

*Heart Matters\* : Short Stories\*\**  
by Yamamoto, Shugoro (1)  
A Translation

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Mom

The Thief And the Young Lord

Pop

**Mom**

**1.**

“Believe ya me, it’s true. Ya can hear it clear as a bell. Both the evenings of the fourteenth an’ the last day of the month, ev’ry month without fail, they count money. Tell ya, honest.”

“Ya prick up yer ears an’ listen fer it?”

“Like it or not, ya know, the sound comes through to me. We’re only separated by a single wall.”

“Hey look, it’s the last day of the month today,” said a young man, a

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\* The title was newly given by the translator; the author himself did not bring out a collection of any of his short stories under any such title pregnant of a number of interpretations. The translator leaves it to the reader how it is to be interpreted.

\*\* Translated from: 「かあちゃん」 (“Kāchan”), 「泥棒と若殿」 (“Dorobō to Waka Tono”), and 「ちゃん」 (“Chan”), in Shinchō Bunko, Shinchō Publishing Co. Tokyo. 2007, 2007, and 2012 (first ed. 1971, 1964, and 1965), respectively. These stories first appeared in the magazines: *All Yomimono*, July 1955, *Kōdan Club*, December 1949, and *The Weekly Asahi: Extra Number*, February 1958, respectively.

carrier by trade by the look of him. "It means they'll do it tonight, too, won't they?"

"Why not?" the first young man said. "They gotta do ev'ry month. It's been two years, it's all but their second nature. How can they miss it?"

Five habitués were drinking at the tables on either side of the inner part of the house. The tables were disposed in three rows, one on each side of the dirt-floored narrow space. The place was a shoebox approximately 30 feet long by 12 feet wide. In the depths was a 3-foot opening on one side that led into the kitchen where three maids were seated (they were sleepy- and puffy-faced). When customers made orders, they took turns serving saké and tidbits, but with an attitude as though they were truly worn-out.

Evidently, the place was an establishment for eating more than drinking. It was close on to ten in the evening, past the crowded time. What left of the customers were from the neighborhood for the purpose of drinking. That was how it looked in this place.

Apart from the five occupying the inner part, there was a solitary young man about twenty-two or -three. His self-serving hands showed he was drinking down in the dumps. Cheerlessly, he lapped the tidbit of shiokara salted-and-fermented fish insides. . . . He wasn't a regular customer. Apparently a whim had him drop by. He wore a shabby long hanten livery coat fastened with a tattered three-foot sash, and worn-down zori sandals with plaited-hemp soles. He neglected his appearance, leaving everything about him uncared-for. His face and head were unshaven. His eyes were sunken and cheeks hollow. All this made his expression laden with lethargy in an "I-couldn't-care-less" desperation.

The rest of the three in the inner part came shoving their oar in the conversation between the two carrier-like young men. Of them two were middle-aged men and the other a bald-headed, lean old man. They had been drinking at the separate eating tables in the same row.

"Den Boy, you're talkin' 'bout that mom again," said the bald-headed old man. "She's up to anythin' again?"

"Same ol' story, 'em countin' money."

"Oh piss it off, young gentleman," the man in the livery with the firm's

logo said. “Don’t ya rack your brain for another’s pain of money matters. Supposin’ ya was so pinched fer money ya gotta strangle yerself to death, ya couldn’t hope fer ’em to squeeze a penny fer ya. The parsimony of the family of ’em might of been enshrined in a double-door cabinet ya stash away sutras and Buddha images.”

“Ya went an’ worked out long loan words from China,” the other young man inveighed. “What’s the par-si-mo-ny mean which is enshrined in what ya call the double-door cabinet?”

“O-Kattsan, she wasn’t the way she is,” the bald-headed man said. “She used to be a good wife, given to tears, piously think of others. Her husband died when the kids were little. She raised ’em on her own and besides, . . . right, she didn’t let her kids horse ’round. But even though they were eating poor gruel every day, she did do something for ’em when there was someone in need. She’d never leave ’em with nothing done.”

“Well I never! Heh,” the man in the livery shook his head. “Would she never, that tightwad? Heh!”

“That’s not of late, but of old,” the old man said.

O-Kattsan, the old man continued, was a glib woman. She used to have her say an’ talk everyone down, come landlords, come town officials. Come whoever it was, she wouldn’t be beaten once her mind was set, never. But everyone in this neighborhood, every one of ’em indeed, knew she had a big heart and that she’d give all she had to others. The man in the livery shrugged and retorted: Aw shucks! Repeating that sort of crap a zillion times won’t make an excuse for the way she is now.

“They’re makin’ money, one an’ all in her family,” the man in the livery went on. “Ichita, the biggest boy, is a builder, Jiro, the second biggest, is a plasterer, Saburo, the third, —was a hawker, hawked down the streets with his merchandise hangin’ on a pole ’cross his shoulder, didn’t he? I got no idea what’s he doin’ nowadays.”

“Workin’ at the fish market,” responded the young man at the next table. “He’s only seventeen, that Abu bloke, he’s such a howling devil. He’s somethin’ like a broker at the fish market, ya know.”

“And o-San the daughter,” the man in the livery took up the thread

of the bull session, “she can do anythin’ like she was her mom’s rival. She works with her mom to sew, mend, undo, starch and dry, and all the other. Boy 7, the youngest one, to clinch it all, he’s six or seven and at this age, the devil picks everythin’ that’s layin’ on the road, such as bent nails and pieces of brass. He sells ’em to junk dealers and scrap metal dealers if they earned him money if a penny. I say they’re makin’ money just like a madman. The entire family’s outa the way. Madness is their middle name!”

Anyways, that’s fine, the man in the livery went on. No problem makin’ money. But we’re poor an’ we’ve got our own way to get alon’ wi’ others. We got poor neighbors. They alone are fer us to get alon’ wi’ and no one else. They’re actually relatives. We must rely on each other an’ help each other. Otherwise, we can’t get by, we poor ones. Ain’t I right?

“Hey miss, warm more saké fer me,” the middle aged man at the end of the table said, shaking the empty tokkuri saké-container at one of the maids. He turned back to his cronies and said, “Was it Tahe’e’s case?”

“Yep, it was the Tahe’e case,” the man in the livery nodded. “His old woman’d been laid up fer a lon’ time, Tahe’e himself had a sprain. They couldn’t do nothin’ ’bout their three kids. It was the very image of lamentableness.”

By Jove, another quibble on Chinese, said one of the young men.

“There an’ then, the entire tenement houses talked together an’ decided to collect a little money from tenants.”

“You was the organizer, right?” said the middle aged man seated at the end.

“I got forced to take the responsibility. It was toward the year-end when we might well of gruded even a penny. But we didn’t. We grew big-hearted and made a contribution. When it came to that old woman,—o-Kattsan, well, she tightened her purse strings.”

The maid brought saké. The middle-ager at the end of the table poured the man in the livery from his new tokkuri. This man drank it and took up his own tokkuri and returned the service in kind as he went on to say, “O-Kattsan asked, how much’s everyone supposed to con-

tribute?" I says, Oh, it's not decided how much this one must and how much that one must. We're givin' out what we each one can within our means. Says she, 's that so? Then, we can do this much. And look what she gave out. It was a fine twenty mon. I gets miffed off, and I says, "Even the grandma at the brush-maker's gave out as much as twenty mon. In your family, everyone's makin' money. Can't you think about a bit more, please?" And says she, "'s so?" and goes on, Should it be too little, please forget us. She made a fine job when she put it: "The reason the whole bunch of us are making money is because unless we do so, we couldn't fall behind. We're working for all we're worth for the cause we have, for neither a show nor pleasure, let me remind you, sir."

"Ya got mad, didn'tcha?" the bald-headed old man said as he chortled. "Ya got taught how to draw a line and how to reason, ha!"

"Did I get mad? No," the man in the livery said. "—I got piqued and I gave the twenty mon clean back to her. And what do ya think she said? 'That's your own deciding, eh?', against the agreement the entire tenements got together to come to. You're collecting money according to the decision it made. Are you allowed to go against the grain?' Terrible, isn't it? Pity came on me and my wretched self, tell ya."

The middle-ager at the end laughed, and the bald-headed old man followed after:

"She wasn't the way she is," the old man said, laughing. "She used to go to all the trouble and cut on what'd have gone into their mouths in order to look after someone in need."

"Ya may be right, but they're earnin' money outa madness, ya know."

"Ya can say that again," said the young man who looked like a carrier. "What the heck made 'em set a foot wrong? They're makin' money niggardly. Seems they've saved up quite a little, just by the sound I hear through the wall, tell ya, guys"

"In time, ain't she gonna buy out the tenement houses in this neighborhood?" the man in the livery said. "Women at that age, once their mind made up, would do somethin' that'd blow yer mind."

Just then, —

The (strange) young customer who had been drinking in solitude

away from the regulars called the maid and paid the bill. It was only for the shiokara tidbit and one single tokkuri of saké. After he had paid it off, the maid happened to see only one or two mon-coins left with him. The young man took out a handcloth and wrapped his head in it, crown over chin, and went out of the eatery, silently. —The five of them in the inner part neither espied him there nor saw him pay off and go.

## 2.

O-Katsu stopped counting coins and looked left across from to right at her sons who were sitting in a row before her.

“Can’t ya shut that mouth and be quiet fer a sec, Boy 3?” she said. “I can’t count correctly with ya gibbering away in my face.”

“Serves ya—,” Jiro said under his breath.

“I will, Mom,” Saburo said, “but I been replyin’ to Big Bro. He assed me ’bout petty things, . . . fine, no prob. I’ll shut up, Mom.”

“I’m sleepy,” Shichinosuke said. “Count my part first, couldya, Mom?”

“Gotcha,” o-Katsu said. “I’ll let Boy 7 come first. I’m comin’.”

O-Katsu went on counting.

There was an only single andon light in the sooty four-and-a-half tatami-mat room, which was separated by the patched screen doors from the six-mat room. There o-San, daughter aged nineteen, was making four beds now. On this side were the shoji sliding doors that opened to the kitchen. It was now sending a smell of something boiling and nice to eat. —Along the wall of the four-and-a-half was placed a time-worn lopsided meat safe, and on top of it was a family Buddhist altar lit by the votive candles and scented by the burning incense. Obviously, the six of them, mom and kids, each dedicated one stick incense. The six sticks had burned down to one-third, but they were all fiercely off for smoke.

