flowers a man sits alone on a bench. His shoulders are covered with petals, as though he has been there for a long time. It is his first time sitting beneath the blossoming cherry trees alone. He could sit there forever. That is because he has no intention of going back.

A gust of wind sends a whirlwind of petals dancing through the air.

Eventually the throngs will arrive to see the blossoms, and beneath the blossoming cherry trees all will be noise.

# Ghost Stories

*Original story by Mori Ōgai (1862-1922)*

*One hundred candles, one hundred ghost stories: a classic Japanese pastime for long summer nights. But perhaps the real entertainment is not in the stories, but in the people who tell them...*

It happened back in the summer of my fourth year in college. The Gion Festival yamahoko parade had just been held, so I believe it must have been in the second half of July.

At the time, I had just returned from England, where I had gone to study English after fleeing the laboratory to which I had been assigned. I couldn't just begin working on my graduation thesis again, yet neither did I have a job; the only thing I did not lack was time. If that had not been the case, I never would have attended that strange gathering at the invitation of my friend F.

This is the story of that gathering.

I'd heard of the *hyakumonogatari*, a game where a large group gathers in a room to tell ghost stories, lighting one hundred candles and blowing one out after each story. The image of the small white candles used in Buddhist altars came to my mind, which made me wonder whether they might go out before the stories were all done. Then again, the thick, sweet-smelling candles you find at Fushimi Inari seemed to me a potential fire hazard. So I wondered how it was that such a game might be played, until F told me that you can also use a hundred oil wicks. I'd never actually seen an oil wick before, though, so I didn't understand what he meant.

With each story a light goes out, and as the darkness closes in you must clear your mind in preparation for what emerges. That is the *hyakumonogatari*: an eerie sort of diversion. But from what F told me, it's quite uncommon for all one hundred candles to go out, and usually the game is ended before that dread moment arrives. That dread moment being, of course, the moment when the last candle is extinguished, the room falls into total darkness, and a real ghost appears.

\*

After spending a few days with my parents following my return from England, I headed back to Kyoto. I wanted to see how my lodgings had fared after being left open for over a

month, and also intended to find a part-time job for the long term. Above all, I wanted to be alone, finding it painful to while away the time at home with no direction in mind.

My lodgings were by the Baptist hospital in Kitashirakawa.

I spent the day walking around town and returned to my lodgings at dusk to find that the rays of the setting sun had turned the 4½ tatami room into a sauna. Though I had been away only a little over a month, I was unreasonably glad to see those cramped quarters again. Opening the window that overlooked the bicycle racks and leaving the door into the corridor wide open for the evening breeze to pass through, I pulled out a well-thumbed book from the shelf and flipped through its pages.

I had an appointment with F that night, so after the sun went down I locked the door behind me and went out. Our rendezvous was at Jeunesse, a cafe at the southwestern corner of the Kitashirakawa Bettō intersection.

F had called me to extend an invitation back when I was still living with my parents. He was a friend from my program at school, easy to converse with, cheerful, and optimistic. Talking to him made you feel like the world wasn't such a bad place after all. Being guarded by nature, I envied how easygoing he was, and how he could make friends with anyone. Of course, with his happy student days coming to an end I'm sure he had worries of his own, but at the time I was in no position to worry about someone else's state of mind.

We sat in a dim nook inside the cafe eating light meals, F talking about his graduation research and asking all sorts of questions about my time in England. It was while we were drinking after-meal coffee that F brought up the hyakumonogatari.

"There's one being held tomorrow night, would you like to come?" he asked. "Or have you got something else planned, Morimi?"

"I do not. But you're sure it's alright for me to go?"

"Of course, of course. There aren't as many people going as originally planned, so I was told to find people to invite."

"A hyakumonogatari, though...that sounds pretty silly. Whose idea was it?"

"A fellow by the name of Kashima. I haven't met him myself," said F. "I've got a friend who's in his theater group."

This Kashima was the leader of a student theater group, and his name apparently held some repute around the Kansai region. The well-connected F had heard many tales of Kashima. During his first year at college he co-founded a theater troupe with his friends, and a string of well-received performances brought him renown. As I listened to F recount the stories, I recalled having seen a billboard with bold writing daubed on it which said, "Written, directed, and produced by Kashima".

"Will I have to tell a ghost story as well? I'm afraid I would only disappoint."

"No need to worry. Many of the audience will only be there to listen."

"Then I believe I will go."

F beamed. "We're gathering at Shinnyo-dō at 5 pm."

"It's being held at a temple?" I asked, surprised at how far they were going for authenticity.

But F shook his head. "Once we're all assembled, we'll walk to the venue. The precise location is being kept secret until the event."

"That's pretty convoluted."

"It's all part of the performance."

We left the cafe at closing time. As we parted ways, F told me that he had some other business tomorrow and might be a little late, promising to call if he was.

It was dark as I headed up the muggy slope back to my lodgings.

Why had I agreed to attend such a dubious event? I was sure it would be a wretched time, since it was unlikely I would know anyone there other than F. Perhaps I was still reticent, having just returned from abroad. I was hardly in any shape to be attending events in public.

During the spring of that year I had suddenly stopped attending my lab. I'd put very little thought for the future during my undergraduate years, and now I was reaping what I had sown; I expected things to work themselves out, yet nothing ever did. I abandoned my lab, yet I had nowhere to go. Seeing how lost I was, my father recommended that I go abroad. So I borrowed money from my parents and set off.

I spent a month in England, living in a house in the outskirts of London and attending an English school by the British Museum. The language study was not much to boast of; I spent half the day at school alongside Spaniards and Italians, and the other half of the day with nothing whatsoever to occupy my time. At first I walked all about town, but never having been much for sightseeing I soon wearied of this. I much preferred buying detective novels from used bookstores, and perusing them at my leisure beneath a tree at the park. It was not much different from living in Japan, whiling the days away seeking only peace and comfort.

A more gifted student might have thrived overseas, but for one of such meager talent as I, leaving Japan only amounted to putting off the problem. One cannot observe his home country from afar forever. I had hoped that something might change in me, but in the end it never did. Idling in some English garden gazing at far off Japan was merely watching my own life go by: no one would live it for me.

And so I came back.

\*

The next day I rode my bike to Shinnyo-dō late in the afternoon as F had instructed me.

I was familiar with the temple, having been to it several times.

I pedalled down Imadegawa Street and turned onto Kaguraoka Street. Mount Yoshida loomed up on the right, while on the left the ground sloped down towards Shirakawa Street. The sun was hidden behind the mountain, leaving Kaguraoka Street in the shade. A silence lay over the neighbourhood in the sweltering heat. I stopped my bike for a moment at a break in the houses and looked to the left, where I saw Mount Daimonji in the rays of the setting sun. I continued to follow the narrowing road past Yoshida Sansō, and the gentle slope eventually brought me to the long stone steps of Munetada Shrine. There I turned left, where the path led directly to Shinnyo-dō.

