

# IN THE SHADE OF SPRING LEAVES

*The Life and Writings of Higuchi Ichiyō,  
A Woman of Letters in Meiji Japan*

Robert Lyons Danly



Portrait of Ichiyō by Kaburagi Kiyokata

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*Separate Ways*  
(Wakare-Michi, 1896)



There was someone outside, tapping at her window.

"Okyō? Are you home?"

"Who is it? I'm already in bed," she lied. "Come back in the morning."

"I don't care if you are in bed. Open up! It's me—Kichizō, from the umbrella shop."

"What a bothersome boy you are. Why do you come so late at night? I suppose you want some rice cakes again," she chuckled. "Just a minute. I'm coming."

Okyō, a stylish woman in her early twenties, put her sewing down and hurried into the front hall. Her abundant hair was tied back simply—she was too busy to fuss with it—and over her kimono she wore a long apron and a jacket. She opened the lattice, then the storm door.

"Sorry," Kichizō said as he barged in.

Dwarf, they called him. He was a pugnacious little one. He was sixteen, and he worked as an apprentice at the umbrella shop, but to look at him one would think he was eleven or twelve. He had spindly shoulders and a small face. He was a bright-looking boy, but so short that people teased him and dubbed him "Dwarf."

"Pardon me." He went right for the brazier.

"You won't find enough fire in there to toast any of your rice cakes. Go get some charcoal from the cinder box in the kitchen. You can heat the cakes yourself. I've got to get this done tonight." She took up her sewing again. "The owner of the pawnshop on the corner ordered it to wear on New Year's."

"Hmm. What a waste, on that old baldie. Why don't I wear it first?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Don't you know what they say? 'He who wears another's clothes will never get anywhere in life.' You're a hopeless one, you are. You shouldn't say such things."

"I never did expect to be successful. I'll wear anybody's clothes—it's all the same to me. Remember what you promised once? When your luck changes, you said you'd make me a good kimono. Will you really?" He wasn't joking now.

"If only I could sew you a nice kimono, it would be a happy day. I'd gladly do it. But look at me. I don't have enough money to dress myself properly. I'm

sewing to support myself. These aren't gifts I'm making." She smiled at him. "It's a dream, that promise."

"That's all right. I'm not asking for it now. Wait until some good luck comes. At least say you will. Don't you want to make me happy? That would be a sight, though, wouldn't it?" The boy had a wistful smile on his face. "Me dressed up in a fancy kimono!"

"And if you succeed first, Kichizō, promise me you'll do the same. That's a pledge I'd like to see come true."

"Don't count on it. I'm not going to succeed."

"How do you know?"

"I know, that's all. Even if someone came along and insisted on helping me, I'd still rather stay where I am. Oiling umbrellas suits me fine. I was born to wear a plain kimono with workman's sleeves<sup>1</sup> and a short band around my waist. To me, all 'good luck' means is squeezing a little money from the change when I'm sent to buy persimmon juice.<sup>2</sup> If I hit the target someday, shooting arrows through a bamboo pole,<sup>3</sup> that's about all the good luck I can hope for. But someone like you, from a good family—why, fortune will come to greet you in a carriage. I don't mean a man's going to come and take you for his mistress, or something. Don't get the wrong idea." He toyed with the fire in the brazier and sighed over his fate.

"It won't be a fine carriage that comes for me. I'll be going to hell in a handcart."<sup>4</sup> Okyō leaned against her yardstick and turned to Kichizō. "I've had so many troubles on my mind, sometimes it feels as if my heart's on fire."

Kichizō went to fetch the charcoal from the kitchen, as he always did.

"Aren't you going to have any rice cakes?"

Okyō shook her head. "No thank you."

"Then I'll go ahead. That old tightwad at the umbrella shop is 'always complaining. He doesn't know how to treat people properly. I was sorry when the old woman died. *She* was never like that. These new people! I don't talk to any of them. Okyō, what do you think of Hanji at the shop? He's a mean one, isn't he? He's so stuck-up. He's the owner's son, but, you know, I still can't think of him as a future boss. Whenever I have the chance, I like to pick a fight and cut him down to size." Kichizō set the rice cakes on the wire net above the brazier. "Oh, it's hot!" he shouted, blowing on his fingers. "I wonder why it is—you seem almost like a sister to me, Okyō. Are you sure you never had a younger brother?"

"I was an only child. I never had any brothers or sisters."

"So there really is no connection between us. Boy, I'd sure be glad if someone like you would come and tell me she was my sister. I'd hug her so tight . . . After that, I wouldn't care if I died. What was I, born from a piece of wood? I've never run into anyone who was a relative of mine. You don't know how many times I've thought about it: if I'm never, ever going to meet anyone

from my own family, I'd be better off dying right now. Wouldn't I? But it's odd. I still want to go on living. I have this funny dream. The few people who've been the least bit kind to me all of a sudden turn out to be my mother and father and my brother and sister. And then I think, I want to live a little longer. Maybe if I wait another year, someone will tell me the truth. So I go on oiling umbrellas, even if it doesn't interest me a bit. Do you suppose there's anyone in the world as strange as I am? I don't have a mother or a father, Okyō. How could a child be born without either parent? It makes me pretty odd." He tapped at the rice cakes and decided they were done.

"Don't you have some kind of proof of your identity? A charm with your name on it, for instance?<sup>5</sup> There must be something you have, some clue to your family's whereabouts."

"Nothing. My friends used to tease me. They said I was left underneath a bridge when I was born, so I'd be taken for a beggar's baby. It may be true. Who knows? I may be the child of a tramp. One of those men who pass by in rags every day could be a kinsman. That old crippled lady with one eye who comes begging every morning—for all I know, she could be my mother. I used to wear a lion's mask and do acrobatics in the street," he said dejectedly, "before I worked at the umbrella shop. Okyō, if I were a beggar's boy, you wouldn't have been so nice to me, would you? You wouldn't have given me a second look."

"You shouldn't joke like that, Kichizō. I don't know what kind of people your parents were, but it makes no difference to me. These silly things you're saying—you're not yourself tonight. If I were you, I wouldn't let it bother me. Even if I were the child of an outcast. I'd make something of myself, whether I had any parents or not, no matter who my brothers were. Why are you whining around so?"

"I don't know," he said, staring at the floor. "There's something wrong with me. I don't seem to have any get-up-and-go."



She was dead now, but in the last generation the old woman Omatsu, fat as a *sumō* wrestler, had made a tidy fortune at the umbrella shop. It was a winter's night six years before that she had picked up Kichizō, performing his tumbler's act along the road, as she was returning from a pilgrimage.

"It's all right," she had assured him. "If the master gives us any trouble, we'll worry about it when the time comes. I'll tell him what a poor boy you are, how your companions abandoned you when your feet were too sore to go on walking. Don't worry about it. No one will raise an eyebrow. There's always room for a child or two. Who's going to care if we spread out a few boards for you to sleep on in the kitchen, and give you a little bit to eat?"

There's no risk in that. Why, even with a formal apprenticeship boys have been known to disappear. It doesn't prevent them from running off with things that don't belong to them. There are all kinds of people in this world. You know what they say: 'You don't know a horse till you ride it.' How can we tell whether we can use you in the shop if we don't give you a try? But listen, if you don't want to go back to that slum of yours, you're going to have to work hard. And learn how things are done. You'll have to make up your mind: this is where your home is. You're going to have to work, you know."

And work he did. Today, by himself, Kichizō could treat as many umbrellas as three adults, humming a tune as he went about his business. Seeing this, people would praise the dead lady's foresight: "Granny knew what she was doing."

The old woman, to whom he owed so much, had been dead two years now, and the present owners of the shop and their son Hanji were hard for Kichizō to take. But what was he to do? Even if he didn't like them, he had nowhere else to go. Had not his anger and resentment at them caused his very bones and muscles to contract? "Dwarf! Dwarf!" everybody taunted him. "Eating fish on the anniversary of your parents' death! It serves you right that you're so short. Round and round we go—look at him! The tiny monk who'll never grow!"<sup>6</sup>

In his work, he could take revenge on the sniveling bullies, and he was perfectly ready to answer them with a clenched fist. But his valor sometimes left him. He didn't even know the date of his parents' death, he had no way to observe the yearly abstinences. It made him miserable, and he would throw himself down underneath the umbrellas drying in the yard and push his face against the ground to stifle his tears.

The boy was a little fireball. He had a violence about him that frightened the entire neighborhood. The sleeves of his plain kimono would swing as he flailed his arms, and the smell of oil from the umbrellas followed him through every season. There was no one to calm his temper, and he suffered all the more. If anyone were to show Kichizō a moment's kindness, he knew that he would cling to him and find it hard ever to let go.

In the spring Okyō the seamstress had moved into the neighborhood. With her quick wit, she was soon friendly with everyone. Her landlord was the owner of the umbrella shop, and so she was especially cordial to the members of the shop. "Bring over your mending any time, boys. I don't care what condition it's in. There are so many people at your house, the mistress won't have time to tend to it. I'm always sewing anyway, one more stitch is nothing. Come and visit when you have time. I get lonely living by myself. I like people who speak their minds, and that rambunctious Kichizō—he's one of my favorites. Listen, the next time you lose your temper," she would tell him, "instead of hitting the little white dog at the rice shop, come over to my place. I'll give you my mallet, and you can take out your anger on the fulling block."

That way, people won't be so upset with you. And you'll be helping me—it'll do us both good."

In no time Kichizō began to make himself at home. It was "Okyō, this" and "Okyō, that" until he had given the other workmen at the shop something new to tease him about. "Why, he's the mirror image of the great Chōemon!" they would laugh.<sup>7</sup> "At the River Katsura, Ohan will have to carry *him*! Can't you see the little runt perched on top of her sash for the ride across the river? What a farce!"

Kichizō was not without retort. "If you're so manly, why don't you ever visit Okyō? Which one of you can tell me each day what sweets she's put in the cookie jar? Take the pawnbroker with the bald spot. He's head over heels in love with her, always ordering sewing from her and coming round on one pretext or another, sending her aprons and neckpieces and sashes—trying to win her over. But she's never given him the time of day. Let alone treat him the way she does me! Kichizō from the umbrella shop—I'm the one who can go there any hour of the night, and when she hears it's me, she'll open the door in her nightgown. 'You haven't come to see me all day. Did something happen? I've been worried about you.' That's how she greets me. Who else gets treated that way? 'Hulking men are like big trees: not always good supports.'<sup>8</sup> Size has nothing to do with it. Look at how the tiny peppercorn is prized."<sup>9</sup>

"Listen to him!" they would yell, pelting Kichizō across the back.

But all he did was smile nonchalantly. "Thank you very much." If only he had a little height, no one would dare to tease him. As it was, the disdain he showed them was dismissed as nothing more than the impertinence of a little fool. He was the butt of all their jokes and the gossip they exchanged over tobacco.



On the night of the thirtieth of December, Kichizō was returning home. He had been up the hill to call on a customer with apologies for the late filling of an order. On his way back now he kept his arms folded across his chest and walked briskly, kicking a stone with the tip of his sandal. It rolled to the left and then to the right, and finally Kichizō kicked it into a ditch, chuckling aloud to himself. There was no one around to hear him. The moon above shone brightly on the white winter roads, but the boy was oblivious to the cold. He felt invigorated. He thought he would stop by Okyō's on the way home. As he crossed over to the back street, he was suddenly startled: someone appeared from behind him and covered his eyes. Whoever it was, the person could not keep from laughing.

"Who is it? Come on, who is it?" When he touched the hands held over his

eyes, he knew who it was. "Ah, Okyō! I can tell by your snaky fingers.<sup>10</sup> You shouldn't scare people."

Kichizō freed himself and Okyō laughed. "Oh, too bad! I've been discovered."

Over her usual jacket she was wearing a hood that came down almost to her eyes. She looked smart tonight, Kichizō thought as he surveyed her appearance. "Where've you been? I thought you told me you were too busy even to eat the next few days." The boy did not hide his suspicion. "Were you taking something to a customer?"