“Nanny,” Saburo called to his sister working in the adjacent room. “Don’tcha have to mind yer kitchen job? Somethin’s burnin’.”

“Soup for noodles,” Jiro said glumly. “Hey, does soup burn?”

“Why not? Don’t soup burn?”

O-Katsu snapped, “Stop, Boy 3.”

Ichita yawned. He was the eldest son aged twenty. In spite of his stout and firm build (well fit for a builder), his thick-fleshed angular face gave an arcadian heartease, which was the word-perfect proof that he was “first born, least clever.” Jiro was eighteen, but looked older than his big bro, with a clean-cut oval face which bore such a striking resemblance that you would mistake him and Saburo for identical twin brothers. They were born within one year of each other. What made them different was that Saburo was agile and glib whereas Jiro was sullen and tetchy, always looking grumpy and wry as if he would readily come out with: “Oh, I hate it.”

“Beds been made,” o-San said as she came out. “If you’re sleepy, Boy 7, you could go to bed.”

“No way,” Shichinosuke shook his head as he was leaning on Ichita’s lap. “I’ll hit the sack after I ate the noodle soup.”

He was the seventh and last son, seven years old. He was ten years apart from the immediate big brother Saburo. Three boys, Genshiro (Boy 4), Gorokichi (Boy 5), and Mutsuji (Boy 6), that had come in the hiatus and had the names that suggested the numbers standing for their respective born order,\* were missing. They had died very young.

“O-San,” o-Katsu said, “do the noodles for Boy 7. I’m finishing his part soon but he may not stay awake by the time I finish.”

O-San went down to the kitchen.

She was nineteen years old, at a critical year, as the folklore had it, when major changes in health or fortune were thought to take place. She had inherited the looks from her father, so she was told, which barely lived up to the mark (like Ichita), but round-faced with homey features. She had a sunny character and started laughing at the drop of a hat in spite of being characteristically of few words.

There was a red-ocher lacquered box standing next to o-Katsu who

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\* The notation of the naming of the boys goes as follows: (from older) *Ichita*=1-ta, *Jiro*=2-ro, *Saburo*=3-ro, *Genshiro*=Gen-4-ro, *Gorokichi*=5-rokichi, *Mutsuji*=6-ji, and *Shichinosuke*=7-nosuke, all the suffixes indicating boys’ names. Hence, Boys 1-7.

was seated squarely on her knees. She had taken out five paper-wrappers which were spread out on the floor right under her nose. The contents in each of them were silver pieces and coins and the individual wrappers bore in kana letters, the easiest writing system, the names of the kids who earned them, except for the one lettered “San” going side by side with another name. It was “Mom.”

“Now I got your sums done,” o-Katsu said. “Boy 7, you did a very good job this month. Look, this is what you’ve made.”

“I made all that?” Shichinosuke sat up to see the amount. “Is it really all I made, Mom?”

“It is. All of it, I assure you.”

“How much is it?” Shichinosuke looked up at his mother. She told him the amount. He apparently marveled at it and said, “I see, with it, I can buy loads of chopped toffee, a hundred thousand pieces, Mom.”

“The noodle soup’s ready,” o-San said in the kitchen. “Shall I bring it over there?”

“Of course, bring it here,” o-Katsu responded.

Ichita yawned again. Saburo, as if drawn into it, gave a big yawn, too.

O-San brought the noodle soup in a big bowl (on a tray). The noodles filled up high in it, giving off pleasant-smelling steam. O-San sat by her little brother, said, “Careful. They’re burning hot,” and held the tray for him at his chest. Without taking up the bowl from the tray, Shichinosuke held down the bowl’s rim with one hand to blow off the steam and pitched them in, his teeth bared.

The rumbling of the belly came from Ichita. No one noticed it but the rumbling in turn went into Saburo, who clicked his tongue and muttered, “Come on, knock it off.” —Shichinosuke finished his soup, and on the way to the six-mat room accompanied by his sister, said, “Mom, wake me up.” O-Katsu responded, “Got ya,” while doing the sums of next one’s.

“Promise me, Mom,” he made sure, “Big Bro pushes me out of the bed in sleep.”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, Boy 7, ain’t you sure?” Ichita said.

“No problem,” o-Katsu said. “I’ll pick an’ take ya in my arms to my

bed when I go to bed, Boy 7. I'll promise."

Shichinosuke was reassured and left.

When she was done with the counting for that month, o-Katsu took out from the same lacquered box another five wrappers, on each of which the sums were written. She did the mental sums of what was made for the month and added it to each of the amounts there. "Ha," she nodded, looked to her left and right, and said, "Where was the gain kit?" At which o-San uttered, "Oops, I forgot it," and stood up to fetch it from the six-mat room.

"How's it come out, Mom?" Jiro inquired.

"Seems we've just about achieved the goal," o-Katsu said. "I'll do it over to make it accurate right off the bat, but I'm sure we've made it."

O-San brought the inkstone case. People fought shy of calling it so because the inkstone "reduced" the stick of black ink as it was rubbed on the stone. Therefore, they used rhetoric for it: a "gain" kit standing for a writing kit (including an inkstone and a black-ink stick).

O-Katsu took it. She lifted the lid broken at the center into two and poured water from the pitcher into the chipped inkstone. Then Saburo pulled it toward him and rubbed the ink stick on it. The stick was reduced down to one and a half inches long in a lopsided triangle. Rubbed hard, it made a gritting sound as if sand were mixed in it.

Presently, o-Katsu took up the brush with a worn-down stub. After she had written in the individual sums on the five wraps, she copied the figures on the back of the wastepaper and, taking quite a while, figured out the total. "I wish we had an abacus," she said as she scratched her head with her ornamental hairpin. "We do need an abacus," she repeated under her breath.

Ichita gave a yawn, which in turn was followed by the rumbling of his stomach for a second time.

"Now finished." O-Katsu put down her brush and said, "We'll be able to make it, most probably."

"How much has it come up to?" Jiro asked.

"It's but a teensy-weensy bit fall short of our goal we set at the start." O-Katsu told the total sum and said, "When was it Gen-san'd be freed,

Big Bro?”

“On the seventeenth of next month,” Ichita answered.

“Then, I’m sure we’ll have time enough to make our goal,” o-Katsu said. “It’s spanned three years, but we’ve been motivated. It ain’t been as hard as it seemed at first, right?”

Then o-Katsu gazed fondly on the five wrappings.

Ichita as well as Jiro, Saburo, and o-San looked on the wrappings dearly with feelings. They were silent for a while. Their mother’s remarks and the wrappings in the face of them seemed to have evoked (common) deep feelings in them. O-Katsu drew a deep sigh and said, “Now, shall we have the noodle soup?” She returned the wrappings into the box, stood to her feet, and stashed it away into the lower shelf of the cupboard.

Mother and daughter worked together to bring the noodle soup from the kitchen. They brought the soup as it had been heated in the pot and sundry bowls. Saburo’s hand reached first to pick out a big bowl from among them. The next moment, o-Katsu’s hand slapped the hand that sought after the big bowl. “Stop bein’ greedy,” o-Katsu said. “Ouch, don’t hurt me!” said Saburo, who in turn took the chopsticks and licked the tips of them. This time again, o-Katsu slapped his hand that held the chopsticks. Saburo mimicked her, parroting, “Stop bein’ greedy.”

Jiro finished first, Saburo followed him, and then Ichita concluded. In this order they took their leave and retired into the six-mat room, finally leaving o-San and her mother alone.

“It’s extraordinary,” o-San said putting down her chopsticks, “that we’re goin’ to have the soup left, Mom.”

“You can make porridge of it for breakfast tomorrow,” o-Katsu said. “You don’t need to clear away the things we used. Go to bed when you’re finished yourself.”

O-San said that she’d do the dishes then go to bed. O-Katsu said that *she* would do it and told her daughter to go to bed right away. She adds, Go to bed right ’way, you have an early morning tomorrow too. I’m sorry to trouble you, but will you sleep with Boy 7 tonight? O-San says as she rises to her feet, Well, I’m fine

but he sucks my breasts. Keep 'em covered with your hands. He's half in sleep. You keep 'em covered for a little while and he'll go to sleep shortly. Oh no, he does do it in sleep, Mom, says o-San as she takes back her bowl and chopsticks to the kitchen. I'm fine when he thrusts his legs between my thighs, but I do hate it when I get my breasts touched. It's the last thing he could do to me. It startles me in sleep if I get my nipples pinched and sucked at. I won't ask you no more, says o-Katsu. I'll move him into my bed later, so you'll go to bed right off the bat. —Then, o-Katsu put down her chopsticks. She took the iron kettle from the rectangular brazier, and poured boiling water into her bowl.

With the daughter's disappearance into the six-mat room, o-Katsu did the dishes (in her efficiency), spread the cover over on one side of the andon, sat by the brazier, and opened her sewing.

"Hey, Mom," she heard Jiro calling in the adjacent room. "Mom, ya gotta get some sleep, do ya hear me?"

"Oh yeah," said o-Katsu. "I'm going to bed soon."

And she took up her needle.

### 3.

O-Katsu had not plied the needle a few stitches before Saburo opened the screen doors and poked his head out of the opening. He says, Mom, ya should know better. Ya gotta go to bed, Mom. Ya'll be down an' out, ya know it. Gotcha, Boy 3, says o-Katsu, I got only to get this done with and I can leave it off. *You* shouldn't get up at this time of night. Jiro, too, wakes and pokes. He says, What's up? He is followed by o-San who also pokes. Jiro says angrily, "Mom!" Shut up, says o-Katsu. This is somethin' Yamada-ya assed me to finish an' by the specified date. I gotta work a bit more or I'll be late. Don't be all that harsh on me an' y'all go back to sleep, guys, please. But, begins Saburo, but o-Katsu is quicker, "Shut up. When I say 'Shut up,' I mean ya to shut up," o-Katsu said in a way that would suppress her kids' solicitude.