I stopped my bike in front of the temple gates where I saw other bikes scattered about, which judging from their appearance probably belonged to students. It seemed that people had already begun to gather for the event, but I didn't see a soul. All was still. The orange light which passed over Mount Yoshida fell radiantly upon the vermilion gate and the pine trees which stood beside it. A pagoda was just visible above the walls which enclosed the temple. There was something lonesome, yet also nostalgic about the scene.

Thinking that I had arrived too early, I bought a popsicle from the corner store across the street to cool myself down. I lit a cigarette as I continued to observe the gate, but no one showed up. Just as I began to wonder whether I had misheard F's instructions and come to the wrong place, I got a phone call from him.

"Looks like I'm going to be late after all; you go on ahead without me. Are you at Shinnyo-dō yet?"

"I'm in front of the gate, but I don't see anyone. You're sure this is the place?"

"It should be. Maybe they're around the main hall."

He hung up as if he was in a hurry. I wondered how he was going to get to the venue when he didn't even know where it was.

I left the eaves of the shop where I had been standing and started walking.

A gentle paved slope led up from the gate to the main hall at the back of the shrine. Tree branches stretched over from both sides of the path. To the right of the path facing the hall were moss-covered wooden benches and tables where visitors could sit and rest.

I noted a few students loitering around the grounds. Three students sat idly at the foot of the pagoda, while others were sitting at the benches. A few paced around the hall, seemingly with nothing better to do. Perhaps they were all just attempting to avoid the heat, but I also got the feeling that they were surreptitiously observing one another. A few of them furtively looked my way, but the instant our eyes met they would immediately avert their gazes. Yet even amongst themselves they were subdued for reasons I could not discern. It reminded me of the awkwardness that hung over the classroom during orientation in my first year of college.

As I continued to walk forward, I noticed a man, probably another student, sitting about halfway up the steps at the front of the main hall. Feeling that eye contact would be awkward, I kept walking at a deliberate pace as if I was simply out on a stroll. The man seemed to be glaring at the top of the pagoda.

Stopping by the main hall I looked around the temple.

Each cluster of people was probably a group of acquaintances here for the hyakumonogatari. Nothing else seemed to link them together. Now that I thought about it, the only instructions had been to gather at Shinnyo-dō, with nothing to identify that you

were here for the hyakumonogatari. The idea of accosting a perfect stranger and asking them if they were here for ghost stories was a little embarrassing.

An atmosphere of uncertainty pervaded the scene, and for a period of time no one moved.

Presently I saw another student come walking through the gate. His old-fashioned wide-brimmed straw hat made him stand out quite a lot. He was extremely thin, and his outfit looked stuffy. But his gaze was quite piercing, and he reminded me of one of the great writers of old. Each time he took a step his brand new straw hat glinted in the sunlight. He walked straight towards the main hall and came to a halt, putting his hand up to his hat and glaring.

"Saitō!" squeaked a voice from one of the benches beneath the trees. "Over here!"

The man called Saitō glanced that way. A scowl was etched on his face, and he snorted mockingly. Folding his arms, he swaggered towards the person that had called out to him.

"Don't you lot have anything better to do?" I heard him say loudly.

"How's the Masterpiece-in-Progress?" someone else asked.

"It's climaxing everywhere," Saito proclaimed. *What an oddball*, I thought.

I turned away, only to notice that the man sitting on the shadowy steps of the main hall was smiling. This time I couldn't help but stare.

He looked to be around my height, with very little that drew the eye. His clothes were ordinary, not shabby or dirty. Yet there was something very *plain* about his appearance. His was the kind of face you would forget the moment you looked away. But what truly caught my attention was the strange smile that adorned his face. It was a forced smile, not natural in the slightest. The other thing which I noticed was his gaze. His bloodshot eyes roved around the shrine. It was as if he saw everything, and yet at the same time as if he saw nothing. I'm not sure why it seemed that way.

The instant he noticed me watching him the smile disappeared from his face like sugar dissolving into water.

\*

A representative from the theater troupe arrived at around five, lifting the uncertain mood that hung over the temple. He came from the cemetery to the south, like he had been



quietly observing us the whole time. His dyed blonde hair clashed with the kimono he wore on his thin frame, and he took me aback when he emerged from the small gate leading to the cemetery, but I realized that it must be another of Kashima's theatrics.

The man came up to the front of the main hall, wiping sweat away with a handkerchief, and called all of the students to assemble. The scattered groups came trickling over.

"The hyakumonogatari will be held at a house in Shishigatani Hōnen'in-cho. It is a short walk, so if you all please follow me."

There was a little grumbling, but the man didn't seem to care at all. He handed out a bunch of round fans from a paper Takashimaya department store bag, each with "Hyakumonogatari" written on it with an ink brush. Once that was done, he briskly strode off, his body language all but saying that he was only here because Kashima had ordered him. In any event, none of us knew where the venue was, so we had no choice but to follow him. The awkwardness, having lifted for a brief moment, settled on us once more.

We trailed after the man in the kimono in a winding procession. Behind the main hall the sunlight was hidden by the building, and cicadas trilled from the shade of the trees. The band of scruffy students descended towards Shirakawa Street on a little used trail. I was walking right behind the man in the straw hat, who was loudly lecturing the man beside him.

The path behind the Shinnyo-dō was cool, but once we emerged onto Shirakawa Street the heat became unbearable. As I walked I kept wiping away the sweat that beaded on my forehead. The rest of the laconic retinue just fanned themselves, the soft thrum seemingly only serving to fan their irritation.

While we were waiting at a traffic light on Shirakawa Street, the man in the kimono turned around and motioned as if taking a headcount of the assembled students, looking rather uninterested. Seeing his obvious mockery of us, the man in the straw hat loudly clicked his tongue. I looked around at the gathering. There were about fifty in all, though among them I did not see the strange man who had been sitting on the stairs at the front of the main hall. It seemed I had been mistaken in assuming that he was there to participate in the hyakumonogatari.

We crossed Shirakawa Street and continued along under the sultry setting sun.

Though they'd said the house was in Hōnen'in-cho, the guide gave no indication of how far we'd have to walk. Perhaps he was making a mockery of us, or perhaps he wanted to set

the mood for the ghost stories, for he led us through a weaving maze of narrow streets. I felt faint with the sun beating down over me, and the heat grew ever more unbearable. Under the dazzling sunlight, the green mountains to the east looked so close I almost felt as though I could reach out and grab them. As I walked I began to feel that this was all a big bother, and that I should just drop out of line and watch the others shamble off to their ridiculous gathering. It wasn't as if the event mattered to me in the first place, and I probably wouldn't be too put out. But I just couldn't quite muster the determination. On a telephone pole I saw a poster, rather distastefully framed in black like a funeral notice, with a hand pointing in one direction underneath the word *Hyakumonogatari*.