"I went to make some of my New Year's calls early," she said innocently.

"You're lying. No one receives greetings on the thirtieth. Where did you go? To your relatives?"

"As a matter of fact, I *am* going to a relative's—to live with a relative I hardly know. Tomorrow I'll be moving. It's so sudden, it probably surprises you. It is unexpected, even I feel a little startled. Anyway, you should be happy for me. It's not a bad thing that's happened."

"Really? You're not teasing, are you? You shouldn't scare me like this. If you went away, what would I do for fun? Don't ever joke about such things. You and your nonsense!" He shook his head at her.

"I'm not joking. It's just as you said once—good luck has come riding in a fancy carriage. So I can't very well stay on in a back tenement, can I? Now I'll be able to sew you that kimono, Kichizō."

"I don't want it. When you say 'Good luck has come,' you mean you're going off some place worthless. That's what Hanji said the other day. 'You know Okyō the seamstress?' he said. 'Her uncle—the one who gives rub-downs over by the vegetable market—he's helped her find a new position. She's going into service with some rich family. Or so they say. But it sounds fishy to me—she's too old to learn sewing from some housewife. Somebody's going to set her up. I'm sure of it. She'll be wearing tasseled coats the next time we see her, la-de-da, and her hair all done up in ringlets, like a kept woman. You wait. With a face like hers, you don't think she's about to spend her whole life sewing, do you?' That's what he said. I told him he was full of it, and we had a big fight. But you *are* going to do it, aren't you? You're going off to be someone's mistress!"

"It's not that I want to. I don't have much choice. I suppose I won't be able to see you any more, Kichizō, will I?"

With these few words, Kichizō withered. "I don't know, maybe it's a step up for you, but don't do it. It's not as if you can't make a living with your sewing. The only one you have to feed is yourself. When you're good at your work, why give it up for something so stupid? It's disgusting of you. Don't go through with it. It's not too late to change your mind." The boy was unyielding in his notion of integrity.

"Oh, dear," Okyō sighed. She stopped walking. "Kichizō, I'm sick of all this

washing and sewing. Anything would be better. I'm tired of these drab clothes. I'd like to wear a crepe kimono, too, for a change—even if it is tainted."

They were bold words, and yet it didn't sound as if she herself fully comprehended them. "Anyway," she laughed, "come home with me. Hurry up now."

"What! I'm too disgusted. You go ahead," he said, but his long, sad shadow followed after her.

Soon they came to their street. Okyō stopped beneath the window where Kichizō always tapped for her. "Every night you come and knock at this window. After tomorrow night," she sighed, "I won't be able to hear your voice calling any more. How terrible the world is."

"It's not the world. It's you."

Okyō went in first and lit a lamp. "Kichizō, come get warm," she called when she had the fire in the brazier going.

He stood by the pillar. "No, thanks."

"Aren't you chilly? It won't do to catch a cold."

"I don't care." He looked down at the floor as he spoke. "Leave me alone."

"What's the matter with you? You're acting funny. Is it something I said? If it is, please tell me. When you stand around with a long face like that and won't talk to me, it makes me worry."

"You don't have to worry about anything. This is Kichizō from the umbrella shop you're talking to. I don't need any woman to take care of me." He rubbed his back against the pillar. "How pointless everything turns out. What a life! People are friendly, and then they disappear. It's always the ones I like. Granny at the umbrella shop, and Kinu, the one with short hair, at the dyer's shop. First Granny dies of palsy. Then Kinu goes and throws herself into the well behind the dyer's—she didn't want to marry. Now you're going off. I'm always disappointed in the end. Why should I be surprised, I suppose? What am I but a boy who oils umbrellas? So what if I do the work of a hundred men? I'm not going to win any prizes for it. Morning and night, the only title I ever hear is 'Dwarf' . . . 'Dwarf'! I wonder if I'll ever get any taller. 'All things come to him who waits,'<sup>11</sup> they say, but I wait and wait, and all I get is more unhappiness. Just the day before yesterday I had a fight with Hanji over you. Ha! I was so sure he was wrong. I told him you were the last person rotten enough to go off and do that kind of thing. Not five days have passed, and I have to eat crow. How could I have thought of you as a sister? You, with all your lies and tricks, and your selfishness. This is the last you'll ever see of me. Ever. Thanks for your kindness. Go on and do what you want. From now on, I won't have anything to do with anyone. It's not worth it. Good-by, Okyō."

He went to the front door and began to put his sandals on.

"Kichizō! You're wrong. I'm leaving here, but I'm not abandoning you. You're like my little brother. How can you turn on me?" From behind, she

hugged him with all her might. "You're too impatient. You jump to conclusions."

"You mean you're not going to be someone's mistress?" Kichizō turned around.

"It's not the sort of thing anybody wants to do. But it's been decided. You can't change things."

He stared at her with tears in his eyes.

"Take your hands off me, Okyō."

*Child's Play*  
(Takekurabe, 1895-96)



It's a long way round to the front of the quarter,<sup>1</sup> where the trailing branches of the willow tree bid farewell to the nighttime revellers and the bawdyhouse lights flicker in the moat, dark as the dye that blackens the smiles of the Yoshiwara beauties.<sup>2</sup> From the third-floor rooms of the lofty houses the all but palpable music and laughter spill down into the side street.<sup>3</sup> Who knows how these great establishments prosper? The rickshaws pull up night and day.

They call this part of town beyond the quarter "in front of Daion Temple." The name may sound a little saintly, but those who live in the area will tell you it's a lively place. Turn the corner at Mishima Shrine and you don't find any mansions, just tenements of ten or twenty houses, where eaves have long begun to sag and shutters only close halfway. It is not a spot for trade to flourish.

Outside the tumble-down houses everyone works madly: cutting up paper into queer little pieces, slopping them with paint, spearing them on funny-looking spits. Whole families, the whole neighborhood is wrapped up in the production of these strange, bright paper skewers. They dry the painted scraps in the morning and assemble them at night. And what are these things that have everyone so preoccupied? "You don't know?" a merchant will reply in astonishment. "Kumade charms!<sup>4</sup> On Otori day, you ought to see the big-wishers buy them up!"<sup>5</sup>

Year in, year out, the minute the New Year pine bough comes down from the front gate, every self-respecting businessman takes up the same sideline, and by summer hands and feet are splattered with paint. They count on the earnings to buy new clothes for the holidays. If the gods grant prosperity to mere purchasers of these charms, the men who make them figure they stand to reap a windfall. Funny thing, no one hears of any rich men dwelling in these parts.

Most of the people here, in fact, have some connection with the quarter. The menfolk do odd jobs at the less dignified houses. You can hear them in the evenings jiggling their shoe-check tags before they leave for work, and you'll see them putting on their jackets when most men take them off. Wives rub good-luck flints behind them to protect their men from harm. Could this

be the final parting? It's a dangerous business. Innocent bystanders get killed when there's a brawl in one of the houses.<sup>6</sup> And look out if you ever foil the double suicide of a courtesan and her lover! Yet off the husbands go to risk their lives each night like schoolboys to a picnic.

Daughters, too, are involved in the quarter: here, a serving girl in one of the great establishments; there, an escort plying back and forth between the teahouse and the brothel. They bustle along with their shop's lantern, an advertisement for all to see. But what will become of these girls once they have graduated from their present course of training? To them, the work is something grand and gala, as if they were performing on a fine wooden stage. Then one day before they know it they have reached the age of thirty, trim and tidy in their cotton coats with matching dresses and their sensible dark blue stockings. They carry their little packages under their arms, and we know what *these* are without asking. Stomp, stomp, they go with the heels of their sandals—they're in an awful hurry—and the flimsy drawbridges flop down across the ditch. "We'll leave it here at the back," they say, setting down their bundles, "it's too far round to the front." So they are needlewomen now, apparently.

Customs here are indeed a little different. You won't find many women who tie their sashes neatly behind their waists. It's one thing to see a woman of a certain age who favors gaudy patterns, or a sash cut immoderately wide. It's quite another to see these barefaced girls of fifteen or sixteen, all decked out in flashy clothes and blowing on bladder cherries, which everybody knows are used as contraceptives. But that's what kind of neighborhood it is. A trollop who yesterday went by the name of some heroine in *The Tale of Genji* at one of the third-rate houses along the ditch today runs off with a thug. They open a lean-to bar, though neither of them knows the first thing about running a business. They soon go broke. The beauty begins to miss her former calling. Her assets are gone with the chopped-up chicken bones left from last night's hors d'oeuvres. Unlike the chicken, however, our charmer can still return to her old nest.<sup>7</sup> People around here, for some reason, find this kind of woman more alluring than your ordinary one.

In such a world, how are the children to escape being influenced? Take the autumn festival.<sup>8</sup> Mother Meng<sup>9</sup> would be scandalized at the speed with which they learn to mimic all the famous clowns; why, there's not a one of them who can't do Rohachi and Eiki.<sup>10</sup> They hear their performances praised, and that night the smart alecks repeat their rounds. It starts at the age of seven or eight, this audacity, and by the time they're fifteen! Towels from the evening bath dangle from their shoulders, and the latest song, in a nasal twang of disrespect, dribbles from the corner of their lips. At school, any moment, a proper music class is apt to lapse into the rhythms of the quarter. Athletic meets ring with the songs of geisha—who needs the school cheer? One sympathizes with their teachers, who toil at the Ikueisha, not far

from here. It may be a crowded little schoolhouse—a private school, actually<sup>11</sup>—but the students number close to a thousand, and the teachers who are popular there soon become known. In these parts, the very word *school* is synonymous with the *Ikueisha*.

Listen to them walking home from school: "Your father sure keeps an eye on the teahouse by the bridge!" they shout at the fireman's boy. It's the wisdom of the street. Children know about the quarter. They scramble over garden walls, imitating firemen. "Hey! You broke the spikes on the fence to keep the thieves away!" A two-bit shyster's son begins his prosecution: "Your old man's a 'horse,' isn't he? Isn't he?" The blood rushes to the defendant's face. The poor boy—he'd sooner die than admit his father collected bills for a brothel. And then there are the favorite sons of the big shots of the quarter, who grow up in lodgings at some remove, free to feign a noble birth. They sport the latest prep-school cap, they have a look of leisure, and they wear their European clothes with style and panache. All the same, it's amusing to watch the others curry favor. "Young master, young master," they call them, when "spoiled brat" would do.

Among the many students at the *Ikueisha* was Nobuyuki of Ryūge Temple.<sup>12</sup> In time, his thick, black hair would be shorn, and he would don the dark robes of a priest. It may well have been his own choice, and then again perhaps he had resigned himself to fate. His father was a cleric, and already like his father Nobu was a scholar. By nature he was a quiet boy. His classmates considered him a wet blanket and they liked to tease him. "Here—this is your line of work," they would laugh, stringing up a dead cat. "How about offering the last rites?" All that was in the past, however; no one made fun of him now, not even by mistake. He was fifteen<sup>13</sup> and of average height, his dark hair was closely cropped in schoolboy fashion, and yet something about him was different from the others. Although he had the ordinary-sounding name of Fujimoto Nobuyuki, already in his manner were suggestions of the cloth.



The Festival of *Senzoku Shrine* was set for the twentieth of August, and not a block would there be without a float of its own jostling for glory. Over the ditch and up the side of the embankment they charge: all the young men, pushing, pulling, bent on taking the quarter. The heart beats faster at the mere thought of it. And keep an eye, mind you, on the young ones—once they get wind of what the older boys are up to. Matching *kimonos* for the whole gang are only the beginning. The saucy things they dream up will give you goose bumps.

The back-street gang, as they preferred to call themselves, had Chōkichi for

their leader. He was the fire chief's son—sixteen and full of it. He hadn't walked without his chest puffed out since the day he started policing the fall festival with his father: baton swinging, belt low around the hips, sneering whenever he answered. The firemen's wives all griped among themselves, "If he weren't the chief's boy, he'd never get away with it."