Jiro retired, throwing in a fierce scowl, and so did Saburo grumbling something. O-San was about to come out, but her mother's fierce look also threatened her into doing an about-face to the six-mat room behind the screen doors, which she slid shut as she withdrew.

It all quieted down in the family, so still that o-Katsu heard for a while an apparently drunken man singing a ditty beyond the single wall, a ditty she couldn't make head or tail of. She mumbled while unraveling her sewing where she had pulled through her needle and thread by rapidly squeezing her nails along it, "He's drinkin' like a fish all the time. What'll he do if his health fails?"

The temple bell struck ninth toki (twelve midnight) at Seigan-ji, then on ninth and a half. The alleyway led out to the riverside street along the Tatekawa River. In the direction of the Mitsume (Third) Bridge, a whippoorwill buckwheat-noodle vendor had been traipsing back and forth along the street to do his business. His voice had traveled here into o-Katsu's alleyway. And now it had stopped, and o-Katsu began to nod off. —She had apparently been born with a hardy physique, sturdy-shouldered, plump at large, but looking older than she really was, forty-three years, and her face showing the expression of ingrained fatigue (which was helplessly impossible to be concealed).

A sudden jerk down of her puppet head awoke her.

O-Katsu put down her sewing on her lap. She pressed her eyes with both hands and heaved a long sigh. Just then, she heard a strange rattle in the kitchen. She checked the charcoal in the rectangular brazier. She again had scarcely added fresh charcoal before she heard a noise at the back door to the kitchen and the squeak of slabs covering the sewage. —O-Katsu concentrated on the noises that were coming on, then quietly got to her feet and stole her way as far as the shoji sliding doors that separated her living room and the kitchen. The andon lamplight was kept low but she pulled herself close to the wall lest her shadow be projected on the shoji. While staying put, she heard the shutter slide open, followed by the kitchen duckboard creaking as it was lifted.

O-Katsu was holding her breath.

From the other side of the shoji, she heard a couple of harsh pants,

*ugh, ugh.* The trespasser was right there next to her separated by the shoji but seemingly hesitating. But then in a few moments, the shoji slid open a half inch, then three inches, and six inches, opening bit by bit by dreaded timid bit, until finally a man came in with a cautious step.

The man had on a washed-out dark-blue long *hanten* livery coat, whose hem was tucked up, and a coarse-cloth hand towel covering his head. O-Katsu perceived he was shuddering. She saw his knees knocking each other and even heard his teeth chattering.

“Don’t make a noise,” o-Katsu whispered.

The man uttered, “Umph, umph, umph,” and could have jumped for surprise.

“I have three big sons, so be quiet,” o-Katsu said, “lest they wake up. Understand?”

“Y-y-y ya be q-q-q-quiet,” the man stuttered heavily, “M-m-m-make a n-n-n-noise and I-I-I-I’ll getcha.”

“I’ll be quiet. I won’t make a noise, so will you sit down?”

“Gimme money,” the man said in a trembling voice.

“Sure thing,” o-Katsu said. “Will you wait? I’ll go shut the doors, first.”

So saying, o-Katsu was about to make for the kitchen when the man grabbed her by the shoulder from behind. He seemed to have been appalled at her. She slapped the hand that was grabbing her shoulder. At the sound of it, someone said “Ouch” in sleep in the six-mat room. The two got stiff, caught their breath, and looked around to see if everything was fine. Saburo seemed to have said it in sleep. But by then, it was quiet again in the six-mat room, from which Ichita snoring was only heard.

“Now, you see,” o-Katsu said to the man. “What if all wake up? Can’t you wait a little while I go shut the doors?”

The man drew back.

O-Katsu closed the shutter first, then the shoji on her way back, and ensconced herself at the rectangular brazier. The man said as he was standing, “Gimme me money.” He goes on, I know you got money. Quick. Says o-Katsu, yes, I do have money. I can give you some of it. But before everything else, be seated there, won’t you? Don’t get fresh,

says the man, Make a fool of me and ya'll be sorry for it. She says, Didn't I tell you I'd give you money? Sit down. I won't pounce to prey on you. —The man hesitates and reluctantly sits down. Be that as it may, his knees are visibly trembling. It comes home to o-Katsu, who says, Oh yes, you're hungry, aren't you? I'll heat the noodle soup for you, leftovers, though. The man says, Don't. It won't work if you try to lead me down the garden path. Lead you so or not, says o-Katsu, you'll see if you wait. So saying she stands up and brings the pot from the kitchen and replaces the kettle with the pot on the charcoal fire of the brazier.

“Quick,” the man said. “I don't wanna eat no such thing. Do be quick and gimme money.”

“A simple question for you. Why do you do a thing like this? You're still young.”

“Can't make a livin',” the man said. “There's no job if you wanna work. I got no parents or brothers and sisters or relatives or nobody else to rely on. There's no means to make a livin' and that's why I need to do crap like this and no choice.”

“What a world! Really, what a world we're living in!” o-Katsu said as she gave a deep sigh. “Up above, in the government, there are greats who are learned and smart, I reckon. Don't you think? The times are getting worse and worse for everyone, let's leave out big merchants, since the reform last year. Fact is, if things go as they are now, poor people'll find no way out but have to starve to death.”

“I don't wanna hear crap like that. Cut out the cant. Why not produce money quick when I say so.”

O-Katsu said, All right. She turned as she was seated and opened the cabinet. She took out the red-ocher lacquered box. The man craned his neck to look at what she was doing. She wrapped some money in scrap paper and was about to put the box away, when the man said, “Gimme the box and all,” and stood up.

“I don't break in 'cause I need such a pittance. Give me the box and all.”

O-Katsu gave a sharp glance at him.

The man said in a hollow shrill voice, “Hey, do as I tell ya.” O-Katsu took the box and put it on her lap. She held it down with both hands and said, “Ya mean it?” She went on: I could of woken my three sons. But I didn’t. Neither do I want to now. And if you insist you need it, I could give all this. But before I do so, I’ll tell you what nature this money is. Lend me your ears, will you?

The man didn’t respond.

“It’s a story but it doesn’t take long,” o-Katsu continued. “My first-born son is a builder. He had a co-builder called Gen-san.”

Gen-san had been short of stuff and done a bad thing against his better judgment three years before. He had been married a year and a half. A baby had been on its way. Not only that, but bad fortune had come his way. Anyways he had badly needed something like two ryo, but failed to raise it. He’d been at the end of his rope. He’d been and gone and stolen two and odd ryo from the safe at the front desk of the firm he’d been working for. —But it had been found right away and, what was worse, Gen-san had been put in jail. The master carpenter was such a ruthless hardhearted person that he had refused to bail him out. The sentence had been severe two-year-and-six-month confinement.

“I heard the story from my son,” o-Katsu said. “Even though released, Gen-san wouldn’t be able to go back to the same old workplace no more. The rumor of him having been imprisoned spreads in a jiffy within the limits of Edo, ’cause the world of the same trade is small, — so my son told me.”

O-Katsu had thought about it two nights.

At the end of it, she had gathered her kids and said: I’m not familiar with Gen-san. Nor is anyone but Big Bro in our family. But I reckon everyone felt sorry for him. Now, this is the point. He can’t go back to the same old job, so when he’s freed from jail, he shall want nothing. He must have a new job ready so he can begin to make a living right off the bat. His job, well, it mustn’t ask much skill of him. I reckon it’s better if it gets him daily wages. After all, I came to a decision. He’ll run an “oden-soup-(heated in soy-sauce)-and-warmed-saké” place. What do you think about it? Jiro said: I think it’s a good idea but how do you

raise the fund? The mother said: We all of us will work. All six of us will work to make money and we'll be able to save up enough to meet it, in the given two years and six months. Shichinosuke said: Ha!?! Me too? —He was still as young as four years old. Thereupon, o-Katsu said:

—Boy 7, the other day you picked up a stray dog an' said to let you have it at home. That you'd give up half of what you'd get to eat, did you not say so? If you make up your mind to give up the half of what you eat, then the rest of the half will be what ya'll make. Don't you feel like it? You'll save a man this time, not a dog.

Sure thing, I can do it, said Shichinosuke. I'll eat half. With this the deal was clinched. The statement of the four-year lastborn apparently rounded off the mother's proposal by putting together what they each had to say. Once determined, everyone in the family worked hard to make money. They cut down to the minimum on food, clothes, pleasures, and socialization with fellow tenants. Even Shichinosuke had begun what seemed to be a ragpicker the spring before. —Naturally, their reputation went down among their neighbors. The rumor had it that they were a "family of misers." Children hooted, "Hey, miser," whenever the family members went in and out of the alleyway. But they put up with it. They took no notice of no matter what flout came their way. They took money-making into pointblank focus with perseverance.

"And it's been two years and five months," o-Katsu said. "—There was a place to let in Third Street, Midori-cho, on that side of River Tatekawa. We paid the ready money to secure it. Only when all's paid, will necessary commodities arrive at any minute. Well, eventually, on the seventeenth of next month, Gen-san serves the term out and is coming out here."

So saying, o-Katsu looked at the man.

#### 4.

"As you see, this money has its own purpose."

So said o-Katsu.

She said: My memory called up Gen-san when you came in. Well, it's another story if you were born a thief. But I reckon an impulse got you because the world is in slump this deep. If I reckon right, I'd like to talk to you. So, I didn't make a noise and I let you in.

"This is all I have to say."

The man remained silent.

"This is the money," o-Katsu said as she took down the lacquered box from her lap and slid it on the floor toward the man, "take it away if you still want to, after all's been said and done."

Then, she turned around to the brazier. She lifted the lid of the pot on the fire and stirred the noodles (so they wouldn't burn).

The man uttered "Ugh!" and all of a sudden came on toward o-Katsu.

She was on the brink of crying for help, when he leaned against the meat safe and blew at something, *whiff, whiff*. "The votive candle," the man said in a croaky voice, "—The wick of it burned down and was about to flare up."

"Oh, thanks much. I've completely forgotten to put it out," o-Katsu said. "I'll do the noodles right now. Sit down, will you?"