We made our way through the neighbourhood looking sulky, hardly saying a word. Naturally our procession attracted some attention; as we passed by a house with bamboo screens hung over the second-floor windows to keep out the heat, a boy sitting before the front door stared at us slack-jawed. Out of nowhere he shrieked, "Dum-dums!" and ran into the house.

We arrived at the mansion in Hōnen'in-cho just before six.

\*

It was an old house, surrounded by a wooden fence. A cobblestone path led from the covered gateway to the front entrance. It was a fine setting for the anachronistic *hyakumonogatari*, though it did make me wonder what kind of person would go to such lengths merely on a whim.

I was last in line, and when I passed through the gate I saw the others already entering the house, crowded in the foyer taking off their shoes. I stopped just beyond the gateway, and listened to the cicadas calling from the mountains.

There was a small opening in the shrubbery to my right. A man and a woman both wearing yukata emerged from it, saying, "How creepy!" as they exited through the gateway. I nonchalantly slipped into the bushes.

Beyond was a small clearing, bare and damp, and an ordinary shed which looked out of place with the rest of the old mansion. I poked my head inside to see a pale face staring back at me and jumped, before realizing that it was a mannequin dressed up to look like a ghost.

I heard the sound of footsteps on dirt, and a shadow loomed up next to me.

Thinking that I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to, I bowed my head slightly and turned to leave, when I realized that it was the man with the bloodshot eyes I had seen at Shinnyo-dō. He didn't pay any attention to me, and after I left my spot, he bent over to peer inside the shed and snorted.

I went to the entrance hall and took off my footwear, thinking disappointedly to myself that the secret of tonight's hyakumonogatari had turned out to be quite dull after all. Having us creep ourselves out with ghost stories, then trotting out a manufactured ghost to scare us—why, it was hardly any different from an ordinary test of courage. It was a far cry from the hyakumonogatari I had imagined when F told me about it.

I didn't know where the others had gone. The thick scent of incense filled the air. Hearing voices coming from an adjoining room, I looked inside and saw a number of people clad in yukata huddled in conversation. "I've told you, I get it," one of them said in a low voice. "There's nothing to worry about. I'll take care of it."

One of them noticed me dithering there and stood up.

"Participants should head that way, to the room by the garden." I thanked them and left. That room must have been for the theater troupe who were running the event.

I followed the corridor, which led to the large tatami room facing the garden.

All of the sliding doors had been removed from the room, which was filled with many more people than I had been expecting. Those I had seen at Shinnyo-dō made up but a few of their number. Everyone sat where they pleased, not only inside the room but also out in the corridor and on the veranda. A kettle and paper cups had been placed in the center of the room. There was even a hanging scroll in the alcove, a surprisingly detailed depiction of a ghost beneath a willow tree. In the garden I could see a small pond with stone lanterns. I crouched down and squeezed through the crowded room, claiming a seat near the veranda.

As I settled down, I noticed that the awkwardness that had permeated Shinnyo-dō was prevalent here as well. Each little huddle talked only amongst themselves; not a word passed in between the groups. But even those restrained exchanges only lasted a little while. Not knowing what to do, everyone was just sneaking quick glances at the other people in the room. They'd all gathered here thinking that it might be fun, but their hopes for excitement soon gave way to disappointment. Yet here they remained, unwilling to give up on that slight chance that it might just be worth the wait after all.

I turned my gaze toward the garden. Wisps of smoke rose up from mosquito coils inside ceramic containers, their nostalgic scent drifting through the air. Shades of evening had crept into the sunlight which illuminated the mountains, and the clouds were tinged with pink. Beyond the garden the streets were quiet.

Staring absentmindedly, I caught snippets of a conversation behind me.

"We might as well enjoy ourselves."

"I can't stand this heat. The tea's not even cold."

"But don't you see, that is precisely why this sweltering venue is perfect. Ghost stories are like cold beer. It's putting up with the heat that makes them all the more delightful."

"Okay, Serina, you and your masochistic tendencies are welcome to it. But I'm completely fed up..."

"How quick you are to change your mind, Meno."

This third voice sounded familiar to me, and I turned around to see F sitting there cross-legged, smiling and fanning himself. He looked over with surprise when I called his name.

"Ah, there you are. You were so quiet I didn't even notice you."

F was sitting with two other men. Their names were Serina and Meno, and they were both members of the Sophistry Debate Society. Serina bowed his head to me, his silver-framed glasses glinting, while Meno stared glassy-eyed out at the garden. F told me he'd followed another group here, instead of assembling at Shinnyo-dō.

"I'd meant to call you but forgot," he said, with a slightly chagrined smile. "By the way, have you seen Kashima?"

"I don't know."

"I'm eager to know what he's like, aren't you?" F craned his neck to look around the room and continued in a low voice, "Apparently this house belongs to a relative of his. Not your ordinary type of fellow, I daresay."

I attempted to chat with them, but my addition seemed to have disrupted the flow of the conversation, and in the end we too found it difficult to sustain our small talk. We

exchanged our views on the upcoming hyakumonogatari, but the more we talked the more foolish things felt. Eventually Meno, looking bored, lay down by the wall.

I excused myself and stood up, saying that I needed to go to the bathroom.

When I returned from the bathroom at the end of the hall, F and the two Sophistry Debate Society members had engaged someone else in discussion. Not wanting to return to my spot just to ruin the mood again, I sat down in a corner. I was really starting to want to go home.

After a little while, F stood up and came over.

"I know a few other people here, shall I introduce you?"

"No, that's all right."

F nodded, then slipped through the crowd. He seemed to have set his eye on someone else.

\*

One of the hosts came into the room and announced, "Dinner will be served before we begin the hyakumonogatari." The lights were turned on.

A large platter of hand towels was carried in. I took one, using it to wipe my sweaty, sticky face. More hosts came in with stacks of bento boxes, and at last a sense of liveliness filled the room. With how crowded the room was I decided to wait my turn, instead going out to the veranda. A cool breeze was blowing when F came along, carrying an extra bento for me.

"What would you do without me?" he said, though there was no malice in his voice.

He poured barley tea from the dull gold kettle he was carrying into a paper cup for me, then stood up cheerily and went around the room pouring tea for others as well. Once he was done he came back and started to eat his own bento.

"Who paid for dinner?" I asked.

"Now that you mention it, they're not charging a cover fee," said F, not sounding much concerned about it.

Meno and Serina came over and sat down beside us. Mutely they took off the lids of their bento. Serina carefully rubbed his chopsticks together to get rid of the splinters. "I saw Nagata earlier," he said, staring at his hands. "I suppose he has an eccentric side as well, attending this sort of event."