Selfish Chōkichi saw to it that he always got his way. He stretched his side-street influence wider than it really went, until in Shōta, the leader of the main-street gang, Chōkichi knew that he had met his match. Though Shōta was three years younger, he was the son of Tanaka, the pawnbroker; his family had money, he was a likable boy. Chōkichi went to the *Ikueisha*; Shōta, to a fancy public school.<sup>14</sup> The school songs they sang may have been the same, but Shōta always made a face, as if Chōkichi and his friends at the *Ikueisha* were poor relations.

With his band of admirers—even some grown-ups numbered among them—for the last two years Shōta's plans for the festival had flowered more luxuriantly than the efforts of Chōkichi's gang. There had been no contest, and, if he lost again this year, all his threats—"Who do you think you're dealing with? Chōkichi from the back streets, that's who!"—would no longer garner even enough members for a swimming team at the *Benten Ditch*. If it were a matter of strength, he knew he would prevail, but everyone was taken in by Shōta's quiet ways and his good grades. It was mortifying—some of his own gang had gone over on the sly to Shōta's side. Tarokichi and Sangorō, for instance.

Now the festival was only two days away. It looked more and more as if Chōkichi would lose again. He was desperate. If he could just see that Shōta got a little egg on his face, it wouldn't matter if he himself lost an eye or a limb. He wouldn't have to suffer defeat any more if he could recruit the likes of Ushi, the son of the rickshawman, and Ben, whose family made hair ribbons, and Yasuke, the toymaker's boy. Ah, and better still: if he could get Nobu on his side—there was a fellow who'd have a good idea or two.

Near dusk on the evening of the eighteenth, hoping for a chance to persuade Nobu, Chōkichi made his cocky way through the bamboo thicket of the temple. Swatting the mosquitoes that swarmed about his face, he stole up to Nobu's room.

"Nobu? You there? I know people say I'm a roughneck, and maybe I am. But it's no wonder, with the way they goad me. Listen, Nobu, I've had enough of them—ever since last year when that jerk from Shōta's gang picked a fight with my little brother and they all came running and jumped on him and threw him around. I mean, what do you think of something like that? Beating up a little kid and breaking his festival lantern! And then that Donkey from the dumpling shop, who's so big and awkward he thinks he can go around acting like a grown-up! He comes and starts insulting me to my brother behind my back. You know what he said? 'Think Chōkichi's so smart, huh?'"



And your father's fire chief? Well, your big brother isn't head of anything. He's the tail end—a pig's tail end! That's what he said! All this time I'm off in the parade, pulling our float. When I heard about it later, though, I was ready to get even! But my father found out, and I'm the one who got in trouble. And you remember the year before that, don't you? I went over to the paper shop, where a bunch of kids from the main street were putting on their slapstick.<sup>15</sup> You know what snide things they said to me? 'Doesn't the back street have its own games?' And all the while they're treating Shōta like king. I don't forget these things, Nobu . . . I don't care how much money he has. Who is he, anyway, but the son of a loan shark? I'd be doing the world a favor to get rid of such a creep. This year, no matter how tough I have to be, I'll see to it that Shōta eats his words. That's why, Nobu—come on—for a friend, you've got to help. I know you don't like this kind of rough stuff. But it's to get our honor back! Don't you want to help me smash that snooty Shōta with his stuck-up school songs? You know when they call me a stupid private-schooler, it goes for you too. So come on. Do me this one favor and help us out. Carry one of the lanterns around at the festival. Listen, I'm eating my heart out, this has been bothering me so much. If we lose this time, it'll be the end of me." Chōkichi's broad shoulders trembled with anger.

"But I'm not very strong."

"I don't care whether you're strong or not."

"I don't think I could carry one of the lanterns."

"You don't have to!"

"You'll lose even with me—you don't care?"

"If we lose, we lose. Look, you don't have to do anything. Just so you're on our side. All we have to do is show you off. It'll attract others. Build up our morale. I know I'm not very smart, but you are. So if they start using big words and making fun of us, you can answer right back in Chinese. I feel better already. You're worth the whole lot of them! Thanks, Nobu." It wasn't often you heard Chōkichi speak so softly.

The one the son of a workman, with his boy's belt and his smart straw sandals; the other like a priest in his somber jacket and his purple band—they were the opposite sides of a coin. More often than not; the two boys disagreed. Yet it was true that Nobu's own parents had a soft spot for Chōkichi. Why, the venerable Head Priest and his wife had heard Chōkichi's first cries as a babe outside the temple gate. And, after all, they did both go to the same school. If people made fun of the Ikueisha to Chōkichi, it reflected on Nobu too. It was a shame that Chōkichi wasn't better liked, but he never had been what you'd call appealing—unlike Shōta, who attracted everyone, even the older boys, for his allies. Nobu wasn't showing any prejudice. If Chōkichi lost, the blame would rest squarely on Shōta. When Chōkichi came to him like this, out of a sense of decency Nobu could hardly refuse.

"All right. I'm on your side. But you'd better keep the fighting down . . . If

they start things, we won't have any choice. And if that happens, I'll wrap Shōta around my little finger." Nobu's reticence had already been forgotten. He opened his desk drawer and showed Chōkichi the prized Kokaji dagger his father had brought him from Kyōto.

"Say! That'll really cut!" Chōkichi admired.

Look out—careful how you wave that thing.



Undone, her hair would reach her feet. She wore it swept up and pulled into a heavy-looking roll in the "red bear" style<sup>16</sup>—a frightening name for a maiden's hairdo, but the latest fashion even among girls of good family. Her skin was fair and her nose was nicely shaped. Her mouth, a little large perhaps, was firm and not at all unattractive. If you took her features one by one, it is true, they were not the classic components of ideal beauty. And yet she was a winsome girl, exuberant, soft-spoken. Her eyes radiated warmth whenever she looked at you.

"I'd like to see her three years from now!" young men leaving the quarter would remark when they noticed her returning from the morning bath, her towel in hand and her neck a lovely white above her orange kimono of boldly patterned butterflies and birds, her stylish sash wrapped high at the waist<sup>17</sup> and her lacquered slippers more thickly soled than what one usually saw, even around here.

Her name was Midori and she was from the Daikokuya. She was born in Kishū,<sup>18</sup> though, and her words had the slightest southern lilt. It was charming. There were few who did not enjoy her generous, open nature.

For a child, Midori had a handsome pocketbook, thanks to her sister's success in the quarter. The great lady's satellites<sup>19</sup> knew how to purchase good will: "Here Midori, go buy yourself a doll," the manager would say. "It isn't much, honey," one of the attendant girls would offer, "but it'll buy you a ball, anyway." No one took these gifts very seriously, and the income Midori accepted as her due. It was nothing for her to turn round and treat twenty classmates to matching rubber balls. She had been known to delight her friend the woman at the paper store by buying up every last shopworn trifle. The extravagance day after day was certainly beyond the child's age or station. What would become of her? Her parents looked the other way, never a word of caution.

And wasn't it odd, how the owner of her sister's house would spoil her so? She was hardly his adopted child, or even a relation. Yet ever since he had come to their home in the provinces to appraise her older sister, Midori and her parents had found themselves here at the Daikokuya. They had packed up their belongings, along with her sister, to seek their fortunes in the city.



What lay behind it all would be difficult to say, but today her parents were housekeepers for the gentleman. On the side, her mother took in sewing from the women of the district; her father kept the books at a third-rate house. They saw to it that Midori went to school and that she learned her sewing and her music. The rest of the time she was on her own: lolling around her sister's rooms for half the day, playing in the streets the other half. Her head was full of the sounds of samisen and drum, of the twilight reds and purples of the quarter.<sup>20</sup> New to the city, Midori had bristled when the other girls made fun of her, calling her a country girl for wearing a lavender collar with her lined kimono. She had cried for three days then. Not now, though. It was Midori who would tease when someone seemed uncouth—"What kind of dress is that!"—and no one had quite the nimble wit to return her rebukes.

The festival was to be held on the twentieth, and this year they would have to outdo themselves. Midori's help was needed. "All right. Everyone plan something. We'll take a vote. I'll pay for everything," she responded with her usual generosity. "Don't worry about the cost."

The children were quicker than adults to seize an opportunity. The beneficent ruler seldom comes a second time.

"Let's do a show. We can borrow a shop where everyone can watch us."

"No—that's stupid! Let's build a little shrine to carry around. A good one like they have at Kabata's. Even if it's heavy, it won't matter, once we get it going to a nice beat."

"Yatchoi! Yatchoi!" danced a youth already in the mood, his towel twisted into a festive headband.

"What about us?" "You think Midori's going to have any fun just watching while you're all roughhousing?" "Come on, Midori, have them do something else." The girls; it seemed, would prefer to forgo the celebrations for an afternoon of vaudeville.

Shōta's handsome eyes lit up. "Why don't we do a magic lantern show? I have a few pictures at my house. Midori, you can buy the rest. We can use the paper shop. I'll run the lantern, and Sangorō from the back street can be the narrator. What do you say, Midori? Wouldn't that be good?"

"I like it! If Sangorō does the talking, no one will be able to keep from laughing. Too bad we can't put a picture of him in the show."

Everything was decided. Shōta dashed around to get things ready.

By the next day, word of their plans had reached the back street.



The drums, the samisen! Even in a place never wanting for music, the festival is the liveliest time of year. What could rival it but Otori day? Just watch the shrines try to surpass one another in their celebrations.

The back-street and the main-street gangs each had their own matching

outfits, Mōka cotton emblazoned with their street names. "But they're not as nice as last year's," some grumbled.<sup>21</sup> Sleeves were tied up with flaxen cords stained yellow from a jasmine dye. The wider the bright ribbons, everyone agreed, the better. Children under fifteen or so weren't satisfied until they had accumulated all the trinkets they could carry—Daruma dolls, owls, dogs of papier-mâché. Some had eight or nine, even eleven, dangling from their yellow armbands. It was a sight to see them, bells of all sizes jingling from their backs as they ran along gamely in their stockinged feet.

Shōta stood apart from the crowd. Today he looked unusually dapper. His red-striped jacket and his dark-blue vest contrasted handsomely with his boyish complexion. He wore a pale blue sash wrapped tightly round the waist. A second look revealed it to be the most expensive crepe. The emblems on his collar were exceptional enough to draw attention by themselves. In his headband he had tucked a paper flower. Though his well-heeled feet beat time to the rhythm of the drums, Shōta did not join the ranks of any of the street musicians.

Festival eve had passed without incident. Now at dusk on this once-in-a-year holiday, twelve of the main-street gang were gathered at the paper shop. Only Midori, a long time with her evening toilette, had yet to appear. Shōta was getting impatient.

"What's taking her so long?" He paced in and out the front door. "Sangorō, go and get her. You've never been to the Daikokuya, though, have you? Call her from the garden, and she'll hear you. Hurry up."

"All right. I'll leave my lantern here. Shōta, keep an eye on it; someone might take the candle."

"Don't be such a cheapskate! Stop dawdling."

"I'm off."<sup>22</sup> The boy didn't seem to mind being scolded by his juniors.

"There goes the god of lightning,"<sup>23</sup> someone said, and the girls all burst out laughing at the way he ran. He was short and beefy, and, with no neck to speak of, his bulging head suggested one of those wooden mallets. Protruding forehead, pug nose, big front teeth—no wonder he was called Bucktooth-Sangorō. He was decidedly dark-skinned, but what one noticed even more was the expression on his face, dimpled and affable and ready for the clown's role. His eyebrows were so oddly placed as to suggest the final outcome of a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. He was an amusing child, without a mean streak in him.

To those who did not know how poor he was, Sangorō shrugged off his everyday cotton clothes. "Couldn't get a matching kimono made in time."