"Forget about me," the man said. Head down, he was about to make for the kitchen. What would he do?, o-Katsu said as she stood up. He said, "I'll go."

"Go? You have any place to go to?"

The man stopped in his tracks, indecisively.

"I'm asking if you got any place to go back to?" o-Katsu said. "You got nowhere to go and what will you do just by going away?"

The man was silent.

O-Katsu quietly pushed him back and said, "Now, now, sit down here and eat the noodle soup, first. Then, when you're finished, shall we talk about you?" Then she went out to the kitchen. Her back to the man, she said: This is probably part of the karma, so sit down, will you? When she came back with a large bowl and chopsticks, she saw the man was seated stiffly. He had taken off the cover from his head, his hand firmly grasping the hand towel that had covered his head.

O-Katsu served the noodle soup. The man ate it, as stiff as any. She

was gazing at the man eating the soup when suddenly she wiped her eyes with her apron and whispered, “How the heck the world is treating you, —” And, covering her face with the same apron, she sobbed.

Tears ran down from the man’s eyes. He put down on his lap his hands he was using to eat the soup. He bent his head deep down and hiccupped with sobs.

“Stay here with us from tonight on, will you?” o-Katsu said between her sobs. “It’s a crowded small place, but there’s still room for one too many and just about enough food to keep you alive, and . . . job, well I’ll get my three sons to find, and chances are, not that there ain’t none for you.”

“Ma’am, —” he said.

“I’m asking you,” she said. “Say nothing and stay with us from tonight on, I ask you.”

The man put down the possessions in his hands and began to cry with his voice stifled, pressing his arm across his face.

That night, when she slid into her daughter’s bed, the daughter woke up and asked, “What happened, Mom?” The mother pulled her face close to her daughter’s ears and whispered into them that a relative had come by from Kasama, a distant relative and “I’ll present him in the morning.” O-San fell asleep again the next moment.

The next morning, —

O-Katsu presented him to her children, telling them that they had distant relatives in the countryside of Kasama, that they had so far had too scarce relationship with them to make mention of. One of them, the third son, called Yukichi, had come up to Edo to work for a maker of metallic ornaments to buildings. The business had gone under ever since the governmental reform. He had become jobless and had gone home. There hadn’t been anything to do at home and he’d returned to Edo, depending for our help. She expressed her intention to take care of him. She clinched her introduction by asking what they had to say about it.

“That’s not a big deal, no need of askin’,” Jiro said sullenly, “ain’t it right, Big Bro?”

Ichita nodded and introduced himself to the man.

“I’m Ichita. Good to have you here.”

“Good to have you, Yu-san,” Saburo said. “Everybody calls me Boy 3 or Oy 3, but my real name is Saburo. But I’m fine with Boy 3 or Oy 3 if you like.”

When Saburo wore a glum expression as he introduced himself, Shichinosuke took his turn and said, “I’m Boy 7.” He then pointed to his big sister.

“And this Big Sis is, —”

“Hey, Boy 7” o-San interrupted, glaring at him.

“Is Nanny,” Saburo said. “Honest, she has been, Yu-san, Nanny of old. If you don’t call her this way, she’ll be cross, tell ya.”

“Boy 3, —” O-Katsu stared at him. “Don’t be flippant. Shame on you. Will you be quiet? I have more to talk about with you.”

“Serves ya, —” Jiro mumbled in his mouth.

O-Katsu talked about finding a job for Yukichi.

She said: He says he’ll do anything, and in the times as bad as bad can be, he’ll have no choice. Will you, three of you, try to find him a job no matter what it is. Then, Jiro looked at Ichita and said: “Weren’t you saying the front desk at your workplace needed an errand boy, Big Bro?” Ichita nodded: Oh, ’s right, yes, seems it was so. O-Katsu said: Really? If so, will ya ask about it right off the bat? Ichita responded: Yeah, I will. Right, I’ll do it right away today.

“Everybody, thank you for your kindness.” The man, bending his head in a bow, spoke for the first time. “I’m sorry I’m troubling you. Thank you ever so much.”

“Knock it off, Yu-san,” Saburo said. “Now you see, we’re all open and blunt. We have things out straight, don’t sugar the pill. You tickle us pink when you sugar your words. We don’t like it. Will ya bro us Bros and sis her a Sis among us?”

“Hun!” Jiro said, “That Boy 3, he done said decent crap for the first time in his life.”

What!? Saburo had hardly turned to confront him before his mother said, “Now breakfast, everyone,” as she rose to her feet.

Finishing breakfast, the men (including Shichinosuke) were off to

work. After o-San had gone out to turn in the completed kimono they had sewn for the dealer, o-Katsu gave the man the money and said to him, showing where it was, “Go to the bathhouse and get a good wash.” The man looked at o-Katsu and spoke to her: “Ma’am,” as he was going out for the bathhouse as he was told.

“You said just now, —relatives in Kasama, do you really have there?”

“Oh, forget stuff like that,” o-Katsu said. “You said you’re from Kasama, and I said so and that’s that. My kids trust me, believe you me. Never mind stuff like that, mind ya.”

And she urged him, “Now off you go.” The man nodded and left.

There was an opening at the front desk at Ichita’s workplace, so it was decided that the man would start working the next day. An errand boy was to do menial jobs on building sites. In spite of wretchedly paltry wages for the hard work, the man willingly took the job.

“—You’ll have no better services than my family members do,” said o-Katsu. “You won’t be treated as a guest. Please make do even if you find it not satisfactory.”

O-Katsu made doubly sure.

The only trouble was how to allocate beds. It was decided that o-Katsu and o-San would share the bed in the 4.5-mat room and that Shichinosuke would sleep in the same bed with Ichita. Everything was settled and a new life began for the family plus one new member. — Well, new life though it was, it was not for all six members. The mother, the daughter, and the lastborn, the three of them, started experiencing a realistical “new life,” which was different from that they had lived.

It was because the mother and daughter had to care about one more person. Above all, the daughter (o-San) was responsible for preparing breakfast and packed lunch. Apparently she had to rack her brains about what to go with cooked rice in the packed lunch.

It was not long before the lastborn was on friendly terms with the man, who, rather a man of few words, seemed to get along with children. He was good at storytelling. What he told were not fairy tales that you hear by and large but tales that he improvised. He spun yarns by picking out topics about what would happen anywhere close by, with

which he conflated what tricks little kids would take fancy to. To some of the tales, adults like o-Katsu, o-San, Ichita, and Jiro, would more often than not be all ears, even.

One day, —when, all gone out, the mother and daughter were left alone sewing, o-San turned to look at her mother in spite of herself. She said:

“I mean the tale Yu-san told last night, it was so miserable I couldn’t help tears welling into my eyes and running down.”

“That boy only tells wretched tales,” o-Katsu said. “Why, he might at least have found more cheerful topics, eh. I don’t like those tearjerkers.”

“Oh, I do,” o-San said. “They come straight to my heart that’s feeling the same, peacefully sink down in me and warm up my heart. Yu-san, he’s sure tenderhearted, isn’t he? Or else, I reckon he can’t go out into everyone’s heart as attractively and sadly as all that.”

“I wonder, how old are you?” o-Katsu said as she looked at her daughter.

“Oh, come on, Mom,” o-San retorted and blushed in shame. “No kidding, Mom, you should know I’m nineteen.”

“Nineteen, I see.” O-Katsu tightened the thread and said, “You’re ’bout the age when girls apt to say they like sad stories. Well, through the years I’ve had more than enough trouble and pain, I’m fed up with ’em. I’d rather be listening to cheerful, amusing stories if I get ’em told.

“Say, Mom, I, er,” said o-San. She seemed to be elsewhere following after her own reverie. Her mother’s words fell short of her ears. “Say, Mom, I,” she said, oiling her needle with her hair, “I wonder if Yu-san’s tales aren’t all about himself.”

“How come?” o-Katsu asked.

“Something tells me so,” o-San said. “When it struck me so for the first time, I found myself amazed. He can’t spin his yarns the way he does if they aren’t really about himself.”

“Where the heck are your hands?” o-Katsu said. “You’ve recently got quite talkative. If you talk, work your hands too, honey.”

The girl blushed (truly so this time) and said, “C’mmon, Mom. I don’t never ever rest my hands.”

—This girl had grown talkative and she'd blush soon, thought o-Katsu. She wasn't the way she'd been. She was funny.

## 5.

It was Saburo who perceived what o-Katsu had perceived in her daughter. Every so often, he gave a giggle at his sister and uttered "ahem," pretending to clear his throat. Ichita was incapable of perceiving the way his brother did. Jiro's attention was, it seemed, directed naturally more to the way his younger brother behaved. He glared at him sidelong, or else, frowned at him as if to say, "You weirdo!"

On the sixth or seventh night since the man had settled with this family, —it was already nearly twelve midnight when the man sneaked into the 4.5-mat room.

Everybody had gone fast asleep. O-Katsu alone was sewing there. She looked at him suspiciously. The man looked at o-San who was soundly sleeping beside him. In bed her back was toward him and her breathing was faintly heard.

"What's up?" o-Katsu whispered.

The man sat down and said, "Ma'am."

"What's wrong? You'll catch cold, coming out only in your nightie," she said. "Anything wrong?"

"It's hard to broach," he said, "but because it's decided among us, I'll speak my mind. Ma'am . . . it's about me. Will you treat me equally like everyone else?"

"That's weird. Don't I never treat you equally?"

"I mean lunch."

"Yu-san," o-Katsu said. She stopped plying her needle and gazed at him. "Didn't I tell you in the first place? You may find it's not enough, well, we are a poor family as you see."

"No, no, I don't mean that," he shook his head vehemently and stopped her. "That's not what I mean, Ma'am. I don't mean it's not enough, what I mean is my lunch is special. Mine is packed with more

rice and with more things to go with it. I see mine's fatter because I eat it with Boy 1 at the workplace. I find my lunch is always packed with more rice and other things," said the man. "Well you, —you kindly said you wouldn't treat me like a guest, that you'd treat me like everyone else in the family. This is what I thought you meant. But every time I open my lunchbox, I can't help but feel as if I've been a stranger from scratch."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" said o-Katsu. "I should have told you in the first place. It's not we're treating you as a guest or a stranger who ought to be specially treated. Yu-san, you're scrawny and lacking in vim. O-San is worried about you and doing what she can for you."