"Who's Nagata?" said Meno.

"He was at the Ichijōji Cup last month, don't you remember?"

"Ah, the mahjong Nagata. Where is he?"

Meno craned his neck as high as he could without getting up, his eyes darting around the room, and eventually called out, "Nagata!" On the other side of the room was a man holding a bento, looking for a place to sit. When he heard Meno's voice he looked over, grinned, and motioned a couple next to him to follow him across the room.

"Hey, good to see you," he said in a friendly tone. "It's so crowded; mind if we sit here?"

He sat down, as did the couple. The woman was the kind of beauty who could suck the air out of a room; I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Placing her bento in her lap, she leaned towards the man beside her, who was holding a small notebook in his hand, and whispered something in his ear, frowning. The man turned around and called out, "Saitō! Saitō!" Another man lounging in a corner holding a straw hat and a bento turned his head irritably, then came walking across the room. He didn't even break stride to glance down when he kicked over a kettle, spilling tea all over the floor. Rudely brushing me aside on the veranda he sat down, grumbling, "This heat is quite intolerable."

I quietly ate my dinner on the fringe of this haphazard group, feeling rather small and insignificant. At first everyone just quietly attended to their own bento, but in time F asked, "I wonder what Kashima is like?" The chopsticks paused, and we all glanced around at one another. I realized that not a single one of us had met Kashima before.

"For such a famous person, he doesn't seem to make many appearances," F said.

"I've seen his plays before, but I've never seen the man himself," Serina interjected. "The actual running of the troupe is done by a guy called Shinen. He also takes lead roles. I hear he also co-founded the group with Kashima."

Meno was the first to finish his bento, and as he fanned himself he said, "He must enjoy making plans and pulling strings from backstage. I certainly think things are more interesting that way."

"I remember the guerrilla production he put on during my first year here," Nagata added. "You remember it too, don't you, Saitō?"

"I cannot say that I do. Such things are of no concern to me."

"You didn't go to the campus festival? Well, Kashima put on this guerilla theater performance during the campus festival. There wasn't a fixed stage, they just started impromptu performances all over campus. I caught a few performances, it was all pretty quirky and interesting."

"Some troupe members told me that Kashima only came up with the plan, and it was Shinen that led the troupe. Kashima apparently issued directions from somewhere off campus," F chimed in.

"Committed to staying in the shadows, through and through," Meno remarked in amazement.

There was silence after this.

I looked up from my bento, and gazed around at the people sitting on the veranda. Suddenly a man sitting cross-legged between Saitō and F swam into view. I hadn't the faintest idea when he'd joined our party. He didn't have a bento, nor was he conversing with Saitō or F. He was leaning forward slightly and staring into empty space. It almost seemed as if he was listening to our conversation. There was a ghost of a smile on his unremarkable face, but it was so faint that it could also just have been a wince. His eyes were bloodshot, like he hadn't slept at all the previous night. It was the strange man who had so fascinated me at Shinnyo-dō.

"What's Shinen like?" asked the woman sitting across from me in a mellifluous voice.

Her companion was looking down and scribbling in his notebook. He seemed to be writing about the mystery of Kashima.

"He's the glue that holds the troupe together. One glance at him and you can tell that he's the leader. Naturally he seems quite sharp. Perhaps Kashima is just a fiction created by Shinen. That's what I believe, at any rate."

"Surely that can't be true, Serina," argued F. "The troupe sees him during performances."

"But if you think about it, there's no proof whoever they see is actually Kashima, is there?" Nagata said. "It could be a double."

"But why resort to such chicanery? What would he stand to gain?"

"I hear the troupe members all get flustered if you ask what Kashima is like," Nagata said, looking round at all of us. "Is he cheerful and personable? Or is he aloof and intimidating? No one can say. That's what I hear from more knowledgeable people, at any rate."

The more I heard about Kashima, the more his mystery grew. This was not simply my knee-jerk reaction; everyone who had heard of this famed student impresario seemed to feel the same way. Though his name had spread far and wide as his theater troupe gained renown throughout Kansai, there was precious little that anyone could actually say with confidence about the man himself. The mental image of this masked man multiplying was quite unsettling.

I took a sip of tea and breathed in the scent of the mosquito coils. The sky was turning a deep indigo. Occasionally a cool breeze would blow, bringing with it the scent of the earth. My wandering eyes settled on the man with the bloodshot eyes again, still unmoving and staring into space.

"He's a strange fellow, to be sure. And a complicated one." Meno summed up, letting out a yawn.

\*

"Oh!" A man standing in the corner holding a camera started heading our way. "If it isn't Saitō!"

"Uyama," Saitō sniffed. "Keep that camera pointed away from me."

"Your help the other day was much appreciated. Ah, I see Nagata is here too."

"Hey Uyama, I heard you were having a pretty rough time. What's the camera for? Shooting a film?"

"This is just for fun."

"You wouldn't be trying to get footage of the ghost at the end, would you?"



"It's nothing as silly as that."

As I sat there drinking tea as inconspicuously as I could, F got up and came over to me.

"Still hiding in the corner, I see," he remarked. "You must not be comfortable at this kind of gathering."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, you certainly don't seem to be enjoying yourself. You're always a little withdrawn. Sometimes at banquets, I'll look over and see you staring blankly my way, like you feel you're different from everyone else."

"I'm not trying to be standoffish."

"I'm not saying it's a bad thing, I'm just saying you look a little lonely, that's all."

"It is what it is," I replied. "But there's nothing I can do about it. I can't help who I am."

When I looked back on my life, I felt like I'd spent my college years just watching from the sidelines. While everyone else had been throwing themselves into clubs or academics, fooling around like typical college students, or running around trying to find love, I'd just stood there and watched. It always seemed like there was something going on that I wasn't part of. The idea of participating in something out of obligation had always seemed unpalatable to me, but from time to time I questioned that attitude of mine. When did I start feeling that way? Or did everyone else actually feel that way too? Was it just the garden-variety fear of missing out? Was I just worrying that the grass was greener on the other side?

How shallow, I thought, to assume that someone who led a famous student theater troupe and put on something as elaborate as a *hyakumonogatari* for a bunch of bored college students would be an eccentric show-off. It seemed that Kashima couldn't be pigeonholed so easily. I wasn't quite convinced by Serina's mystery novel deduction that Kashima didn't exist, but the secrecy in which Kashima cloaked himself certainly was peculiar.

In my mind's eye I pictured a man hidden in the stage wings, observing the giddy buffoonery that reigned on center stage. The man had no face—except for his bloodshot eyes.