He was the eldest of six children. Their father contrived to feed them all by clinging to the handles of a rickshaw. True, he worked the prosperous street in front of the quarter, lined with the teahouses. But somehow the wheels of his cart never turned a real profit. Fast as they spun, they only kept the family going hand-to-mouth.<sup>24</sup>

"Now that you're thirteen, I'm counting on you to help out, boy," Sangorō's

father had told him the year before last. He went to work at the printing shop over in Namiki but, in his lackadaisical way, in ten days he had tired of the job. Seldom did he last more than a month anywhere. From November to January he worked part-time making shuttlecocks for the New Year's games. In summer he helped the iceman near the hospital. Thanks to the comical way he had of soliciting customers, the two of them did a brisk business. A born hawker, the iceman said.

Ever since he had pulled a float last year at the Yoshiwara carnival, his disapproving friends had dubbed him "Mannenchō." He was as bad, they said, as the jesters from that lowliest of slums.<sup>25</sup> But everyone knew Sangorō was a buffoon. No one disliked him; this was his one advantage.

The pawnshop Shōta's people ran was a lifeline for Sangorō and his family, whose gratitude toward the Tanakas was no small thing. True, the daily interest rates they were obliged to pay bordered on the exorbitant; yet without the loans they could scarcely have kept going. How, then, could they begrudge the moneylender his due?

"Sangorō," Shōta and the main-street gang were forever urging him, "come over to our street and play." And how could he refuse Shōta, to whose family they were all indebted? On the other hand, he was born and raised in the back streets, he lived on land belonging to Ryūge Temple, Chōkichi's father owned their house. It wouldn't do to turn his back openly on Chōkichi. When in the end he quietly went over to the main street, the accusing looks were hard for him to bear.

Shōta sat down in the paper shop, tired of waiting for Midori, and began to sing the opening lines of "Secret Love."

"Listen to that!" laughed the shopkeeper's wife. "Singing love songs already—we'll have to keep an eye on this one."

Shōta's ears turned red. "Let's go!" he called to the others in a loud voice he hoped would cover his embarrassment. But as he ran out of the shop, he bumped into his grandmother.

"Shōta—why haven't you come home for dinner? I've been calling and calling, but you're so busy playing you don't even listen. You can all play again after dinner. Thanks," she added in a curt word of parting to the shopkeeper's wife.

Shōta had no choice but to follow her home.

Whenever he left, how lonely it seemed. Only one less person than before, and yet even the grown-ups missed Shōta. It was not that he was boisterous or always cracking jokes, like Sangorō. Such friendliness, though—you don't usually find it in a rich boy.

"But did you see the nasty way his grandmother has?" housewives gossiped on the street corner. "She's sixty-four if she's a day. And her hair done up like a young floozy! At least she doesn't wear all that powder any more."

"You ought to hear her purr and coax to get her loans back. Nothing stops

her. You watch—the borrower could die, and she'd be at the funeral to collect. She's the kind who'll try to take her money with her when she goes."

"We can't even hold our heads up to her—that's the power of money."

"Don't you wish you had a little of it?"

"They say she even lends to the big houses in the quarter."

What they wouldn't give to know how much the old crone had.



"How sad it is for one who waits alone by the midnight hearth." The love songs do have a way of putting things.<sup>26</sup>

The breeze felt cool on that summer evening. In the bath Midori had washed the heat of the day away, and now she stood before her full-length mirror getting ready. Her mother took charge of repairing the girl's hairdo. A beauty, even if she did say so, the woman thought, inspecting her daughter from every angle. "You still don't have enough powder on your neck." They had chosen for the occasion a silk kimono in a cool, pale blue. Her straw-colored sash was flecked with gold threads and custom-made to fit her tiny waist. It would be some time, though, before they could begin deciding on the proper sandals.

"Isn't she ready yet?" Sangorō was losing his patience. He had circled the garden wall seven times. How much longer could he go on yawning? The mosquitoes around here were a local specialty; no sooner had he brushed them away than they would buzz back again. A bite on the neck, a bite on the forehead. Just as he had had about all he could take, Midori finally appeared.

"Let's go," she said.

He pulled her sleeve without answering her and began to run.

Midori was soon out of breath. She could feel her heart pounding. "Well, if you're in such a hurry about it, go on ahead."

Sangorō arrived at the paper shop just before her. Shōta, it appeared, had gone home for dinner.

"This isn't going to be any fun. We can't start the lantern show without Shōta," Midori complained, turning to the shopkeeper's wife. "Any checkers? Cut-outs? We'll need *something* to keep us busy till he comes."

"Here we are." The girls immediately began to cut out the paper dolls the shop lady handed them.

The boys, with Sangorō in the lead, replayed entertainments from the Yoshiwara carnival. Their harmony was odd, but they knew the melodies:

"Come see the thriving quarter—  
The lights, the lanterns under every eave,  
The gaiety of all five streets!"<sup>27</sup>

In fact, they remembered perfectly the songs and dances of a year, two years before. They didn't miss a beat; they had every gesture down. A crowd gathered at the gate outside to watch the ten of them, carried away by their own side show.

"Is Sangorō there?" called a voice from among the onlookers. "Come here a minute, quick." It was Bunji, the hairdresser's boy.

"Just a second," yelled Sangorō without a care.

No sooner did he run through the doorway than someone punched him in the face. "You double-crosser! This'll teach you! Who do you think I am? Chōkichi! I'll make you sorry you ever made fun of us!"

Sangorō was dumbfounded. He tried to escape, but they grabbed him by the collar.

"Kill him! Shōta too! Don't let the chicken get away. And Donkey from the dumpling shop—don't think you're going to get off so easy!"

The uproar swelled like the rising tide. Paper lanterns came crashing down from the eaves.

"Mind the lamp. You mustn't fight in front of the shop." The woman's yell was loud enough, but who was listening?

There were fourteen or fifteen of them in the attack, streamers round the heads, their oversize lanterns swinging. Blows were struck in all directions, things trampled underfoot. The outrage of it! But Shōta—the one they were after—was nowhere to be found.

"Hide him, will you? Where is he? If you don't tell us, you'll answer for it." They closed in around Sangorō, hitting and kicking, until Midori couldn't stand to watch. She pushed her way to the front, past the restraining hand of the shopkeeper's wife.

"What are you taking it out on him for? If you want to fight with Shōta, fight with Shōta. He didn't run away and he's not hiding. He's not here, that's all. This is our place. Why do you have to go sticking your noses in? You're such a creep, Chōkichi. Why don't you leave Sangorō alone? There—you've knocked him down. Now stop it! If you want to hit someone, hit me. Don't try to hold me back," she turned to the shopkeeper's wife, shouting abuse at Chōkichi all the while she tried to free herself.

"Yeah? You're nothing but a whore, just like your sister," Chōkichi shot back. He stepped around from behind the others and grabbed his muddy sandal. "This is all you're worth." He threw it at Midori.

With a splatter, it struck her square on the forehead. She turned white, but the shopkeeper's wife held her back. "Don't. You'll get hurt."

"Serves you right," Chōkichi gloated. "By the way, guess who's joined our side. Nobu from Ryūge Temple! So try and get even any time you want." He left Sangorō lying in the shop's front door. "You fools! *Weaklings!* Cowards! We'll be waiting for you. Be careful when you walk through the back streets after dark."

Just then he heard the sound of a policeman's boots. Someone had

squealed on them. "Come on!" As fast as they could, Ushimatsu, Bunji, and the ten or so others all scattered in different directions, crouching in hiding places among the alleyways until the coast was clear.

"Damn you, Chōkichi! You bastard. Damn you! Damn you, Bunji! Damn you, Ushimatsu! Why don't you just kill me? Come on. Just try and kill me. I'm Sangorō—and maybe it's not so easy! Even if you did kill me, even if I turned into a ghost, I'd haunt you for the rest of your lives. Remember that, Chōkichi!" Sangorō began to sob. Hot tears rolled down his cheeks. He looked as if he must be aching. His sleeves were torn. His back and hips were covered with dirt.

The force of his anger, beyond his power to control, kept the others back. But the shopkeeper's wife rushed over to him. "It's all right," she soothed him with a pat and helped him to his feet. She brushed the gravel from his clothes. "Don't be upset. There were just too many of them, the rest of us weren't much help, not even a grown-up could do anything. It wasn't a fair match—don't be ashamed. It's lucky you weren't hurt, but you won't be safe going home alone. I'll feel much better if the policeman takes you; it's a good thing he's come. Officer, let me tell you what happened."

As she finished her account, the policeman reached for the boy's hand in his professional way. "I'll take you home."

"No. I'm all right. I can go by myself." He seemed to cringe with shame.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll just take you as far as your house. Don't worry." He smiled at Sangorō and patted him on the head.

But Sangorō shrank back farther. "If my father hears about the fight, I'll get in terrible trouble. Chōkichi's father owns our house."

"How about if I take you as far as the front gate? I won't say anything to get you into trouble." He managed to coax the downcast Sangorō and led him off toward home.

The others felt relieved. But as they watched the two depart, at the corner leading to the back streets, for some reason Sangorō shook loose and broke into a run.



It was as rare as snow falling from a summer sky, but today Midori couldn't brook the thought of school. She wouldn't eat her breakfast. Should they order something special? It couldn't be a cold, she had no fever. Too much excitement yesterday, probably. "Why don't you stay home?" her mother suggested. "I'll go to the shrine for you."

Midori wouldn't hear of it. It was *her* vow to Tarō-sama for her sister's success.<sup>28</sup> "I'll just go and come right back. Give me some money for the offering."

Off she went to the shrine among the paddy fields. She rang the bell,

shaped like the great mouth of a crocodile, and clasped her hands in supplication. And what were they for, these prayers of hers? She walked through the fields with her head downcast, to and from the shrine.

Shōta saw her from a distance and called out as he ran toward her. He tugged at her sleeve, "Midori, I'm sorry about last night."

"That's all right. It wasn't your fault."

"But they were after me. If Grandmother hadn't come, I wouldn't have left. And then they wouldn't have beaten up Sangorō the way they did. I went to see him this morning. He was crying and furious. I got angry just listening to him talk about it. Chōkichi threw his sandal at you, didn't he? Damn him, anyway! There are limits to what even he can get away with. But I hope you're not mad at me, Midori. I didn't run away from him. I gulped my food down as fast as I could and was just on my way back when Grandmother said I had to watch the house while she went for her bath. That's when all the commotion must have started. Honest, I didn't know anything about it." He apologized as if the crime were his, not Chōkichi's. "Does it hurt?" Shōta examined Midori's forehead.

"Well, it's nothing that will leave a scar," Midori laughed. "But listen, Shōta, you mustn't tell anyone. If Mother ever found out, I'd get a real scolding. My parents never lay a hand on me. If they hear a dolt like Chōkichi smeared mud on my face with his filthy sandal—" She looked away.

"Please forgive me. It's all my fault. Please. Come on, cheer up. I won't be able to stand it if you're mad at me." Before they knew it, they had reached the back gate of Shōta's house. "Do you want to come in? No one's home. Grandmother's gone to collect the interest. It's lonely by myself. Come on, I'll show you those prints I told you about the other day. There are all kinds of them." Shōta wouldn't let go of her sleeve until Midori had agreed.

Inside the dilapidated gate was a small garden. Dwarf trees were lined up in their pots and from the eaves hung a tiny trellis of fern with a windbell, Shōta's memento from the holiday market.<sup>29</sup> But who would have picked it for the wealthiest house in the neighborhood? Here alone by themselves lived an old woman and a boy. No one had ever broken in: there were cold, metal locks everywhere, and the neighboring tenements kept an eye on the place.

Shōta went in first and found a spot where the breeze blew. "Over here," he called to Midori, handing her a fan. For a thirteen-year-old, he was rather too sophisticated. He took out one color print after another. They had been in his family for generations, and he smiled when Midori admired them. "Shall I show you a battledore? It was my mother's. She got it when she worked for a rich man. Isn't it funny? It's so big. And look how different people's faces were in those days. I wish she were still alive . . . My mother died when I was three, and my father went back to his own family's place in the country. So I've been here with Grandmother ever since. You're lucky, Midori."