The man turned on o-San with a start. His eyes wore a look of at once surprise and embarrassment as though he'd seen his own ghost with his own eyes.

I was told about the situation you had been in and I know how much trouble and pain you'd been through," o-Katsu continued. "Sure, you may well have got skinny and lacked vim. But you're twenty-four. You're at the prime of your life. O-San suggested to me that Yu-san's lunch be bigger until he puts on a bit more weight. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it. I ought to have told it to you before."

"Ma'am," the man said and hung his head down.

"When you put on a bit more, we'll treat you like my sons. Will you put up with it till you do and not beyond?" o-Katsu said. "—For all that, it often is the way with the world that there are splinters in what you get to eat from one not related by blood. Understand?"

"I understand it well, Ma'am. I'd appreciate your kindness." He covered his eyes with his arm. "I, I, . . . I never felt like this in all my life. The first time in my born days."

"Thanks for your tears, but not for me."

"For the first time in my life, I, I, I, . . . I've never been treated like this by my real parents, even."

"What?" O-Katsu raised her eyes. "Your real parents didn't do what? Listen, Yu-san, that's something I can't never, ever, forgive you about."

“But, Ma’am.”

“But no buts, laddie, I do hate those who speak ill of their own parents,” said o-Katsu. “I’ve got no idea about rich people. Rich parents can do anything for their kids, but poor parents can’t do nothing like rich parents. They can’t afford to give what their kids like to eat or dress them in what they like. But they put their kids to babysitting when they must play. They get them to shoulder and hawk shijimi freshwater mussels when their shoulders are still tender. They nab them to get them to run for errands instead of sending them to a terakoya to give them the three R’s. But parents are parents—,” said o-Katsu. Her eyes were teary. “Poor parents do think and feel the same as rich parents. If they can, like rich ones they are only too willing to let come true whatever their little creatures want them to. If they can, . . . they are willing to pay with anything, to peel their skin and pay with it, even. This is how parents feel for their kids. But they can’t afford. Now, Yu-san, have you ever thought about their hearts that hurt for being feckless?”

“I’m in the wrong. I’m sorry I’m in the wrong.”

“I hate it the most, yes, I do,” her voice quivered as she said. “I hate it the most when they speak ill of their parents, whether son or daughter.”

Just then, the screen door opened and through the chink Saburo poked out his head, warning, “Mom!”

“That’s enough, eh, Mom. Yu-san’s saying he’s sorry. Forgive him, Mom.”

“Ya, devil, stay back,” o-Katsu said, “that got nothin’ to do with ya.”

“Yeah, that may be so, but,” said Saburo, “look Mom, you done made Nanny cry, too.”

O-Katsu looked over her shoulder to her daughter.

O-San had pulled up her quilt over her head before they knew it, and from under the cover, the sound of her hiccups from sobbing was leaking. O-Katsu nodded, “I gotcha,” and took up her sewing again.

“Ma’am,” the man said, bending his head low.

“Stop it,” said o-Katsu, “and go back to bed, will you?”

“It’ll be toki 9 soon,” Saburo said. “Mom, you yerself gotta hit the sack.”

“Knock it off! I know better myself,” she said. “Mind yourself, not me, you Boy 3, and get back to sleep right off the bat.”

Saburo withdrew his head, and the man also retired to the six-mat room.

When they were gone, o-Katsu wiped her eyes with her apron. O-San’s sobbing stopped a while after. And the bell started striking ninth toki at Seigan-ji.

Days progressed to the evening of the fourteenth of the month, —the money had been summed up. When the usual noodle soup was served, everyone raised a whoop of joy.

“Gee, it startles me,” Saburo said, “get a load of it, there is tempura in it, Mom.”

Shichinosuke shouted, too, “Wow!”

“Can’t you quiet down? It’s like a beggar, guys,” o-Katsu said. “Tonight, there’s going to be a celebration for the pains and troubles you’ve all took. Your hard work bore fruit, we got enough for Gen-san. You guys all gave your all and pulled through. That’s why I want you to enjoy a teensy-weensy bit of extravagance.”

“That’s great,” Jiro said.

“Yeah,” Ichita nodded. “Well then, I should give you a word of thanks on my part.” He slowly looked around at everyone there, and, bending in a bow, said, “Thanks much, everyone.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Saburo repined at it, blowing the soup to cool it down. “That’s for your friend, isn’t it? If you intend to express thanks, you might at least find a little more fancy way to thank, eh?”

“Shut that mouth,” o-Katsu interrupted, “can’t ya be quiet at least while eating?”

“Serves ya, —” Jiro mumbled in his mouth.

Saburo mimicked, “Serves ya.” And o-Katsu glared at him. No sooner had she done it than Saburo uttered “Oh yeah,” and slid forward on his legs.

“It’s completely slipped my memory, Mom,” said Saburo, “that the rate of coins will go up. Coins, Mom.”

“Coins what?”

“They say newly-minted 1-shu silvers will be issued,” Saburo said as he leaned forward. “I heard it at the fish market. It’s news. Nobody knows it elsewhere yet. They say the new silver will be a bad currency and the price of coins will go up. The rumor has it, the rate will be a 1-shu silver against 94 mon-coppers. Or, it’ll go below 90, depending on circumstances. So, I’ll go and exchange all silver pieces for coins tomorrow. What do you think?”

“Mind-boggling lout!” Jiro spat sullenly, “you talk like a humbug.”

“I say, Mom,” Saburo said, “News travels fast to the market, faster than elsewhere and everything’s most certain. So, if we exchange the silver pieces now, then we’ll make considerable profits. Can I do that, Big Bro?”

“Well yeah,” Ichita said. “Could be thought.”

“No, I don’t like it. Not for me, thanks,” o-Katsu said. “Each and every piece and coin here is a good and honest penny. Everyone has worked to make it and save it. Here we have at least all Gen-san needs. You say you’ll play it off the cuff. What would you do if you should fail to hit it big and lose it?”

“There’s no way of losing it, that’s for sure, Mom.”

“Not over my dead body, son,” the mother said. “When I mean to bet, I’ll work my fingers to the bone and make good and honest money. I don’t want a penny that is made by tripping others up with a trick. Not a penny, never.”

“Is that what you want, Madam? Heh.” Saburo thrust out his empty bowl toward o-San and said, “Serves ya,” shrugging his shoulders.

“Hey, Nanny,” Saburo said, “I’m asking for another helping. Sorry, but could ya pay attention to me, too?”

O-San blushed. She was looking at the man, who was finishing his first (so she was thinking about offering him a second helping). She turned red in the face and, saying, “Oh, sorry,” took Saburo’s bowl.

“Look, you blushed again,” Saburo said. “It’s like you’re a glorious sunset against Mt. Tatsuta.”

“Funny, he’s saying it as *Mount* Tasuta,” said Jiro.

Don’t *Mount* do?—No, never.—If it don’t do, then what’ll do?—It’s,

lemme tell ya, *River* Tatsuta. If ya talk about the mountain, it should be Mount Arashi.—You're great, you're a scholar, Saburo clinched.

"I got sleepy." Shichinosuke put down his chopsticks and said, "Uncle Yu, you'll tell me a tale in bed again as I go to sleep?"

"Sure," the man nodded.

"That makes a difference, no doubt," o-San said to her mother. "The noodle soup went well, tonight."

"Their tongues don't lie, don't they?" o-Katsu said and smiled.

On the seventeenth, three days after, the whole family took a day off for Gen-san who was to be released from the jail.

After Ichita and Jiro had gone to meet him, o-Katsu and o-San put away things in the house and made foods and drinks ready for a celebration ceremony. —Meantime, Saburo and the man accompanying Shichinosuke to see Gen-san's "new house." —It was located on the edge of the fish market, a good site on the corner of an alleyway, which they reached by crossing the Futatsume (Second) Bridge over the Tatekawa River and walking east three blocks or so. They said the proprietor had taken a liking to o-Katsu's personality, so he had the old building remodeled into a new structure so that the business could be operated at any time. So explaining to the man, Saburo said, "The cost of the remodeling is on the proprietor, if you can believe me."

"Really," Saburo said as he shook his head in amazement, "What the heck has our mom gone and done, —"

The man nodded wordlessly.

Ichita and others came back after three in the afternoon. The others were Gen-san who was loaded with a bundle on his back and his wife who had a girl strapped to her back and carrying a pack wrapped in furoshiki cloth. Ichita and Jiro both carried packs with them. All of them were carrying apparently all of the Gen-family effects. O-Katsu stopped them at the doorway and sprinkled the salt of purification (over their heads) from a small plate.

"You are Gen-san, aren't you?" o-Katsu said. "Let me remind you here. Once you cross over that threshold and you'll be purified once and for all. The crests of briny foam have completely washed away the

damned thing. When you come in, be sure you'll forget everything that's been to date and be a newly born Gen-san."

And she concluded, "Please come on in."

At o-Katsu's directions everyone was seated at the trays waiting for them. The packs had been piled up on the dirt floor and the stepping board to rooms. They were soon to be transported to Midori-cho.

Gen-san looked just about twenty-four with an angular long face. He was a skinny man, his skin swarthy. The gloomy looks with the eyebrows and eyes set close to each other made him appear all the damper and more somber maybe because of the nearly three-year imprisonment.—On sitting down, the wife unloaded the girl from her back and held her in her arms. She didn't look more than twenty. She was small and round, her face round, too. Her hair was a bit auburn and not straight, difficult to handle. Her eyes had a droop. She was far from good-looking in any way, but was, as a whole, well-dispositioned, charming, and small.

"But look! This is cool!" said Saburo. "This comes with saké, doesn't it, Mom?"

"Come on. Don't say so. It's only for formalities, not more than that."

"For all that, it's cool," Saburo said and licked his lips. "Saké's coming. OK, I'll take a large cup."