Whereas I had merely stumbled into becoming a passive observer, Kashima had willingly chosen that position for himself. There was something fiendish about him. The theater

productions, tonight's hyakumonogatari—I suspected that Kashima engineered them merely so he could observe large numbers of people. All of these students who had gathered at the mansion with their vague expectations were simply playing right into his hands. It hardly mattered to Kashima whether they were enjoying themselves or not. He'd never intended to bask in the limelight in the first place.

He would never play the protagonist. He wasn't even in a supporting role. He merely looked on from afar, observing the proceedings he'd put into motion with his bloodshot eyes, a cold smile on his face.

\*

The sun was setting.

I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I was taken aback when Saitō started heatedly arguing about something. "That's not acceptable," the woman declared to Saitō. "Excuse me?" said Saitō, rising to his knees.

The woman's companion seemed on the verge of tears as he tried to defuse the tension, but neither the woman nor Saitō were ready to back down. Saitō became more and more agitated, while the woman stared him down coolly and countered his every retort. The air crackled with tension, and people were looking curiously at us.

Saitō downed his cup of barley tea in one gulp, then angrily declared, "Farewell. I shall not debase myself with this ridiculous nonsense any further!"

"Come on, Saitō, let it go," Nagata said placatingly.

But Saitō was beyond listening, and standing up with his straw hat in hand he stormed out of the room. His footsteps receded down the corridor. An uncomfortable silence descended, though the woman seemed quite indifferent. Her companion stared down into his notebook, a worried look on his face. Serina read a book, while Meno lay down on the tatami and fell asleep. Nagata pulled a mosquito coil closer to him and poked at the ashes. Meanwhile, I realized that the man with the bloodshot eyes who had been sitting next to Saitō had vanished.

A subdued buzz gradually returned to the room.

"When's the hyakumonogatari going to get started?" I asked F.

"Judging by the commotion I heard earlier from the staff room, it should be any minute now."

"Then I'll pop the bathroom before it begins."

The old blue-tiled bathroom was empty.

After washing my hands, I cracked open the frosted glass window. There were a few scattered bamboo stalks growing outside. The sun was nearly down, and a cool breeze flowed in.

As I listened to the chatter from the tatami room, a lonely, dejected feeling came over me. I couldn't bear the idea of going back and mingling with a room full of strangers late into the night. And I already knew that what awaited at the end of those interminable stories was merely the mannequin hidden in the shed. Would it not be more amusing to imagine the proceedings, rather than force myself to remain and witness them? I envied Saitō, though he had stormed out by happenstance rather than design. The mere act of fantasizing sneaking out of the house and strolling down the Philosopher's Walk back to my house was enough to fill me with longing.

I knew thoughts like that were what kept me where I was, but once the idea of going home was planted in my head, there was no resisting it. I decided to make like Saitō and get out of here. No sooner had I made the decision than my melancholy dissipated.

On my way back through the corridor I glanced into the room and saw the hosts busy clearing away bento. It appeared that the *hyakumonogatari* was finally about to begin. I decided not to say goodbye to F. I didn't want him trying to persuade me to stay, and considering how many people he knew here he'd get along just fine without me.

In the corridor I walked past more people coming out of the staff room. Hurriedly I put on my shoes and walked out the front door. The sky was a deep indigo. Cicadas trilled out nearby. With the coming of evening, the looming shadows of the mountains to the east seemed to suffocate the surroundings.

As I walked down the stone path through the gate, I noticed someone standing in the street. The dim lights of the gate were just bright enough for me to see that it was the man with the bloodshot eyes.

I gave him a slight nod.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked.

"Something's come up." On the spur of the moment I added, "I'm sorry I didn't at least give my compliments to Kashima."

The man stared at me for a moment, his arms crossed. "That hardly matters," he said, in a bored voice. "I am Kashima."

"Oh, really."

I stared at him for a moment. Kashima stared back with those bloodshot eyes of his, and then said, "Goodbye then." He flapped his hands at me as if to say, *go on*.

I came back to my senses. "Yes, goodbye."

I went down the narrow slope, heading for the canal.

At the end of the mansion fence I stopped.

I turned around to see Kashima for some reason still standing in front of the gate, his face floating in the darkness. He was bending forward and stretching out his neck, reaching out strangely as though he was trying to grab something in front of his chest. Light glowed in the windows of the house, and I could faintly hear the clamour of the many students inside.

I stood there at the bottom of the hill watching Kashima observe the house.

The hyakumonogatari must have begun at last, for the lights began to go out one by one, until the house was completely dark. It was so quiet that I almost doubted whether the commotion of a few minutes past had only been a dream. It was as though the students who had thronged that room had all vanished. When I looked back at the gate, Kashima was gone.

I followed the canal home, imagining what scenes must be playing out inside the darkened haunted house.

The stars began to twinkle in the velvet night sky.

\*

I asked F what had happened when I met him a few days later. He wasn't put out that I had left early.

"You missed a great show," he told me. "The theater troupe pulled off the *hyakumonogatari* splendidly. As we listened to the ghost stories, it started to rain, and I could have sworn I heard wailing from somewhere. After the main event they held a test of courage. Their props crew was involved in setting it up, so it was all very elaborate. I wish you could have stayed a bit longer."

"I suppose. I just found it all very tiresome."

"The highlight of the night came at the end of the courage test."

Here F grinned as he recalled the events of the night.

"Serina may try to play things cool, with his silver-rimmed glasses and such, but at heart he's quite a scaredy cat. He pushed Meno and me and Nagata to do the courage test, yet he refused to go himself. We had to reassure him that it wasn't so bad before he would go. "There was slimy *konnyaku* dangling on strings, spooky images projected onto sliding screens, little monster-like things shrinking and growing and scurrying underfoot, and every time Serina screamed all of us downstairs burst into laughter."

"Poor fellow."

"Maybe, but it was so funny we couldn't help ourselves. At the end of the room in the alcove there was a funeral plaque and a skull, as well as a temple block which you had to beat. There was also a strange woman curled up in a futon inside a mosquito net, moaning. I'd never actually seen a mosquito net before, and the effect was pretty chilling. As Serina clenched his teeth and beat the temple block, the woman got up and came out of the tent, and she had the most ghastly makeup. Of course Serina frantically shoved her away and she tripped over a lantern with a real flame inside which went up in no time. The woman started screaming when she saw the fire, and Serina started screaming when he saw her face in the firelight, and the backup staff started screaming when they came in and saw the burning props, and everyone else started screaming when they ran upstairs and saw what was going on. It was hellish, passing water buckets back and forth in that inferno, and quite a few things were lost in the fire before we were able to put it out."

I was shocked. "That's incredible. It's a good thing that you managed to put it out."

"Indeed. It was all quite entertaining, but frightening, in a different sense."

F laughed out loud, and then said, "Ah yes, one of my friends on the event staff told me that Kashima never showed up. He certainly lives up to his reputation, putting all this together and not even bothering to show up."

"But he did show up."

"You mean you met him, Morimi?"