"Look out. You'll get the pictures wet. Boys aren't supposed to cry."

"I guess I'm a sissy. Sometimes I get to thinking about things . . . It's all right now, but in the winter, when the moon is out and I have to make the rounds in Tamachi collecting the interest, sometimes when I walk along the ditch, I sit down on the bank and cry. Not from the cold. I don't know why . . . I just think about things. I've been doing the collecting ever since year before last. Grandmother's getting old. It's not safe for her at night. And her eyes aren't so good any more. She can't see what she's doing when she has to put her seal on the receipts. We've had a lot of different men working for us. But Grandmother says they all take us for fools—when it's only an old lady and a boy they have to answer to. She's just waiting for the day when I'm a little older and we can open the pawnshop again. We'll put the family sign out in front, even if things aren't as good as they used to be. Oh, I know people say Grandmother's stingy. But she's only careful about things for my sake. It really bothers me, to hear them talk that way. I guess the people I collect from over in Tōrishinmachi are pretty bad off, all right. I suppose it's no wonder they say things about her. When I think about it, though, sometimes I just can't help it if I cry. I guess I am a weakling. This morning when I went to see Sangorō, he was sore all over, but he still went right on working so his father wouldn't find out about last night. I didn't know what to say. A boy looks pretty silly when he cries, doesn't he? That's why the back street makes fun of Sangorō." He seemed ashamed at his own unmanliness.

Occasionally their eyes would meet.

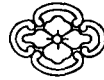
"You looked so handsome yesterday, Shōta. It made me wish I were a boy. You were the best dressed of them all."

"I looked good! *You* were beautiful! Everybody said you were prettier than any of the girls in the quarter, even your sister Ōmaki. Boy, I'd be proud if you were my sister! I'd hold my head up with a girl like you alongside me. But I don't have any brothers or sisters. Hey, Midori, what do you say we have our picture taken? I'll wear what I did yesterday and you can put on one of your best striped kimonos, and we'll have Katō in Suidōjiri take our picture! Won't Nobu be jealous! He'll turn white, he'll be so envious—a milquetoast like him wouldn't know how to turn red. Or maybe he'll just laugh at us. Who cares? If Katō takes a big one, he might use our picture in the window! What's the matter? Don't you like the idea? You don't look very excited." The boy's impatience was disarming.

"What if I look funny? You might not like me any more." Her laugh had a beautiful ring, her spirits had obviously improved.

The cool of the morning had given way to the summer sun. It was time for Midori to be going: "Shōta, why don't you come over this evening? We can float candles on the pond and chase the fish. It'll be easy now that the bridge is fixed."

Shōta beamed as he saw her out. What a beauty Midori was.



Nobu of Ryūge Temple and Midori of the Daikokuya both went to school at the Ikueisha. It had all started at the end of last April, at the spring athletic meet in Mizunoya-no-hara. The cherries had fallen and the wisteria was already in bloom in the shade of the new green leaves. They played their games of tug-of-war and catch and jump rope with such ardor that no one seemed to notice the sun going down. But what had come over Nobu? He had lost his usual composure. He stumbled over the root of a pine by the pond and landed hands-first in the red mud.

Midori, who happened to be going by, took one look at his dirty jacket and proffered her crimson handkerchief. "Here, you can wipe it off with this."

There were those, however, who were jealous of this attention from Midori. "For a priest's son, he sure knows how to flirt. Look at him smile when he thanks her! What's he going to do—take her for his wife? If she goes to live at the temple, then she really will be Miss Daikoku: from Midori of the Daikokuya to Daikoku, goddess of the kitchen! That ought to suit a priest."<sup>30</sup>

Nobu couldn't stomach all the talk. He had never been one to enjoy idle gossip and had always shunned tales about others. How, then, could he tolerate it when he found himself the target of the rumors? He began to dread hearing Midori's name. He was snappish whenever anyone mentioned field day. "You're not going to bring that up again, are you?" It never failed to put him in a bad mood. Yet what reason was there, really, for this loss of temper? He knew he would do better feigning indifference. A stoic face, wait it out, he told himself. He could silence his tormentors with a word or two, but the embarrassment was still there. A cold sweat followed every confrontation.

At first, Midori failed to notice any change. On her way home from school one day she called out with her usual friendliness. Nobu trailed behind amid a cluster of people. The blossoms at the roadside had caught her eye, and she waited for him to catch up. "See the pretty flowers, Nobu? I can't reach them. You're tall enough—won't you pick me some?"

She had singled him out from his younger companions. There was no escaping. He cringed at what he knew the others would be saying. Reaching for the nearest branch, without even choosing, he picked the first flower he saw, a token effort. He flung it at her and was gone.

"Well, if that's how he's going to be! Unsociable thing!"

After several of these incidents, it dawned on Midori: Nobu was being mean to her deliberately. He was never rude to any of the others, only her. When she approached, he fled. If she spoke to him, he became angry. He was sullen and self-conscious. Midori had no idea how to please him, and in the end she gave up trying. Let him be perverse; he was no friend of hers. See if she'd speak to him after he'd cut her to the quick. "Hello's" in the street

were a thing of the past. It would take important business indeed before she would deign to talk to him. A great river now stretched between them that all boats were forbidden to cross. Each of them walked alone on separate banks of the stream.

From the day after the festival, Midori came to school no more. She could wash the mud from her face, but the shame could not be scrubbed away so easily.

They sat together side by side at school—Chōkichi's gang and the main-street gang—and one might have expected that they could get along. But there had always been a sharp division.

It was the act of a coward to attack a weak, defenseless girl. Everyone knew Chōkichi was as violent and as stupid as they come. But if he hadn't had Nobu backing him, he could never have behaved so brazenly. And that Nobu! In front of others he pretended to be gentle and wise, but a look behind the scenes would reveal that *he* was the one pulling all the strings. Midori didn't care if he was ahead of her in school, or how good his grades were. So what if he was the young master of Ryūge Temple! She, after all, was Midori of the Daikokuya, and not beholden to him in the slightest. She had never borrowed a single sheet of paper. So who were they to call her a tramp, or those other names Chōkichi had used? She wasn't about to be impressed just because Ryūge Temple had a prominent parishioner or two.

What about the patrons her sister Ōmaki had? The banker Kawa, a steady customer for three years now; Yone, from the stock exchange; and that short one, the member of parliament—why, he'd been all set to buy her sister's contract and marry her, till Ōmaki decided she could do without him. And he was somebody! Just ask the lady who ran Ōmaki's house. Go ahead and ask, if you thought she was making it up. Where would the Daikokuya be without her sister? Why do you think even the owner of the house was never curt with Midori and her parents? Just take that porcelain statue of Daikoku, the one he kept in the alcove. Once when she was playing shuttlecock, she knocked over a vase accidentally and smashed the master's favorite statue to smithereens. He was sitting right in the next room drinking. And all he said was, "Midori, you're turning into a little tomboy." Not one word of reproach. Had it been anyone else, you can be sure, he wouldn't have stopped there. The maids were green with envy. No question about it, the child's privileges derived from her sister's position. Midori knew it, too. Her parents were mere caretakers for the master's house, but her sister was Ōmaki of the Daikokuya. She didn't have to take insults from the likes of Chōkichi. And too bad for him if the little priest wanted to be mean to her. Midori had had enough of school. She was born stubborn and she was not about to suffer anyone's contempt. That day she broke her pencils and threw away her ink; she would spend her time playing with her real friends. She wasn't going to need her abacus or her books.





In evening they rush into the quarter, at dawn they leave less cheerfully. It's a lonely ride home, with only dreams of the night before to keep a man company. Getaways are under cover. A hat pulled low, a towel around the face. More than one of these gentlemen would rather that you didn't look. To watch will only make you feel uneasy. That smirk of theirs—not half-pleased with themselves as the sting of their lady's farewell slap sinks in. After all, she wouldn't want him to forget her. Careful when you get to Sakamoto. The vegetable carts come barreling back from the early morning market. Watch out when you hit Crazy Street. Until Mishima Shrine, you won't be safe from those who wander home all gaga and enraptured from the night before. Their faces never look so resolute the morning after. It's rude to say it, but don't they all suggest love's fools? The fishwives seldom hesitate to sum them up. Look, there goes a man with money. But that one over there, he couldn't have a penny to his name.

One need hardly cite the Chinese "Song of Everlasting Sorrow"<sup>31</sup> and the heights to which Yang's daughter rose to see that there are times when daughters are more valuable than sons. Many a princess comes into the world among the shanties of the back street. Today she calls herself "Snow" in one of those swank geisha houses over in Tsukiji, a celebrated beauty whose accomplishments in dance have entertained a nobleman or two. But yesterday she was a mere delinquent and she earned her spending money making playing cards, you know. "What kind of tree does rice grow on?" she asks, as if she'd grown up in the lap of luxury. Around here, of course, she is not the celebrity she used to be. Once they leave, they're soon forgotten. Already she has been eclipsed by the dye-maker's second daughter, Kokichi, a home-grown flower of a girl, whose name you'll hear throughout the park. The lanterns are up these days at The New Ivy, in Senzoku, where that one works.

Night and day, it's the daughters that you hear of. A boy is about as useful as a mutt sniffing round the rubbish. Every shopkeeper's son is a wastrel. At seventeen, the age of insolence, the young men band together. Before they go completely gallant—you don't see any flutes tucked into sashes yet—they join up with a leader whose alias is invariably a solemn, grandiose affair. They deck themselves out with matching scarves and matching paper lanterns. It won't be long now before they learn to gamble and to window-shop the quarter. Bantering with the courtesans will begin to come more easily. Even with the serious ones, the family business is only something for the day. Back from the evening bath they come in kimonos of a rakish cut, sandals dragging. "Hey, did you see the new one? At What's-Its-Name? She looks like the girl at the sewing shop, over in Kanasugi. But, with that funny little nose of hers, she's even uglier." It's the only thing remotely on their

minds. They bum tobacco, a piece of tissue at every house. The pats and pinches they exchange with each beauty along the way: *these* are the things that bring a lifetime of renown. Even the sons of perfectly upstanding families decide to style themselves as local toughs. They are forever picking fights around the Gate.

Ah, the power of women. One need hardly say more. In the quarter, prosperity makes no distinctions between the autumn and the spring. Escort lanterns are not in vogue these days, and still the men are carried away. All it takes is the echo of a pair of sandals. Here she comes! The little girl from the teahouse who will take them to their ladies. Clip-clop, clip-clop. The sound mingles with the music of the theater. They hear it and they stream into the quarter. If you ask them what they're after, it's a flowing robe, a scarlet collar, a baroque coiffure, a pair of sparkling eyes and lips with painted smiles. The beauties may in fact have little of the beautiful about them. The minute they are courtesans, they climb the pedestal. Those of you from other parts may find it all a little hard to understand.

Needless to say, Midori, who spent her days and nights immersed in such a world, soon took on the color of the quarter. In her eyes, men were not such fearsome things. And her sister's calling was nothing to disparage. When Ōmaki was on the verge of leaving for the city, how Midori had cried. Not in her wildest dreams had she hoped to accompany her sister. And now here they were. Who wouldn't envy a sister like Ōmaki? What with her recent success, it was nothing for her to repay all the debts she had ever owed her parents. Midori had no notion of what price Ōmaki might have paid to reign supreme in her profession. To her it was all a game. She knew about the charms and tricks the girls would use. Simpering to summon men they longed for, like mice grabbing cheese. Tapping on the lattice when they made a wish. She knew the secret signals they would use to give their guests a parting pat. She had mastered the special language of the quarter, and she didn't feel the least embarrassed when she used it.

It was all a little sad. She was fourteen. When she caressed her dolls, she could have been a prince's child. But for her, all lessons in manners and morals and the wifely arts were topics to be left at school. What never ceased to capture her attention were the rumors of her sister's suitors—who was in and who was out of favor—the costumes of the serving girls, the bedding gifts that men would lavish on Ōmaki,<sup>32</sup> the teahouse tips for the introduction of a patron. What was bright and colorful was good, and what was not was bad. The child was still too young to exercise discretion. She was always taken with the flower just before her eyes. A headstrong girl by nature, Midori indulged herself by fluttering about in a world that she had fashioned from the clouds.