The sizes of the trays were sundry and so were small plates and bowls on them. There were only two that looked like real saké cups, and the rest were tea cups and children's rice bowls to substitute for saké cups. Saburo didn't lose a moment taking up a children's rice bowl. He desecrated what was in his mother's hands—only one tokkuri container, and said to make sure, "Well I never! That's the first and last one, isn't it?"

"It's as plain as the nose in your face," o-Katsu retorted. "This is not a drinking-bout, a celebration, you know."

"Then, do I understand right when I say there's going to be just one tokkuri?"

"You can't be surer, son."

"Well then, I'll take a small one," Saburo said and returned the rice bowl. "Each of us will get one lick of it. You have a big cup and you'll

lose most of it. A large cup will take up much on its inner surface.”

Saburo reached for the cup in front of Ichita. O-Katsu reproached, “Boy 3,” and slapped his hand that reached for the cup.

“Ouch!” Saburo rubbed his hand. Gen-san’s wife burst into laughter. Jiro made a frown that couldn’t be glummer.

“Now, Nann . . . no, o-San,” o-Katsu said, “shall we get everyone to begin? there’s nothing good, though. Will you pour saké into everyone’s cup? Will you begin with Gen-san?”

## 6.

The menu for the celebration dinner comprised grilled salted-mackerel, stewed greens and deep-fried tofu, tofu soup, parboiled spinach with soy sauce dressing, on top of a wee bit of saké.

Saburo alone prattled while the others almost silently ate. Ichita talked to Gen-san once in a while, but hardly found a way to keep the ball rolling because o-Katsu had forbidden “to talk about things of old.” And Gen-san lapsed into silence, hanging his head down and stiffened, barely touching the foods. His wife only kept thanking (her heart must have been full) and wouldn’t take up her chopsticks, either, —except when she fed her girl on her lap.

O-Katsu didn’t force them to go on with the dinner.

“Boy 1,” said o-Katsu, who seized the time and signed with her eyes to Ichita, “ready?”

“Yes,” he responded, “why not begin?”

O-Katsu rose to leave her seat and brought three paper-wrappings and resumed her seat.

“Gen-san,” she said. “Maybe, you heard about it from Boy 1. We’ve rented a house for your family in Third Street, Midori-cho, so you can begin working at any minute.”

Gen-san gave a nod in appreciation.

“This one’s for rents for one year.” She produced one of the wrappings, which was followed by the second one, and said, “This one’s the

money for your job kit. Take this to Warehouse Marugane in First Street and they'll wrap up the whole set of utensils and give it to you. It's so arranged. —And," she pushed forward the third one and said, "This is for the expenses you'll need before your business runs on the rails. We expect it to meet the needs for three months, which should be hopefully enough, but if it isn't, we'll cope with it."

Gen-san bent his head down low again.

"That money is yours," o-Katsu said. "It's neither loaned nor given. It's truly yours, two of you, —the wheel of bad fortune which turned a vicious circle and the three-hard-year perseverance you two displayed to each other turned into that money."

Gen-san choked, "Oo-oof."

"Congratulations, Gen-san and Mrs. Gen-san," o-Katsu said. "I pray you'll work hard for all you're worth on your trade."

Gen-san fell on his arms which were planted on the tatami-mat floor in heartfelt gratitude. His wife (with her girl on her lap) bent down. Jiro grabbed his own knees and looked up at the ceiling. Saburo got to his feet to go into the 4.5-mat room. Ichita, as if at a loss, was blinking his eyes as he jiggled one knee. O-San was wiping her eyes with her apron.

The man folded his arms before his chest, hung his head deep down as if his backbone would break into two. His eyes shut tightly, he clenched his teeth with all the might he could muster.

—Congratulations, Gen-san.

So he yelled in his heart.

"Heh! It's weird," Shichinosuke said, "Oy 3's crying, Mom."

"Idiot! Am I crying?" Saburo protested in the 4.5-mat room.

"Ichita's mom, thank you very much," said Gen-san as he remained on the floor the way he was. "Thank you very much, everyone."

"Ma'am," Gen-san's wife said.

O-Katsu nodded at her, tacitly meaning: Don't, I know it. That's enough, and looked toward Ichita.

"Now, shall we close the celebration, Boy 1?" said o-Katsu. "Guys, walk Gen-san and his family to their home."

"Yes, let's," Ichita said.

All stood up.

In the 4.5-mat room, Saburo said, "I'll pack this on my back." It was a big pack (seemingly, a meat safe). O-San took the girl in her arms. Shichinosuke said, "I'll go with y'all." Everyone scrambled for the packs to carry with them and rambled down to the dirt floor.

"I'll stay," the man whispered to Ichita. "I got a thing to talk to Ma'am about."

"No problem," Ichita nodded.

O-Katsu and the man stepped down onto the stepping board and there the two saw the others off. Gen-san and his wife turned back three times and each time bent low in greeting until they went out of the alleyway.

The man went back into the 4.5-room and sat down. O-Katsu turned up a little later and looked at him, saying, "What's it, dear?"

"Wondering what I should do," the man said. "The Gen-san family has now settled. Things have the points to leave off, you know."

O-Katsu sat down where she was.

"You say, Point to leave off, —"

"I've been taken care of over a half month and," the man said, "I must find a good point to leave off. I must stop being self-complacent, depending as I do . . ."

"Yu-san," she interrupted, "have you grown fed up with staying with us?"

"No, no, no way, Ma'am! Isn't it a bad joke!" he said as he gazed at her in earnest. "You're in the wrong. I've been so happy depending on your kindnesses as to trouble y'all so much. I can't help but feel bad for everyone in your family."

"What do you feel bad about? Lemme remind you, it's me that asked you to stay."

"For all that."

"Yu-san," o-Katsu began, "you've been given a plane, right?"

The man nodded.

"I hear Boy 1 recommended me. I was given a plane three days ago," the man said. "Maybe it's impossible to be master of it, starting at my age, but I'm determined I'd give my all to it."

“That is to say, you have a goal, right?”

The man nodded.

“That’s great, isn’t it?” o-Katsu said. “Boy I told me that the so-called sub-master is keeping an eye on you, because according to him the hope would peek out that you’d make it. I shouldn’t say this at this moment yet, but if you hang in there in earnest, chances are you’ll be a full-fledged craftsman. Now is the crucial point for you, isn’t it?”

The man hung down his head.

“You’re now standing at the crucial point, and yet why bring out such stuff? It’s just like, —we know we haven’t done nothing to take care of you, but it’s just like you’d trample on our good will.”

“Ma’am,” the man said, “I don’t know how to put it. I saw Gen-san’s home. I met Gen-san and his wife and their girl. I thought the Gen-san family would settle down in that home. I traced back in my mind how it came about. While I was tracing back, I can’t put it clearly, though, the thought struck me that I oughtn’t be a burden on your family, that I shouldn’t rely too much on you all, and that I’d be sorry for everyone in the family.” The man rubbed his eyes with his arm and went on to say, choked with sobs, “—I may get hell from you again, but ever since I began to live with you, I’ve come to feel for the first time in my life like I was living with my true family. It’s true, honest, Ma’am. I don’t care if I get hell from you, but how else can I think you’re my real mom and that your kids are all my true brothers and sister. This is true, honest. If you all allow me to, I’d be much obliged to let me stay with you for the rest of my life . . .” He stopped, not finished. The sobs choked him. Sobbing, the man went on in snatches, “But that’s asking too much. I am asking too much and yet if I can ask, then how can I possibly thank you enough?”

O-Katsu (swiftly) wiped her eyes and got to her feet, saying, “Quit harping on it, Yu-san.”

“I don’t like long-windedness,” she said. “Strangers come together to cry, . . . even though you are not related by blood, once the fate means us to come together and live together, it’s natural we’ll begin to love each other like your own mom, your own son, and your own brothers

and sisters. Yu-san, if you leave us because you feel bad about us, do you think the rest of us can stay cool?"

"Ma'am," the man said.

"Let's not hear about it no more," said o-Katsu.

"Ma'am," the man said, "then, am I . . . allowed to stay with you?"

O-Katsu covered her face with her apron. Choked, her throat made a noise as she held down a sob. She left rudely for the six-mat room as though she were infuriated.

"Yu-chan," she called from the six-mat room, "—I'm gonna clear away the trays. Will you help me?"

The next morning, —

In the dim light when the morning was still infant, breakfast was going with everyone seated at their tray. Saburo, among others, frequently gazed at o-San. She was not her usual self, —she had heard from her mother what had gone between her and the man. That he would settle down to live with them and how he thought about the family members . . . . She was feeling lighthearted. She stole a glance at the man invariably, and when her eyes met his, she averted hers. She blushed and served the wrong persons.

"Nanny!" Saburo reprimanded her. "What do you think you're doing? Ya gave that bowl to Boy 7, it's mine!"

"Oh, was it? Was it yours, Boy 3?"

"Hey, wake up," Saburo said. "You're dreamin' or somethin', Nanny?"

"Tell you what," o-Katsu said, "tell you what, listen, Boy 3. Stop calling her Nanny. O-san's your sister and yet to be married. She isn't an old woman, no way."

"Did I have a deaf ear?" Saburo said. "You, too, Mom, had Nanny on the tip of your tongue yesterday."

"Quiet. Can you hear me saying to stop it as of today?" said o-Katsu, "I tell you, everyone. Call her Nanny from today on, and you'll get hell from me, get it?"

"No problem," Ichita said, "I got you."

Breakfast over, everybody got ready to go to work.

O-San handed lunch to each one of them and stepped down onto the stepping board to see them off. Now the night had been shed of its cloak and the morning mist enveloping the alleyway looked like floss had been spread thinly.

The man was the last to step out of the 4.5 and looked back toward o-Katsu before he knew it.

“What?” O-Katsu caught his eye. “What’s wrong with you?”

The man shook head.

“No, no,” the man said, blinking his eyes, “it’s nothing.”

And he was about to go out, when he turned back and murmured, “Mom,” which was gagged almost voiceless, but unmistakably o-Katsu’s ears registered it.

“Have a nice day,” o-Katsu said. “Come back early.”

The man went out.