"He was there when we were eating."

"I don't recall seeing him. Where was he?"

"He was sitting right between you and Saitō."

I tried to describe him, but his appearance from his face to his clothes were so nondescript that the more desperately I tried to explain the falser my words rang. I couldn't blame F for not believing me. He insisted that the entire time he had been eating Saitō had been on his right and Serina to his left.

"After the fire the staff were all discussing how to tell Kashima about the charred tatami mats. If he really was here, why would he hide himself? And surely if he was in the room with us, the staff would have noticed?"

He did have a point. If Kashima had been trying to make himself inconspicuous, it seemed odd that he would be sitting with all of the guests.

Then who was that man who had been at Shinnyo-dō, who had claimed to me in front of the gate, *I am Kashima*? What did he gain by lying to me?

And if that had been the real Kashima, had he gone back and hidden himself in a corner, observing the students amusing themselves with their ghost stories?

Once more I pictured in my mind the man standing at the end of the alley, staring keenly at the house as the lights went out one by one.

# Afterwords/Commentaries

## Afterword

The short stories presented in this collection are not those considered the original authors' best works, nor are they my personal favourites. Their selection was much more arbitrary: I simply chose the stories that inspired me to write something.

In modernizing the stories, I tried to bring the central elements of the originals to the forefront. Without getting into excruciating detail, here are the elements which struck me deepest in each story.

The Moon Over the Mountain: the anguished isolation of the tiger-poet, Li Zheng. In a Grove: the powerlessness of the husband, bound to a tree and able only to look on impotently. Run, Melos!: the joy exuded by the author's words as they bound one scene to the next. Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees: the woman standing beside the corpses of the slain wives. Ghost Stories: the man with the bloodshot eyes, sitting there alone amidst the revelry.

I don't really know what literature is, but I do hold a vague admiration for literary history. While I realize that what I've done is a little impertinent, linking my name with the names of all of these literary giants does make me happy. I hope for only two things: that those who love the original works will be willing to overlook my transgression, and that this book will inspire people to go read the originals for themselves.

This collection was written at the suggestion of Watanabe Mamiko from Shōdensha. Deciding which work to tackle next and being pushed by such immortal stories was a lot of fun. Thanks to Ms. Watanabe for giving me the opportunity.

January 15, 2007

## Afterword—Bunkoban Edition

These stories were written from 2005-2006.

The project was the brainchild of Ms. Watanabe from Shōdensha, who suggested in a basement cafe on Teramachi Street that I rewrite classic masterpieces and set them in modern times.

It was quite a reckless suggestion.

The mere suggestion that you are going to revise the classics is guaranteed to draw hordes of angry people demanding to know what gives you the right. They are called classics because they have been read by countless people over the course of many years. They carry with them the love of all those readers, and love is a heavy thing. Modernizing and rewriting them in my own style likely would please no one. Come to think of it, even I would probably feel indignant seeing an eccentric rewrite of a classic which I had read and loved for many years.

So why would I—a child of delicate modern sensibilities who would rather go without eating for a day than have someone get angry at me—tackle such a project? There are three reasons.

First, the idea of rewriting *The Moon Over the Mountain* with an aloof, ne'er-do-well college student at its center was too much for me to resist. Second, being a writer means that I have to come up with my own stories, and compared to that rewriting classics seemed like a cinch. And finally, even if I did receive a lot of flak, I wouldn't really lose anything.

So it was that I began to re-read the classics and write these stories.

There's a fine line between reading and writing. Sometimes you write as if you are reading, or read as if you are writing. I sometimes get the feeling that there's a secret nestled somewhere within this muddled chicken-or-egg problem. Writing this book has only solidified that feeling.

Reading classics while thinking about how you would rewrite them is fun. Which parts would you have to keep? How would you change the characters? Which parts still ring true today? If a hundred people were to rewrite Osamu Dazai's *Run, Melos!* a hundred different Meloses would be born, dashing down a hundred different street corners.

Put another way, only stories that can withstand such repeated readings time and time again can be called classics. And that is what makes them so terrifyingly formidable.

September 2009

## Afterword—Kadokawa Bunkoban Edition

*Through Kyoto Streets: Run, Melos! and Four Other Stories* has become part of the Kadokawa lineup, joining other titles like *The Night is Short*, *The Tatami Galaxy*, and *Penguin Highway*. I



feel like a doting father looking upon his children, and I pray that along with the Shōdensha version this edition will go out into the world to meet many wonderful readers.

When I re-read my own works I'm always surprised at the kinds of things I manage to put to paper, but I'm especially surprised with what I wrote in *Through Kyoto Streets*. It's as if there's an external power flowing through its pages. Obviously, that power comes from the original works, which I urge you to read if you haven't already.

Chino Bōshi has graciously written a commentary for this edition. I'm always nervous when I ask people to write for my books, and that was doubly true for this book considering how I mangled the corpus of modern literature within its pages. Many thanks from the bottom of my heart to Mr. Chino.

June 2015

## Commentary—Ten Nights of Dreams

Chino Bōshi

I had this dream.

I was sitting with my arms folded at Mr. Tomihiko's bedside. He murmured that *Through Kyoto Streets: Run, Melos! and Four Other Stories* was going to be published by Kadokawa. *Will it, then?* I asked, looking down at him. *Indeed it will*, said Mr. Tomihiko, opening his eyes wide. I could see my reflection vividly suspended in the depths of his jet-black pupils.

I very much enjoyed *Through Kyoto Streets*. Its short stories represent Japanese literature from a number of eras—Meiji (Mori Ōgai), Taishō (Akutagawa Ryunosuke), and Shōwa (Nakajima Atsushi, Osamu Dazai, Sakaguchi Angō)—with a cast of college ne'er-do-wells standing in for the original protagonists.

The "Four Other Stories" mentioned in the title are of course *The Moon Over the Mountain, In a Grove, Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees*, and *Ghost Stories*.

After a moment, Mr. Tomihiko spoke again.

"If you want to write the commentary, please be sure to make the deadline."

*When is the deadline?* I asked.

"The sun will rise, and then it will set. Again it will rise, and again it will set. Can you finish writing it as the red sun makes its way from east to west, east to west?"

I mutely nodded. Eventually, just as Mr. Tomihiko had said, the sun came up in the east and slowly sank into the west. *One*, I counted.

After a while, the pale red orb arose sluggishly into the heavens once more, then sank silently beneath the horizon. I counted again: *two*.

The sun rose and set, rose and set, until at last I lost count. Then, a green stem sprouted from underneath a stone, growing diagonally up towards me. The pure white lily that grew at its tip gave off a scent that moved me deeply. A single star twinkled in the dawn sky.

It was then that I realized that the deadline had already arrived.

\*

I found myself on a maroon train. It raised a tremendous racket as it careened along the Hankyu Kyoto railway after the setting sun, though its pursuit was in vain.