Crazy Street, Sleepy Street. The half-witted, groggy gentlemen all pass this way as they head home. At the gate to this village of late risers, the sweepers



and the sprinklers have already cleaned the streets. But look down main street. They have roosted for the night among the slums of Mannenchō or Yamabushichō, or perhaps Shintanimachi, and now here they come: what for want of any other word one might as well call "entertainers." The singing candy man. The two-bit player. The puppeteers. The jugglers and the acrobats. The dancers with their parasols. The clowns who do the lion dance. Their dress is as varied as their arts, a gauze of silk, a sash of satin. The clowns prefer the cotton prints from Satsuma, with black bands round the waist. Men, pretty women, troupes of five, seven, even ten, and a lonely old man, all skin and bones, who totters as he clutches his battered samisen. And, look, there's a little girl of five or so they've got to do the Kinokuni dance.<sup>33</sup> Over there, with the red ribbons on her sleeves. But none of them stop here. They know where the business is, and they hurry to the quarter. The guest who has lingered at the teahouse, the beauty in a melancholy mood—these are the ones it pays to entertain. The profits are too good to give it up, or to waste time with benefit performances along the way. Not even the most tattered and suspicious-looking beggar would bother to loiter around here.

A lady minstrel passed before the paper shop. Her hat all but concealed her striking face, yet she sang and played with the bearing of a star. "It's a shame we never get to hear the end of her song," the shopkeeper's wife complained. Midori, bright from her morning bath, was lounging on the shop's front step, watching the parade pass by. She pushed her hair up with her boxwood comb. "Wait here. I'll bring her back!"

The child never mentioned slipping something in the lady's sleeve to coax her to perform but, sure enough, back in tow she came to sing the requested song of thwarted love. "Thank you very much for your patronage," she concluded in her honeyed tone, and even as it echoed they knew that they were not about to hear its likes again.

"To think—a mere child could have arranged it!" bystanders marveled, more impressed with Midori than with the minstrel.

"Wouldn't it be fun to have them all perform?" Midori whispered to Shōta. "The samisen and the flute and the drums! The singers and the dancers! Everything we never get more than just a glimpse of!"

Even for Midori, the proposal was ambitious. "Don't overdo it, girl," Shōta muttered.



"Thus have I heard it spoken," the reverend priest intoned the sutra. As the holy words were carried from the temple by the soft breeze through the pines, they should have blown away all dust within the heart.

But smoke rose from fish broiling in the kitchen. In the cemetery diapers had been seen drying over tombstones. Nothing wrong here in the eyes of the Order, perhaps; those who fancied their clerics above worldly desires, though, found the doings at Ryūge Temple rather too earthly for their tastes.<sup>34</sup>

Here the fortunes of the head priest were as handsome as his stomach. Both had rounded out nicely through the years. The man's glow of well-being beggared description: not the sunny pink of the cherries, not the deep pink of the peach; from the top of his freshly shaven pate to the bottom of his neck, he shone like burnished copper. When he whooped with laughter—bushy, salt-and-pepper eyebrows floating heavenward—the noise of the old man's excess could have toppled Buddha from the altar.

The priest's young wife (she was only in her forties) was not an unattractive woman. Her skin was fair, and she wore her thinning hair in a small, modest bun. She was always cordial when people came to pray. Even the florist's wife outside the temple gate held her tongue where the reverend's wife was concerned—the fruit, you may be sure, of the temple lady's kindness: a hand-me-down here, a leftover there. At one time, she herself had been among the parishioners. But her husband died young, and, having nowhere to turn, she came to do the sewing at the temple. In exchange for meals, she took over the washing and the cooking. Before long she was out in the graveyard, sweeping away with the best of the groundsmen. The priest was quick to offer his compassion, and quicker still to calculate the advantages. The woman knew full well that the difference in their ages, some twenty years, might make the arrangement appear a bit unseemly. But she had nowhere else to go, and she came to consider the temple a good place to live out her days and to meet her end. She learned not to lose too much sleep over prying neighbors.

Some in the congregation found the situation shocking. Soon enough, however, they began to acknowledge that in her heart the woman was a good person, and they ceased to censure her. While she was carrying their first child, Ohana, the priest finally made an honest woman of her. A retired oil dealer over in Sakamoto, one of the parishioners who went in for such things, acted as the go-between—if you want to call it that.

Nobu was their second child. Someday he would do his father proud, but at the moment he was a taciturn, moody boy who preferred to pass the day alone in his room. Ohana, on the other hand, was quite the opposite, a lovely girl with fine skin and a soft, plump little chin. To call her a beauty would be going too far, perhaps, but since adolescence she had had her share of admirers. It seemed a shame to waste such a girl, for she might have been a geisha. Who knows? There may be worlds where even Buddha enjoys the music of the samisen. In this world, at any rate, there was the matter of what others said, and talk they would if the daughter of a temple became an

entertainer with her skirt hitched up. What the priest did instead was to establish Ohana in a little tea shop in Tamachi. He put her behind the counter, where she could vend her charm. Young men with no idea in their heads how tea was weighed and measured began to gather at the shop. Seldom was Ohana's empty before midnight.

But his holiness was the busy one. Loans to collect, the shop to oversee, funerals to arrange, not to mention all the sermons every month. When he wasn't flipping through accounts, he was going through the sutras. If things didn't let up, he'd wear himself out, he would sigh as he dragged his flowered cushion onto the veranda, where he fanned himself, half-naked, and enjoyed his nightly hooch. He was a fish-eater, and Nobu was the one he sent over to the main street for the broiled eels that he liked. "The big oily ones, if you please." It galled Nobu. His eyes never left his feet as he trudged over to the Musashiya. If he heard voices at the paper shop across the street, he would keep on going. Then, when the coast was clear, he'd dart into the eel shop. The shame he felt! He would never eat the smelly things.

The reverend was nothing if not practical. There were some who might call him greedy, but that never bothered him a whit. He was neither a timid soul nor an idler: give him a spare moment and he'd set about fashioning kumade charms. On Otori day he would have his wife out peddling them. Whatever doubts she may have had about the venture, they were short-lived once his holiness started to bemoan the killing everybody else made, rank amateurs up and down the street. He soon persuaded his reluctant wife, set up a booth not a stone's throw from the temple gate, and installed her there to sell his charms and good-luck hairpins. She tied her hair back with a headband, just like the vendors and all the young men. In the daytime, she knew enough to stay out of sight and mingle with the crowd, leaving the florist's wife to manage things. But when the sun went down—who would have guessed it?—the woman had a field day. At dusk she took over for herself, quite forgetting what a spectacle she made with her sudden itch for profit. "Everything marked down! Prices slashed!" she barked after a customer who backed away. Buffeted and dizzy from the throngs, the victim soon lost his powers of appraisal. They had fled along with memory: two days earlier he had come to this very temple as a pilgrim. "Three for only seventy-five sen." But her price left room to negotiate. "How about five for seventy-three?" "Sold!"

There were, of course, all kinds of sharp practices. Even if no one from the congregation heard, Nobu wondered, what would the neighbors think? And his friends? He could just hear them. Ryūge Temple is selling hairpins now. Nobu's mother is out huckstering like a lunatic. Really, didn't they think they ought to stop?

The reverend priest would hear nothing of it. "Knock it off. You don't know what you're talking about." The mere idea sent the man into paroxysms.

Prayers in the morning, accounts at night. His father's face beamed whenever his fingers touched the abacus. It was enough to turn the boy's stomach: Why on earth had the man become a priest?

There was nothing in his upbringing to make Nobu such a gloomy child. He had the same parents as Ohana. They were part of the same cozy, self-contained family. Yet, he was the quiet one. Even when he did speak, his opinions were never taken seriously. His father's schemes, his mother's conduct, his sister's education—to Nobu everything they did was a travesty. He had resigned himself to knowing that they would never listen. How unfair it was. His friends found him contrary and perverse, but in fact he was a weakling. If anyone maligned him in the slightest, he would run for the shelter of his room. He was a coward utterly lacking in the courage to defend himself. At school they called him a brain; his family's station was not lowly. No one knew how weak he really was. More than one of his friends considered Nobu something of a cold fish.



The night of the festival Nobu was sent on an errand to his sister's tea shop in Tamachi, and he was late coming home. Not until the next morning did he learn of the fight at the paper shop. When Ushimatsu and Bunji and the others gave him the details, the full impact of Chōkichi's violent ways startled him anew. What was done was done—but in name he was included in the violence, and it rankled. Now people would be blaming him for the trouble.

It was three days before Chōkichi had the nerve to face Nobu. For once he must have felt a little sheepish about the damage he had done. He did not look forward to Nobu's scolding. "I know you're probably angry," he ventured, having waited for the storm to pass. "I couldn't help it, though. Everything got out of hand. I hadn't meant it to happen. You won't hold it against me, will you, Nobu? How were we to know that you'd be gone and Shōta would fly the coop? It's not as though I planned to beat up Sangorō and pick a fight with that tramp Midori. Things just happened. You don't run away once the lanterns start swinging! All we wanted was to show a little muscle, show 'em who's boss. It's my fault, I know. I should have listened to you. But come on Nobu, if you get mad now, how's it going to look? After I've gone around telling everybody you're on *our* side. You can't leave us in the lurch. Okay, so you don't approve of this one thing. You be the leader, and next time we won't botch things up." Gone was the usual swagger.

Nobu couldn't turn his back on Chōkichi. "All right," he sighed. "But listen—bully the weak ones, and we'll be the ones in disgrace. We're not going to gain anything fighting Sangorō and Midori. If Shōta and his flunkies want to stir up trouble, we can cross that bridge when we come to it. But let's

not egg them on." Chōkichi had to promise: no more fights. For a rebuke, it was rather mild.

The innocent one was Sangorō. They had kicked and beaten him to their hearts' content, and he still ached two, three days afterward. He couldn't stand up, he couldn't sit down. Every evening when his father picked up the empty rickshaw and headed for the teahouses, someone would ask him what was wrong with the boy. "Say, your Sangorō looks a little peaked these days," the caterer remarked, almost accusingly. "Somebody give him a pounding?"

Groveling Tetsu they called his father, head always lowered before his betters. It didn't matter who—the landlord or someone with money or the owner of one of the houses in the quarter, where Tetsu pulled his cart—any of them could make the most impossible demands, and the rickshawman would acquiesce. "Indeed, of course, how right you are." Small wonder, then, what his reaction was to the incident with Chōkichi. "He's the landlord's son, isn't he? I don't care if you were right. I won't have you getting into scraps with him. Now go apologize. You ought to know better!" There was no avoiding it. His father made sure that he got down on his knees in front of Chōkichi.

Within a week Sangorō's wounds healed and his temper cooled. He was ready to forget what he'd been angry about. For the price of a carriage ride, he was baby-sitting again for Chōkichi's little brother, walking round with the child on his back and lulling it to sleep with nursery rhymes. Sangorō was sixteen, that age when boys get cocky, but the lumpish figure he cut failed to trouble him. He wandered over to the main street, unconcerned as always. "Hey, Sangorō. Have you forgotten you're a boy?" Midori and Shōta were great ones when it came to teasing. "Some sight you make, with that baby on your back!" It didn't matter, they were still his friends.

In spring the cherry trees blossom in profusion. In summer the lanterns twinkle in memory of the late Tamagiku.<sup>35</sup> In fall the festival streets overflow with rickshaws. Count them: seventy-five down the road within the space of ten minutes. Then the autumn holidays are over. Here and there a red dragonfly bobs above the rice fields. Before long, quail will be calling out along the moat. Mornings and evenings, the breeze blows cold. At the sundries shop, pocket warmers now take the place of mosquito incense. It's sad, somehow, that faint sound of the mortar grinding flour at Tamura's, over by the bridge. The clock at Kadoebi's has a melancholy ring. Fires glow through all four seasons from the direction of Nippori. It's in autumn that one begins to notice them. Smoke rises each time one more soul embarks on the journey to the other shore.