## **The Thief and the Young Lord**

### **1.**

That sound was first heard from the verandah, which was also used for the passageway in the traditional architecture. The planks of the verandah gawked in a pretty high-pitched tone. Instinctively, Shigenobu reached his hand for his sword lying at the head of his bed, but when his hand touched its sheath, the second thought came on him of what use it was now that things had come to this pass and retrieved his hand that had once clutched the sword.

—Oh, I've had enough. Do what you like, I couldn't care less, I'm fed up through and through.

Thinking thus, he joined his hands on his belly as he was lying on his back. Through the fissures of the high window cut out on the right wall of the room, the moonlight was streaming in three pale blue streaks like three strips of cloth. It was lighting the hems of his bedding only a while ago, and now it had receded to only dye the frayed tatami mats. Shigenobu surmised it was already around three, judging from the position of the moonlight.

The sound in question moved from the verandah into the night-duty office room. The steps were extremely cautious. Cautious as they were, they made an occasional gawky noise because of the missing of the floor joists. Every noise was followed by a strict silence, which made the noise-maker bate his breath cautiously for a time. In time, the trespasser, who was probably too beware of his step, obviously tripped at the tear of a tatami mat and tottered down with a violent thud. The sound of the floor giving away under his feet traveled here.

—He's gone and stomped into the fireplace. That must be it.

Shigenobu imagined thus, and a grin came itself to him. As if the vivid picture had been glimpsed, a picture of the bewildered face of the

unfortunate person. Hardly had he smiled wryly at the thought that they had sent a stupid assailant before he heard the trespasser mumble right over there.

“Augh, it hurts! I got a scrape, son of a bitch. What the heck of a house! Everywhere I go, it graunches and squeaks, and on top of it it got a pitfall like this. Heh! the worst of it is, it’s all bare and empty. No idea what things are where, it beats me. Son of a bitch! It might of been a haunted house I done sneaked into, eh?”

Shigenobu heard him tear a handcloth or something to bind where he was scraped. Now the thief must have been safely convinced that there was nobody here, he rummaged around awhile as he invariably grumbled and complained to himself. Then, he opened the fusuma screen doors and came into where Shigenobu was resting.

It was a short thickset man in something like a short hanten livery coat and a long john. He was barefoot, head covered. He was not a samurai warrior, not to mention, or a different sort from an assassin.

—Then, it must follow it’s what they call a thief.

The thought of this titillated Shigenobu to a chuckle. The opponent seemed flabbergasted. He looked over his shoulder toward Shigenobu, narrowed his eyes and gazed at the bedding laid out under his nose. To his surprise, he found a human lying in it. The thief raised an odd cry, “Heow” like, and stepped aside.

“Who, who’s that? —What?”

So the thief shouted and timorously looked into where he had been standing. Shigenobu kept silent. He lay on his back like a rock and would not move an inch. —The thief, caught in a Catch-22, thought whether or not he’d do better to get away. At long last he seemed to have decided. Deliberately, he clutched his butcher knife in his hand again and, thrusting it forward, yelled:

“Hey, ya get up an’ cough up money. Hey, get up an’ come out here.”  
“\_\_\_\_\_”

“I say, Give out money. Quiet an’ cough up all ya got an’ it’s clean over. Don’t ya grumble or ya can’t get away wi’ it. Ya’ll get this buried right into yer guts.”

For all this, Shigenobu remained silent. The thief quietly looked into the ambience about him and took a gentle step forward.

“Ya devil-may-care, yer playin’ possum, or you’re plannin’ out any tactics? Heh! Lemme tell ya, I got as many as thirty rogues waitin’ outside. Once blow this whistle, heh ya know, reckless blokes’ll come crowdin’ in, each wi’ their glintin’ sword. Freeze or I’ll get ya.”

“—That’s interesting. Why not try and blow it once?”

“What? What do ya dare to say, ya asshole?”

“—I’m telling you to try and blow that whistle.”

When, giggling, Shigenobu said so, for a split second the thief was at a loss for words. Decidedly he swayed his knife and shouted threats at the top of his lungs.

“Don’t ya make a fool of me, ya saucy bastard. Darn it! Don’t ya make me laugh, ya bastard. —Oy! Cough up money whatever it is.”

“I’m sorry but I have no money.”

“Ain’t ya takin’ me fer a lay thief? Ya ain’t got no money, livin’ as ya do in a mansion like this. And yet, heh, ya ain’t got no money. I tell ya, man, don’t ya make a fool of me. Hey, get up! I know fer sure ya got money. Gimme a lot of hocus-pocus an’ I’ll search the house.”

“That’s a good idea. Feel free and do that right away.”

Shigenobu added:

“Should you find any, may I have a small share of it?”

“Ain’t ya still foolin’ me? Don’t ya be saucy. Don’t ya make a fool of me. Wait ’n’ see. Stay put, or else ya’ll be sure I’ll get ya.”

The thief threatened thus and when he confirmed that Shigenobu was staying put, he slowly launched a search of the house, which, however, turned out to be not an easy task. Fusuma screen doors easily fell down, and so did the panels of the cabinets when slid open. Something rattled down and a scream came, “Augh!” On the heels of the scream was heard a violent banging noise of the joists being broken. Obviously the searcher happened to thump somewhere on the floor where it readily gave way under his feet.

“Darn it! What a mess! Asshole! What a house! What a darned house!”

Scarcely had the thief cursed so before he fell down somewhere. A heavy thud followed a splashy crumbling noise.

## 2.

Shigenobu heard the thief say, “Help me,” or he didn’t hear him say so. He did hear him swear, “Hey bastard,” and “Quit pretendin’ to be saucy,” from under the floor. —Then he continued to rummage around a while. He had scrambled out from under the floor before Shigenobu knew it. He began grumping where he came out.

“It’s the finest house I done ever sneaked into. Collapsing, empty through and through. Darn it, not a single door or screen’s good. Ugh, —*spit, spit*, son of a bitch, something darned flew into my mouth.”

The thief’s attention still seemed to be on the taking. He made for the storage room and cluttered something there. In time there were boisterous noises of rattles, and thuds, ear-splitting cacophony, as if a big rock had fallen from the ceiling. The thief screamed and made bongs against pillars every time he stepped aside. Then a most violent scream came to Shigenobu.

“Hey, that’s enough. Quit it,” shouted Shigenobu, bursting out laughing, “—Search as you do, you’ll truly find nothing. It’s no use. You might as well stop it.”

What a surprise! What a mess! Terrible house! Ya done a fine job. So saying the thief came back to where Shigenobu was.

“Hey, ya ain’t got absolutely nothin’?”

“Exactly what you say. There’s absolutely nothing. Didn’t I tell you in the first place?”

“It ain’t no time to laugh. Oh, it hurts.”

The thief came up to the bedding, rubbing and stroking him, and sat down. He had rolled up the right leg of his long john and bound it with a cloth. It must be where he scraped a little while ago. —He looked around and gave a sigh. Then look what happened. A weird sound rumbled in his belly, *rr-rrr-rum-rum-rumble-rumble*.

“I’m hungry. Is there anythin’ to eat?”

“Seems not.”

“I can make do with the leftovers from dinner. Gimme somethin’ to eat.”

“—Sorry, honestly I don’t have any such thing.”

The thief stood up with a click of his tongue. He made for the kitchen. While rattling things in the kitchen, he muttered to himself as if in a wild rage, “This here’s needlessly too large to get an idea of where to find anythin’”; “Given that there’s the kitchen stove this here”; or “Shit! This one’s also empty.” After all was said and done, he came back to where Shigenobu was, with his tail between his legs.

“There ain’t no rice in store. Ya ain’t have no rice, either?”

“—I’m not a liar.”

“Then, how are ya livin’?”

“—As you see it here.”

“But yer eatin’ somethin’?”

“—In the past three days including today, I’ve had definitely nothing.”

“You’re a helpless bastard.”

The thief gave a deep sigh and turned to look at Shigenobu. Then his belly gave out a growl. He got to his feet, swallowing down his saliva, thinking of something, whispered again, “You’re darned helpless,” and from the verandah stepped out to no one knew where.

Shigenobu, it seemed, fell asleep. Someone was shaking him when he awoke and found the faint morning light was coming through the shoji sliding doors and that the same old thief was standing right beside him.

“Get up an’ wash yer face, won’tcha? Breakfast’s ready.”

“—Breakfast? . . . What in the world have you done?”

“It don’t matter what I done. Get up right away.”

The thief left for the kitchen. He was thirty-four or -five, by the look of him. He was swarthy, looking simple-minded, honest to a fault, with lumpy sturdy shoulders and bandy-legs. This stood out, particular to a man who had done manual labor.

—That’d be interesting. Shigenobu smiled lopsidedly and got up. He wobbled a little from hunger, stepped down from the hallway where the

rinsing was equipped, and made his way toward the drawing well.

The front of the estate developed the view of a village with fields and rice paddies as you stepped down the stairs, while the backyard where the central garden used to be with the area of over two thousand tsubo (ca 1.65 acres) extended to one side, as you descended to the deep ravine Kurotani (Black Ravine) and went further, and merged naturally into the foothill of Mt. Onizuka. There used to be fences built to draw the boundaries on that side, too, but they had been torn down ages before, and consequently there were no traces of the boundaries any more now. Taking advantage of this, wild animals such as deer and wild boars and sometimes bears and others fearlessly trespassed the backyard. And foxes and raccoons were the denizens of this garden for it seemed they had their lairs here. —The estate had been uninhabited over twenty years, nor had the trees and other plants been lopped or pruned through the years. The branches of the trees had grown in the directions they liked. Where branches crossed and lay over and so did leaves, sorrel vines, wisterias, and kudzu came in and got so entangled, it was impossible to distinguish pines trees from plum trees . . . . Not to mention, as far as the eye could see, the garden was the sea of the dense growth of luxuriant summer grasses and the soil was seldom to be seen. At one of the exposed spots, just outside of the kitchen door, was located the well, and four, five ken (ca ten yards) ahead of it was running a narrow stream of water which came together from springs of the mountain. The stream was abundant icy water across the estate. It was so icy your hands would be frozen when dipped in it even during summer.