I caught a conductor and asked, "Is this train going west?"

The conductor scrutinized me for a moment, finally replying, "Why do you ask?"

"Because we seem to be chasing after the setting sun."

The conductor laughed drily, then walked off towards the women-only car.

I was filled with great unease. Before I knew it we had arrived at Jūsō Station in Osaka.

The train car was quite full. Most of the passengers seemed to be tourists on their way to see the autumn leaves. One approached me and asked if I knew literature. I was silent.

Peering into my face, the tourist told me that each of the original works which inspired this book are delightful to read. Many are surreal. Some of them are like fairy tales. Taken together they are a primer to Japanese literature for young people.

But many of those originals are reworks themselves: *The Moon Over the Mountain* was adapted by Nakajima Atsushi from a Chinese Tang Dynasty fable; *In a Grove* is Akutagawa's reboot of a tale from the *Konjaku Monogatari* in the style of Ambrose Bierce's *The Moonlit*

*Road*; and Dazai Osamu used a poem by Friedrich Schiller (itself inspired by Greek mythology) as the basis for *Run, Melos!*

In this volume Mr. Tomihiko reworks these tales yet again. Perhaps he took inspiration from another collection of reworked tales, Dazai's *Shinshaku Shokokubanashi*. The tourist returned his gaze to me, and seeing that I remained silent began to relate Dazai's *Run, Melos!* to me, telling me that this story helped inspire Mr. Tomihiko's spirit of service.

\*

I left the monks' quarters and returned to my room along the corridor where the paper lamp was glowing dimly. I knelt with one knee on a floor cushion and stirred the wick. The charred, flower-like wick tip clattered onto the crimson-lacquered table, and at that same instant the room was flushed with light.

An important theme in Mr. Tomihiko's writing emerges in the first two stories in this collection, *The Moon Over the Mountain* and *In a Grove*. That theme is the futility of that self-consciousness that is so common peculiar to youth, or in other words the cruel gulf between how you perceive yourself and how the world perceives you.

In Akutagawa's *In a Grove*, the story of a robbery and murder unfolds through the testimony of multiple narrators. Mr. Tomihiko uses that technique to tell the story of an unhappy love triangle that takes place within a student film club.

Nakajima Atsushi's *The Moon Over the Mountain* relates the tale of an arrogant aspiring poet. Mr. Tomihiko uses this framework to tell the story of a proud literary young man whose views are hopelessly outdated.

In the original, Yuan Can (Constable Natsume) listens to Li Zheng's (Saitō Shūtarō's) poem and thinks to himself, *The poet himself is certainly first-rate. However, there is an element missing from his poems which prevents them from being truly great.*

It is an unsentimental tale, something which Mr. Tomihiko does not miss in his reworking. Yet neither does he forget to treat the proud protagonist with a sense of compassion. It is splendidly done.

If you are familiar with the source material you will appreciate the way he changes the elements, and even if you are not you will find it fascinating nonetheless.

This book is meant simply to be enjoyed. There is little for me to dissect. And yet—

*Aren't you a samurai? How can a samurai possibly fail to write a commentary?* said the monk. *Seeing how you continue to flail about with your words I can only conclude that you are not a samurai. You are common riffraff, nothing more. Ha ha, do my words anger you?* continued the monk. *If you feel my words to be unjust, bring me a draft,* he said, before abruptly turning away as if I was not worthy of further attention.

I shall certainly write a commentary before the table clock placed in the alcove of the adjoining room strikes the next hour. And tonight I shall enter the monk's room again. I shall exchange the commentary for his head. That is why I must complete it. For I am a samurai.

If I cannot complete it, I must turn my blade upon myself. A samurai cannot live in shame.

As I was thinking of how beautiful my death must be, I heard the clock in the next room begin to chime.

\*

I am carrying a woman on my back. I believe she is an old acquaintance of mine.

To my left and right the cherry trees are blossoming. The Philosopher's Walk is narrow. I think back to Mr. Tomihiko's *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees*, which also depicts a man carrying a woman on his back along the Philosopher's Walk with the cherry trees in full bloom. In that work Mr. Tomihiko plucks out the theme of youthful malaise from Sakaguchi Ango's body of work and recreates it in modern-day Japan.

"Mr. Tomihiko is quite good at portraying youthful malaise," says the woman on my back.

"Are you reading my mind?" I ask, turning my head.

"Can't you see the flowers dancing through the air?" comes her reply.

Two cherry blossom petals come fluttering down.

I become slightly unnerved. Carrying such a burden on my back makes me fear for my future. I look around for someplace to set her down.

"Am I heavy for you, Mr. Chino?" she asks.

"Not at all."

"Soon I will be," she says. "It was under that cedar, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," I replied.

"It was in 1988, the year of the dragon."

Yes, I'd had a feeling it was sometime around then.

"It's been 27 years since you lifted me onto your back and started walking."

The moment I hear those words, the memory rushes back to me. I'd carried her on my back, walking through the darkness beneath the cherry blossoms and reading Sakaguchi Ango's *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees*. And as I realize that I am just like the mountain bandit shouldering that youthful malaise, the woman on my back becomes as heavy as Sakaguchi himself.

\*

Hearing that Mr. Tomihiko was revising Ōgai's *Ghost Stories* before the gate of Shinnyo-dō, I walked there to take a look only to find that a great crowd had already gathered, voicing opinions on the work.

"Incredible," some were saying. "It must be much more difficult than writing a novel of your own."

"Ōgai, huh?" wondered another man. "In this day and age? I'd thought he was played out at this point."

"It's just remarkable. No other word for it. You look at the literary giants of the old days, none of 'em holds a candle to Ōgai. I'd put him over Natsume Sōseki, even," said another.

Mr. Tomihiko sat on his chair typing away, paying no attention whatsoever to all the hubbub as he sketched through his words the student theater troupe putting on the *hyakumonogatari*.

Seeing how stoically he worked, a young man turned to me and gushed, "That's Mr. Tomihiko for you. He's so focused it's like we don't even exist. Like there's nobody else but him and Ōgai. It's incredible!"

I glanced back at him, thinking what he'd said was interesting. Without skipping a beat, the young man continued, "Look at how he brings his characters to life. He's completely one with his work."

Mr. Tomihiko began to write about the scene at Shinnyo-dō. I could practically feel the late July heat shimmering in the air at Hōnen'in-cho. The way he selected his words was so natural. It was as if there were no doubts in his mind at all.

"He uses his words with such ease, the sentences and scenes just flow onto the page," I muttered to myself in awe.

"But he isn't using words to create sentences and scenes," the young man said to me. "He's just using his fingertips to unearth the sentences and scenes which are buried in his head. It's like digging up stones from the earth; that's why there's no way he *could* make a mistake."