Deftly, a geisha plays on the samisen. The refrain reaches the path along the bank behind the teahouses. A passerby looks up and listens. Not much of a song, really, but moving all the same. "Together we shall spend our night of

love."<sup>36</sup> Women who have done time in the quarter will tell you—it's the men who begin visiting in fall who prove to be the truly faithful ones.

Talk, talk: in this neighborhood, there is always grist for gossip. The details are tedious, but the stories make the rounds. A blind masseuse, she was only twenty, killed herself. With a handicap like hers, love was out of the question. Well she couldn't stand it any more. Drowned herself in Mizunoya Pond. Then there are the incidents too commonplace to rate a rumor. Missing persons: Kichigorō, the greengrocer, and Takichi, the carpenter. How come? "They picked them up for this," a fellow whispers, and pantomimes a gambler dealing out the cards.

A moment ago there were children there, down the street. "Ring-a-ring-a-rosey, pocket full of posies."<sup>37</sup> Suddenly it's quiet now, before you notice. Only the sound of rickshaws, loud as ever.

It was a lonely night. Just when it seemed the autumn rains would go on and on falling softly, with a roar a downpour came. At the paper shop they were not expecting anyone. The shopkeeper's wife had closed up for the evening. Inside, playing marbles,<sup>38</sup> were Shōta and Midori, as usual, and two or three of the younger ones. All at once, Midori heard something: "Is that a customer? I hear footsteps."

"I don't hear anything," Shōta said. He stopped counting out the marbles.

"Maybe someone wants to play."

Who could it be? They heard him come as far as the gate, but after that, not a word, not a sound.



"Boo!" Shōta opened the door and stuck his head out. "Hey, who's there?" He could just make out the back of someone walking along beneath the eaves two or three houses up ahead. "Who is it? Do you want to come in?" He had slipped Midori's sandals on and was about to run after him, in spite of the rain. "Oh, it's him." Shōta cupped his hand above his head, mimicking a bald monk. "No use—we can call him all we want, he won't come."

"Nobu?" Midori asked. "That old priest! I'll bet he came to buy a writing brush and scurried off the minute he heard us. Nasty, stupid, toothless, old-maid Nobu! Just let him come in. I'll tell him what I think. Too bad he ran away. Let me have the sandals. I want a look." This time Midori poked her head out. The rain dripped down from the eaves onto her forehead. It gave her a chill. She pulled back, staring at the shadowy figure as he made his way around the puddles. He was four or five houses away by now, and he seemed to cower in the gaslight. His paper umbrella hugged his shoulders. She looked and looked.

Shōta tapped her on the shoulder. "Midori, what is it?"

"Nothing," she said absent-mindedly, returning to the game. "I hate that little altar boy! He can't even conduct his fights in public. He makes that pious, old-maid face of his and goes sneaking round corners. Isn't he awful? My mother says people who are straightforward are the good ones. She's right, don't you think, Shōta? It's a sure thing Nobu has an evil heart, the way he lurks around."

"But at least he knows what's what. Not like Chōkichi, there's a real moron. The boy's a total ignoramus," Shōta said knowingly.

"Cut it out. You and your big words." Midori laughed and pinched him on the cheek. "Such a serious face! Since when are you so grown up?"

Shōta was not amused. "For your information, it won't be long before I *am* grown up. I'll wear a topcoat with square-cut shoulders like the shopkeeper at Kabata's, and the gold watch Grandmother's put away for me. I'll wear a ring. I'll smoke cigarettes. And for shoes—you're not going to see me in any clogs. Oh, no. I'll wear leather sandals, the good kind, with triple-layered heels and fancy satin straps. Won't I look sharp!"

"You in triple heels and a square-cut overcoat?" Midori couldn't help snickering. "Mm, sure, if you want to look like a walking medicine bottle."

"Oh, quiet. You don't think I've stopped growing, do you? I won't be this short forever."

"Seeing is believing. You know, Shōta," Midori said, pointing a sarcastic finger at the rafters, "even the mice laugh when you keep making these promises." Everyone, the shopkeeper's wife included, shook with laughter.

His eyes spun; Shōta was completely serious. "Midori makes a joke of everything. But everyone grows up, you know. Why is what I say so funny? The day will come when I go walking with my pretty wife. I always like things to be pretty. If I had to marry someone like that pock-marked Ofuku at the cracker shop, or the girl at the firewood store with the bulging forehead—no thank you. I'd send her home. No pockmarks for me!"

"How good of you to come, then," the shop wife laughed. "Haven't you noticed my spots?"

"Oh, but you're old. I'm talking about brides. Once you're old, it doesn't matter."

"I shouldn't have said anything," the woman sighed. "Well, let's see now. There's Oroku at the flower shop. She has a pretty face. And Kii at the fruit stand. And who else? Who else, I wonder? Why, the prettiest one is sitting right next to you. Shōta, who will it be? Oroku with those eyes of hers? Kii and her lovely voice?"<sup>39</sup> Tell us who."

"What are you talking about? Oroku, Kii—what's so good about them?" Shōta's face turned scarlet, and he backed away from the light, into a corner.

"Does that mean it's Midori, then?"

"How do I know?" He looked away, tapping out a song against the wall. "The water wheel goes round and round."<sup>40</sup>

Midori and the rest had begun another game of marbles. *Her face was not flushed in the slightest.*



There would have been no problem if he hadn't taken the short cut. But every time Nobu went off to Tamachi he took the path along the ditch. And every time he saw it: the lattice gate, the stone lantern, the thatched fence. The summer bamboo blinds were rolled up now along the veranda. He couldn't help remembering things. Behind the glass windows,<sup>41</sup> her mother would be there, like some latter-day widow of Azechi at her rosary; and she would be there too, straight from the ancient tales, a young Murasaki with her hair bobbed.<sup>42</sup> This was the house of the man who owned the Daikokuya.

Yesterday and today the autumn rains had continued. The winter slip Ohana had requested was ready, and Nobu's mother was anxious for her to have it. She didn't like to ask in such weather, but would he mind taking it to the shop in Tamachi on his way to school? The poor girl was waiting for the package. Diffident Nobu could never say no. He took the bundle under his arm, stepped into his clogs, and started out, clinging to his umbrella as the rain lapped at his feet.

He followed the ditch around the quarter, the same path he always took, but today luck was not with him. Just in front of the Daikokuya, the wind came up. He had to tug to keep his umbrella from flying off. He braced his legs against the wind, when the strap on one of his clogs tore clean away. Now what was he to do?

It was almost enough to make him swear. He had no choice but to try repairing the clog himself. He propped his umbrella against the gate and sought shelter underneath its eaves. Yet how was a fledgling cleric to accomplish this sort of handiwork? He was flustered, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't fix it. He grew more and more irritated. From his sleeve he took out the draft of his school composition and tore it up, twisting the strips of paper in hopes of somehow fashioning a new strap. But the confounded storm grew worse again, and his umbrella began to roll away in the wind. This was more than he could tolerate! He reached out to grab the umbrella—but it was just his luck—his sister's package fell from his lap into the mud. There, now he had mud on his sleeve, too.

A pathetic sight he made, without an umbrella and stranded barefoot in the downpour. From the window, Midori saw the sad figure beyond the gate. "Look, someone's broken his sandal. Mother, can I give him something to fix

it with?" She found a piece of Yūzen crepe in the sewing drawer and hurried into her clogs. Grabbing an umbrella from the veranda, she dashed out across the stepping stones toward the front gate.

Then she saw who it was. The blood rushed to Midori's head. Her heart pounded as if she had encountered a dreaded fate. She turned to see, was anyone watching? Trembling, she inched her way toward the gate. At that instant Nobu, too, looked around. He was speechless, he felt cold sweat begin to bead. He wanted to kick off the other sandal and run away.

Had Midori been herself, she would have seized on Nobu's predicament to tell him what she thought. She would have sneered at his cowardice and heaped upon him every bit of abuse that he deserved. Didn't he think he owed her an apology? Bossing everyone around from backstage, ruining all the fun at the festival, just because he was angry at Shōta. And letting them beat up helpless Sangorō! He was the one who had incited Chōkichi to call her those names. And what was wrong with being a courtesan, anyway, even if she were one? She didn't owe him anything. With her parents and her sister and the man from the Daikokuya—what did she need to ask favors of a broken-down priest for? He had better stop calling her names. Something to say, was there? Then he could come out in the open, like a man. Any time, any time. She'd meet him. What did he have to say to that? She would have grabbed him by the sleeve and given him a piece of her mind, all right. Nobu would not have had a prayer.

But instead she cringed in the shadows of the gate. She didn't move, her heart throbbed. This was not the old Midori.



Whenever he came near the Daikokuya, timorous Nobu hurried past without so much as looking left or right. But today, the unlucky rain, the unlucky wind, and, to make matters worse, the broken sandal strap! There was nothing for it but to stop and make a new one. He was upset enough already, and then he heard the sound of steps on the flagstones—he felt as if ice water had been poured down his back. Even without looking, he knew who it would be. He shivered and his face changed color. He turned away and pretended to be hard at work. But he was panic-stricken. It didn't look as if the clog would ever be of use again.

From the garden, Midori peered at him. How clumsy he was; he could never do anything right. Who ever heard of trying to make a strap out of anything as flimsy as a piece of paper—or straw, is that what he was using? Old ladies, maybe. It would never hold. Oh, and didn't he know he was getting mud all over the bottom of his jacket? There went the umbrella. Why didn't he close it before he propped it up? How it irritated her to watch his

fumbling. "Here's some cloth to fix it with." If only she could have said it. Instead, she stood rooted to the spot, hiding, staring. The girl was oblivious to the rain soaking through her sleeves.

Midori's mother, unaware of what was happening, called out. "Midori, the iron's ready. What are you doing out there? Don't you know better than to play in the rain? You'll catch another cold."

"All right, coming." If only Nobu wouldn't hear. Her heart raced, her head seemed to reel. The last thing she could do was open the gate, but she could not turn her back on him, either. What was she to do? There—she hurled the rag outside the lattice without saying anything. Nobu pretended not to notice. Oh! He was his same old nasty self! It crushed her, the tears welled up. Why did he have to be so mean? Why didn't he just tell her what it was? It made her sick. But her mother kept on calling. It was no use. She started for the house. After all, why should she be sentimental? She wasn't going to let him see Midori eat humble pie.

He heard her walk away; his eyes wandered after her. The scarlet scrap of Yūzen silk lay in the rain, its pattern of red maple leaves near enough to touch. Odd, how her one gesture moved him, and yet he could not bring himself to reach out and take the cloth. He stared at it vacantly, and as he looked at it he felt his heart break.

He bungled everything. Nobu sighed and took the cord from his jacket and wrapped it round the clog. It was unsightly and makeshift, but perhaps it would do, perhaps he could stumble along. But all the way to Ohana's? It was a little late to be wondering that, he thought as he stood up, his sister's package tight under his arm. He had only gone two or three steps when he looked back again at the tatter of silk, bright with autumn maples. It was hard for him to leave it there.

"Nobu, what's the matter? Break your strap? What a sight you are!"

Nobu turned around to see who owned the unexpected voice. It was obnoxious Chōkichi, decked out like a young gallant. He had on his best-dress kimono,<sup>43</sup> and he wore his orange sash profligately low on the hips. His new jacket had a fancy black collar, and the umbrella he carried was festooned with the trademark of one of the houses in the quarter. His high clogs were sporting lacquered rain covers—this was something new. What pride there was in the young man's swagger.

"The strap broke, and I was wondering what to do," Nobu answered helplessly. "I'm not very good at these things."

"No, you wouldn't be. It's all right, wear mine. The straps won't give out."