This was the first time I had ever considered literature in such a light. And if that were all there was to it, anybody could do it. I suddenly was overcome with a desire to write Sōseki's *Ten Nights of Dreams*, and leaving the scene returned directly home.

I started up the text editor on my MacBook Air and began to frantically type, but to my disappointment, Sōseki was nowhere to be found. I tried booting up my old Sony laptop running Windows XP, but the words were just as barren. Neither was Sōseki on my iPhone.

I tried with every writing implement I could find, but none of them was hiding Sōseki within. After the sixth dream, the words at last dried up. It was only then that I realized that the literature of Sōseki's time is not buried within my mind. I believe now I understand why Mr. Tomihiko has remained such a popular author.

## Commentary—Treading on the Tiger's Tail: Just Plain Funteresting

Kamiyama Kenji

"Is this kind of thing allowed in literature...?"

That was what popped into my mind the first time I read this book. Though it was a gripping read, I couldn't help but feel a little worried. It certainly is possible to do things like

this in anime and film, but there's something more taboo about written literature, and I wondered whether this book might not anger fans of the original works.

I first read *Through Kyoto Streets: Run, Melos! and Four Other Stories* in the fall of 2007. I'm an anime director, and at the time I was in the midst of planning for an original show called *Eden of the East*. The characters in the show were college students worrying about their impending graduation and having to step out into the world. All of them much younger than I was, and since I didn't go to college, I had to run around asking the younger staff what college was like these days.

One of them told me about an up-and-coming author who wrote incisive portrayals of somersaulting youths with trouble fitting into society, and suggested that I check out one of his books. This bizarre pitch was my introduction to Morimi Tomihiko, and how I ended up reading this very book. Thinking back on it, the young man who made the suggestion was quite influenced by Morimi's works.

At first I considered reading Morimi's debut novel *Tower of the Sun*, or *The Night is Short* which at the time was already making waves, but as I perused Morimi's works at the bookstore the title of this book jumped out at me from the shelves. The audacity of the concept—particularly the reworking of the famous story *Run, Melos!*—grabbed my attention and refused to let go, so I plucked it from the bookshelf. I'd heard that this Morimi Tomihiko was around 30 years old. Yet the stories in this collection—*The Moon over the Mountain*, *In a Grove*, *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees*, *Ghost Stories*—were all landmarks of the literary landscape. People gripe about the younger generations for their supposed lack of literacy, yet here I had stumbled upon a bold young writer who challenged that stereotype. This wasn't just a book about degenerate college students, I soon realized, flipping through the pages and forgetting why I had come here in the first place.

I soon came across the following phrase: *There once was a haughty student who possessed great renown among a select few in the Yoshida neighbourhood of Kyoto*. What a wonderfully ambivalent expression.

Though I didn't know then that these oxymorons are a Morimi special, I was hooked by the quirky, clever writing, and as the book really was about college students I soon headed for the register.

\*

The more I read, the more I was enthralled by the ingenuity with which Morimi recast these classics. The storylines remain unchanged, the setting is brought to modern-day Kyoto, and the characters are transmuted into slightly (very) eccentric college students. The author's feigned pretension and his command of language unusual for one his age all inject a wonderful sense of humour into the pages.

When I work on a TV anime adaptation, I always add things which are not in the source text. These are a way to expand on the original and create something new, as well as a rare chance for me to realize the stories in my head. In that sense I've quietly done similar experiments as what is done in this book. I've transformed classic movies that I admired into animation, retaining the structure but building them anew with original characters and settings. But this must be carried out carefully to keep people from realizing what you have done, because people get angry when they think you've ripped something off. On the off chance that you are found out, you can still get away by using only the structure and plot devices and passing it off as a homage. But recreating an entire movie in the same format down to the title is a fairly daring venture. Not to mention, when you base your work on classics (which don't exist in the same way in anime) you draw comparisons to the original, which almost guarantees that your project will crash and burn.

Despite my initial misgivings, when I finished reading the book I found that those concerns were unfounded after all. Though there are elements of parody it is not a parody. Neither is it an imitation or a remake. Though it borrows the bones (structure) and wears the skin (title) of the original works, it is a splendid, original tale of youth that stands on its own, perhaps even as a full novel. And most of all, it is *funinteresting*. On that point alone I don't think you could call it a ripoff no matter what it is titled. I once tried to base one of my works on *The Moon Over the Mountain* and found it terribly difficult, and because of that experience I am all the more impressed by what Morimi has done here.

\*

Admitting that doesn't bother me. However, film (to say nothing of anime) already often takes a back seat to literature. If I ever ran into Morimi, as much as it galled me to do so I would probably shower praise on him, a man more than a decade my junior. But Japan boasts the masterful Kurosawa Akira and the master of animation Miyazaki Hayao, both of whom have achieved greatness doing similar things to this book. Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* is a transposition of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to Sengoku-period Japan, while Miyazaki's *Nausicaa* was inspired by the Heian-period tale *Mushi-mezuru himegimi* as well as Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* cycle. And if you claim that those are merely film adaptations,



consider the playwright-cum-director Mitani Kōki's play *Twelve Gentle Japanese* (though Mitani didn't direct the film version), which brilliantly reimagines Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* as a comedy in a Japan where trial by jury exists. Hurrah for a true trailblazer. Now I can face Morimi as a filmmaker with my head held high—or so I sputter to myself, but in the end I must admit that there is really no point to pretending I don't feel a vague sense of defeat and envy. Not only can this book stand side by side with the classics I have just mentioned, it is a masterclass in scriptwriting and direction, and furthermore it is an invaluable field manual for those seeking to learn more about the slacker college student in his natural habitat. When I first read this book I was tempted to bring this book up at the next planning meeting, or even better yet, go directly to Morimi and urge him to write a script. My mind was bursting with possibilities, and so using my industry connections (apologies to all the Morimi fans who don't have that luxury) I went to Kyoto in February of 2008 to visit him.

\*

To make a long story short, I never got to meet him. The ever shy, retiring, and (according to Honjō Manami) self-effacing Morimi did apparently consider taking precious time out of his crushing writing schedule to meet with me; however, he was bedridden with a cold owing to the uncommon flurry of snow that suddenly descended on Kyoto that day.

On the bullet train back to Tokyo, I felt strangely relieved as I looked out the window at the light snow that fell outside. Maybe it was better I didn't meet him just yet. I still carried that jealousy in my heart; better that I try my hand one more time at reworking a classic, so that I would have something in hand when I finally did come face to face with him.

So how was Morimi able to rework the classics so fearlessly? Perhaps the answer lies in the admiration and respect he holds for them, just as Kurosawa and Miyazaki respected that which came before them.

I don't know if I will ever reach those heights. But without this book I never even would have considered that question, and for that I am delighted and grateful.