"But what will you do?"

"Don't worry. I'm used to it. I'll just go like this," he said, tucking up the bottom of his kimono. "Feels much better than wearing sandals, anyway." He kicked off his rain clogs.

"You're going to go barefoot? That won't be fair."



"I don't mind. I'm used to going barefoot. Someone like you has soft feet. You could never walk barefoot on the gravel. Come on, wear these," he urged, arranging his sandals obligingly. What a spectacle: Chōkichi was more dejected than the plague god himself, and here he was with soft words on his tongue and bushy eyebrows moving solicitously. "I'll take your sandals and toss them in at the back door. Here, let's switch."

Chōkichi took the broken clogs, and they parted, Nobu bound for his sister's in Tamachi and Chōkichi for home before they met again at school.

The silk shred lay abandoned by the gate. Its red maple leaves shimmered in the rain.



This year there were three Otori fair days.<sup>44</sup> Rain had spoiled the second, but today, like the first, was perfect for a festival. Throngs packed Otori Shrine, young men surged into the quarter through the side gates. They say they've come to pay a visit to the shrine. They are pilgrims, but, ah, the roar of young laughter is loud enough to rend the pillars holding up the heavens, to tear away the very cord from which the earth hangs. Front and back of the main street of the quarter look as if they've been reversed. Today, the side drawbridges are down clear around the moat, and the crowds keep pouring in. "Coming through, coming through." What have we here? Some flat-bottomed boat trying to navigate these waves of people? Who will soon forget the excitement in the air? Peals of laughter, incessant chatter echo from the little shops along the ditch. Strains of the samisen rise from the first-class pleasure houses towering several stories in the sky.

Shōta took a holiday from collecting interest. He dropped in at Sangorō's potato stall, and then he visited his friend Donkey at the dumpling shop. "How are you doing? Making any money?" The sweets looked pretty uninviting.

"Shōta! You're just in time. I've run out of bean jam and don't know what to do. I've already put more on to cook, but they keep coming and I don't want to turn them away. What should I do?"

"Don't be stupid. Look what you've got on the sides of the pot. Add some water and some sugar, and you can feed another ten or twenty people. Everybody does it—you won't be the first. Besides, who's going to notice how it tastes in all this commotion? Start selling, start selling." Shōta was already at the sugar bowl.

Donkey's one-eyed mother was filled with admiration. "You've become a real merchant, Shōta. I'm almost afraid of you."

"This? I saw Clammy do the same thing in the alley. It's not my idea." The woman's praise did not go to his head. "Hey, do you know where Midori is?"

I've been looking for her since this morning. Where'd she go off to? She hasn't been to the paper shop. I know that. I wonder if she's in the quarter."

"Oh, Midori, she went by a little while ago. I saw her take one of the side bridges into the quarter. Shōta, you should have seen her. She had her hair all done up like this." He made an oafish effort to suggest the splendor of Midori's new grown-up hairdo. "She's really something, that girl!" The boy wiped his nose as he extolled her.

"Yes, she's even prettier than her sister. I hope she won't end up like Ōmaki." Shōta looked down at the ground.

"What do you mean—that would be wonderful! Next year I'm going to open a shop, and after I save some money I'll buy her for a night!" He didn't understand things.

"Don't be such a smart aleck. Even if you tried, she wouldn't have anything to do with you."

"Why? Why should she refuse me?"

"She just would." Shōta flushed as he laughed. "I'm going to walk around for a while. I'll see you later." He went out the gate.

"Growing up,  
she plays among the butterflies  
and flowers.  
But she turns sixteen,  
and all she knows  
is work and sorrow."<sup>45</sup>

He sang the popular refrain in a voice that was curiously quavering for him, and repeated it again to himself. His sandals drummed their usual ring against the paving stones, as all at once his little figure vanished into the crowd.

Inside the bustling quarter, Shōta found himself swept along into a corner of the compound. It was there he saw Midori. Why, it certainly was Midori of the Daikokuya; she was talking to an attendant from one of the houses, and, just as he had heard, her hair was done up in the glorious *shimada* style of a young woman.<sup>46</sup> And yet she looked shy today. Colored ribbons cascaded from her hair, tortoise-shell combs and flowered hairpins flickered in the sun. The whole effect was as bright and stately as a Kyōto doll. Shōta was tongue-tied. Any other time, he would have rushed over and taken her arm.

"Shōta!" Midori came running up. "If you have shopping to do, Otsuma, why don't you go on ahead? I'll go home with him." She nodded good-by to the lady.

"Oh, you don't want me around, now that you've found another friend, is that it?" Otsuma smiled as she headed down a narrow street of shops. "I'll be off to Kyōmachi, then."

"You look nice, Midori." Shōta tugged at her sleeve. "When did you get that



new hairdo? This morning? Why didn't you come and show it to me?" He pretended to be angry.

Midori had difficulty speaking. "I had it done this morning at my sister's. I hate it." Her spirits drooped. She kept her head down; she couldn't bear it when a passerby would gawk.



When she felt so awkward and unhappy, flattery only sounded like an insult. People turned to admire her and she thought they were jeering.

"Shōta, I'm going home."

"Why don't you play? Did someone scold you? I bet you had a fight with your sister."

Midori felt her face color. Shōta was still a child, clearly. Where did one begin to explain?

They passed the dumpling shop, and Donkey called out theatrically, "You two sure are friendly." It made her feel like crying.

"Shōta, I don't want to walk with you." She hurried off ahead of him.

She had promised to go with him to the festival, and now here she was, headed in the opposite direction. "Aren't you going to come?" he yelled, running after her. "Why are you going home? You might at least explain!"

Midori walked on without answering, hoping to elude him. Shōta was stunned. He pulled at her sleeve. It was all so strange. Midori's face only turned a deeper red. "It's nothing, Shōta." But he knew that this was not the truth.

He followed her in through the gate at her house and onto the veranda. There was no need to hesitate; he had been coming here to play for years.

"Oh, Shōta," her mother greeted him. "Nice to see you. She's been in a bad mood all day. I don't know what to do with her. See if you can cheer her up."

Shōta became quite the grown-up. "Something the matter, is there?"

"No, no." Her mother gave an odd smile. "She'll get over it in no time. She's just spoiled. I suppose she's been grumpy with her friends, too? I tell you, sometimes I've had it with that girl." Her mother turned to look at her, but Midori had gone into the other room. Her sash and her outer kimono were discarded on the floor and Midori lay face-down underneath a quilt.

Shōta approached her gingerly. "Midori, what is it? Don't you feel well? Please tell me what's the matter." He held back as he spoke to her. What should he do? He folded and unfolded his hands in his lap. Midori said nothing. He could hear her sobbing into her sleeve. Her bangs, too short still for sweeping up into the great hairdo, were matted with tears. Something was terribly wrong, but, child that he was, Shōta had no idea what it could

be, or how to console her. He was totally bewildered. "Please tell me what it is. You've never said anything to me, so how can you be angry with me?" He looked at her warily.

"Shōta, it isn't you." Midori wiped her eyes.

But when he asked her what it was, then, she couldn't answer. There were just sad things, vague things. Feelings . . . She couldn't put them into words. They made her cheeks burn. Nothing she could point to—and yet lately everything discouraged her. So many thoughts; none of them would ever have occurred to the Midori of yesterday. This awkwardness all of a sudden! How was she to explain it? If they would just leave her alone . . . she'd be happy to spend night and day in a dark room. No one to talk to her, no one to stare. Even if she felt unhappy, at least she would be spared the embarrassment. If only she could go on playing house forever—with her dolls for companions, then she'd be happy again. Oh! She hated, hated, hated this growing up! Why did things have to change? What she would give to go back a year, ten months, seven months, even.

They were the thoughts of someone already old.

She had forgotten that Shōta was there. But he kept on pestering her until she wanted to drive him away. "For God's sake, go home, Shōta. I feel like dying, with you here. All these questions give me a headache. They make me dizzy. I don't want anybody here! Just go home!"

She had never treated him so cruelly; Shōta could make no sense of it. He might as well have been groping through a cloud of smoke. "You sure are acting strange, Midori. I don't know why you talk this way. You must be crazy." The regrets were too much for him. He spoke calmly enough, but now his eyes smarted. This wouldn't help matters.

"Go home! Go home, will you! If you don't get out of here, you're not my friend at all. I hate you, Shōta."

"If that's the way you feel, I'm sorry to have bothered you." He darted off through the garden without so much as a farewell to Midori's mother, who had gone to check the water in the bath.



Shōta made a beeline for the paper shop, ducking, dodging his way through the crowds.

Sangorō was there, his holiday stall sold out and the take jingling in his pocket. Shōta burst in upon them just as Sangorō was playing the part of big brother. "Anything you want—it's yours!" The younger ones jumped up and down with glee. "Hey, Shōta! I was looking for you. I made a lot of money today. I'll treat you."

"You idiot. Since when do you treat me? Don't start talking big." These were rough words for Shōta. "That's not what I came here for." He looked dejected.

"What happened? A fight?" Sangorō shoved a half-eaten doughnut into his pocket. "Who was it? Nobu? Chōkichi? Where? The temple? Was it in the quarter? It won't be like the last time! This time, they won't take us by surprise. There's no way we can lose. I'm ready. Let me lead. We can't chicken out, Shōta."

The call to arms only infuriated him. "Take it easy," Shōta snapped. "There was no fight."

"But you came in here as if something terrible had happened. I thought it was a fight. And besides, if you don't do it tonight, we won't have another chance. Chōkichi's losing his right arm."

"Huh?"

"His accomplice, Nobu. Didn't you hear? I just found out. My father was talking with Nobu's mother. Any day now, he's going off to learn how to be a monk. Once he puts those robes on, they'll cover up his fighting arm. Those long, floppy robes—how can he roll up his sleeves in them? But you know what that means. Next year, you'll have the front and the back street to yourself."

"All right, quiet. For a few coins they'll go over to Chōkichi. I could have a hundred like you, and it wouldn't excite me in the least. They can go where they like for all I care. I'll fight my own battles. It was Nobu I wanted to beat. But if he's running off on me, it can't be helped. I thought he was going next year, after he graduated. What a coward—why is he going so soon?"

But it wasn't Nobu he was worried about. Tonight, there were none of the usual songs from Shōta. Midori was on his mind. The throngs of merrymakers passing in the street only left him feeling lonely. What was there to celebrate?

The lamps went on, and Shōta rolled over on his side. Some festival, everything had ended in a mess!

From that day on Midori was a different person. When she had to, she went to her sister's rooms in the quarter, but she never went to play in town. Her friends missed her and came to invite her to join them in the fun again. "Maybe later. You go on ahead." Empty promises, always. She was cool even to Shōta, once her closest friend. She was forever blushing now. It seemed unlikely that the paper shop would see the old dancing and the games a second time.

People were puzzled. Was the girl sick? "No, no. She'll be her old self again," her mother assured them. "She's just having a rest. One of her little vacations." The woman smiled. And yet there seemed to be more to it.

There was praise for Midori now from some quarters. So ladylike, so well-behaved. Yes, but what a shame, others mourned: she was such a delightful, saucy child.

The front street was quiet suddenly, as if a light had gone out. Seldom did Shōta sing his songs any more. At night you could see him with his lantern making the rounds for the interest payments. The shadow moving along the moat looked chilly, somehow. From time to time, Sangorō would join him, and his voice rang out, comical as ever.

Everyone talked about Nobu, but Midori had not heard any of the rumors. The former spitfire was still closeted away somewhere. With all these changes lately, she hardly knew herself. She was timid now, everything embarrassed her.

One frosty morning, a paper narcissus lay inside the gate. No one knew what it was doing there, but Midori took a fancy to it, for some reason, and she put it in a bud vase. It was perfect, she thought, and yet almost sad in its crisp, solitary shape. That same day—she wasn't sure exactly where—Midori heard of Nobu's plans. Tomorrow he was leaving for the seminary. The color of his robes would never be the same.