When he was back after washing his face, Shigenobu found the bedding had been folded away, and the thief was getting breakfast ready, placing the trays where the bedding had been but closer to the verandah. The savory smell of the miso-soup spreading over from a big pot, and the steam of the cooked rice was going up from the pot whose lid had been lifted.

“Ya done washed yer face? Then, sit down over there.”

The thief said so and pointed to the other tray.

### 3.

Shigenobu sat down at the tray and took up his chopsticks all right, but there he hesitated a little. It was a petty joke but the thought came across his mind: Eagle does not hunt flies.

“What’s wrong? Ya won’t eat?”

“—Well, not that I won’t eat.”

“Then, go ahead an’ enjoy it. There ain’t no need of reserve at all. We should help each other when we’re starved. How can ya last fer as long as three days without eatin’ nothin’, eh?”

The thief reassured him by saying so, but Shigenobu wouldn’t touch the food still. He said what the matter was and was quizzically gazing on him, when suddenly he squared up his shoulders and declared:

“Now it comes home to me. Yer thinkin’ I stole all this, rice, miso, and all the other. Quit jokin’. How can I do such glaring stuff? Ya know, how the fuck could I do?”

A real anger rose onto his face and he protested with a spouted mouth:

“I paid fer ’em right outa my pocket. Tell ya, man, I bought this rice, this miso, these greens wi’ my own money. Ask ’em if I’m lyin’. I bought ’em at the farmer’s right below this place. Ya know, there’s pomegranate flowers are in bloom, and there I bought ’em wi’ my own money from the fat wife like a stone mortar.”

“—Oh dear, please forgive me. I’m to blame. Now that I’m in the know, let me enjoy it.”

Relieved, Shigenobu took up his rice bowl.

When the breakfast was over, the thief cleared the trays away and went out of the kitchen door. Apparently, he was going to wash dirty bowls and plates in the stream beyond the kitchen. Shigenobu went into his small study which let in comfortable winds, and laid himself. Absently he looked across to the stand of trees in the garden. —A while later, the thief came. He looked around as he dried his hands and said, Well. But he looked toward Shigenobu as if left hanging in the midair,

and dawdled there, rubbed his unshaven bearded jaw, and scratched his scruff.

“Now I must go. Will ya remain this here all the way?”

“Well yes.”

“OK, but, say, how will ya feed yerself? Ya got somethin’ in mind?”

“None, at all.”

“Ya say none, but how can ya? Ya’ll be starved to death.”

“Maybe, so I will.”

The thief rubbed his jaw and scratched his scruff again. He just daldied. He looked to Shigenobu, shook his shoulders, and piffled what could not be made head or tail. And he tried once to go away but indecisively. He returned soon and said:

“Darn it! It’s no joke.”

So saying, he untied a wrapping as large as a baby’s head from his waist and put it in front of Shigenobu with a thud.

“I can’t leave ya when you’re ’bout to die from darned starvation, when I know you will without doin’ nothin’. Oh I done gone and landed in such a fine place! It’s such stuff and nonsense! —However, there ain’t no way out. I’ll do what I can, so eat this and wait fer me.”

“—What will *you* do without your lunch?”

“What will *I* do without my lunch? There ain’t nothin’ I can do ’bout it. I gotta come up with a way. Anyways, ya piss it off an’ wait this here.”

The thief went somewhere, looking as if he were piqued.

—I’m sure he isn’t a local man.

So Shigenobu thought because even the citizens of the castle town were, since the premises of this estate at the foot of Mt. Onizuka were deserted, forbidden to get close to them, the violators of which knew they would be punished. Sometimes there were those who, dressed down as farmers, hunters, and loggers, would hang around in and out of the estate. They were the watchers of the Takizawa group. Among them was a person whose role was to take Shigenobu’s life.

Three years before he had been incarcerated here, until then Shigenobu had lived in the second mansion in Kobiki-cho, Kyobashi,

Edo. He had been born as the second son of Shigetoyo of Lord Ooi. His residence had all along been the second mansion with his mother, a concubine of Shigetoyo's.

Once for nearly five years, Lord Ooi took the responsibility of being the deputy castellan of the Osaka Castle and was absent from Edo. Other times he left his position of grave responsibilities once in a blue moon, such as a magistrate of shrines and temples, a junior councilor, a chief financial official, and a senior councilor. Thus opportunities were exceedingly scarce to return to his own domain on leave under the system of alternate-year residence between Edo and his home. —It was maybe because his father had always been tied up at work that Shigenobu had seen his father so seldom, he could count how often he had seen his father until he had turned twenty years old. And he had siblings living in the main mansion in Marunouchi, his big brother, first son, Shigetake, and three sisters older and younger than he. Since he had gone to see his father with his brother on the fixed days, he had ever talked to his brother, but when it came to his sisters, he had only heard their names but never met them.

Another house had wanted to adopt Shigenobu when he was fifteen. It was said that the adoption had almost been consummated but that his father Shigetoyo would not consent to it. After that there had come up a couple of more but then again his father had turned all down. —This dissent of his father's had caused a conflict nobody would have expected. Apart from this, Shigenobu had the remembrance that he had been deeply moved that his father's disagreement to leaving him had proved he loved him so dearly. . . . But, when Shigenobu was twenty-one, Lord Ooi was attacked by a stroke which triggered a hot competition regarding who to succeed to their father. The dispute was whether the right of succession had been attributed to his big brother Shigetake or to him.

4.

As is mentioned before, since Lord Ooi was most of the time tied up in official duties, the government of his domain was practically all entrusted to the senior vassals. The head was represented by the top senior councilor in Edo named Takizawa Zushonosuke, whose appearance and abilities were prominently outstanding, for once reputed to be a distinguished governor. —He held the office nearly fifteen years. Supposedly, he had abilities and popularity. However, on the other hand, there were not a few who grudged and grumped about the policies he implemented. According to those who found the joy of reading too much, Lord Ooi himself came first disliking Zushonosuke . . . . The anti-Takizawa group was represented by Kajita Ju'emon. Considering that he was the grand chamberlain of Lord Ooi may well have proved it was fair judgment and that it was a fact that the lord disliked Zushonosuke.

The Takizawa group asserted Hyobu Shigetake's right to heir. Naturally, it was a judicious argument, for Shigetake was the first son and had met with the shogun at the age of eight. Only, when he was thirteen, he had such a serious disease in his brain he was on the daft side in spite of being physically robust, that he sometimes behaved in a funny way, and that his language was apt to be incoherent. This was the problem with him.

The Kajita group tried to back up Shigenobu to the throne.

—Immediately after Shigetake had suffered from a brain disease, Lord Ooi had intended to remove the right to heir to Shigenobu. That was why the father persistently refused all the offers of his second son's adoption.

That was the point of assertion of the Kajita group. Other than this, they went to great lengths to promulgate it to the senior councilors of the shogunate that Shigetake was an idiot. . . . Lord Ooi was laid up with the stroke and could not do anything about it. It was said that the entire paralysis had deprived him of speech.

No one told Shigenobu how the whole thing had come about, nor did he want to know. But one evening in the beginning of February three years ago, a retainer called Samejima Hyoma, who always attended on and looked after Shigenobu's needs, came and reported. —That Kajita Ju'emom had been confined out of the blue, that the major members of his group had been dismissed from their offices, that some three of them had been exiled, that, because the young lord might be involved in the trouble, he ought also to be on the alert, and so on and so forth. The retainer reported all this hurriedly with the color drained from his face.

It was neither too early to be on the alert nor too late. The next morning, Shigenobu was surrounded by retainers he hadn't seen and moved to the third mansion in Honjo. One month after, an emissary came from the main mansion and proclaimed under the name of Lord Ooi that which went as follows:

—By plotting with some traitors, you have insolently gone over the right of your elder brother Shigetake and conspired to be heir of the domain lordship. This fact exceeds the authority of the family constitution, which is never to be forgiven. For this reason, this proclamation is issued under my name to enjoin you to be eternally confined in my domain.

Shigenobu expressed his desire to see his father once, but they would not listen to his entreaty. He was given no time to say goodbye to his mother in the second mansion and immediately sent to the home domain. —The villa on Mt. Onizuka had, it was said, belonged to the former lord of the domain. Since the Matsudaira family had been transferred to this fief, Shigemitsu of Lord Ooi, Shigenobu's grandfather, had once used it as his retreat for a time. However, he used it only a little while and left there because the estate was extremely deserted and it was five ri (ca 12 miles) to the castle, which was inconvenient. After that, it was said, the estate had not been kept under guard, left to grow as deserted as any, . . . Shigenobu was confined in this villa on arriving in the home domain.

In the beginning, five retainers and several servants attended on him. In time one retainer went and then another, and so did the servants. Fi-

nally, this last spring Shigenobu was left alone in the villa. In spite of this, rice was delivered regularly in one way or another. But it also began to come in a longer time than it had the last time, until at last no rice arrived any more. —However, they would sometimes come from the castle to inspect how he was getting along and there would be strange louts hanging about the estate around the clock. Among them, as it happened some three times, one stole in to stab him to death. Only recently, too, did one of them release an arrow to get him who was sitting on the verandah from behind the front janitor's box.

Time and again Shigenobu raised the matters on the necessity of servants, no delivery of food, and the possible assassins, to the officials who came to see him from the castle. The response from them was that they were following the orders that came from Edo, but that he had behaved too rudely for the servants to stay with him, and that food ought to be coming regularly. Regarding the assassins they responded as follows:

—That couldn't be possible. Should it prove true, the assassins might have been sent by the Kajita group. By killing him, they might be going to cover up a conspiracy they were plotting on the matter at stake, of the succession of heir.

Shigenobu was despaired, *alas!*

—To be starved to death or to be assassinated? He learned of his predestination.

Therefore, it was a waste to struggle with life and death, so his mind was made up. He had dumped all and chosen to die from starvation when the last grain of rice was gone, and he was lying in bed.

In that last straw a thief landed. Probably he was a stranger from another province and knew nothing about the circumstances. It was too ironic for him to break in here of all places. —He arrogantly asked Shigenobu if he was wondering he was a lay one. For sure, he was one. He was evidently good-natured, not roguish. He troubled himself to feed Shigenobu out of his pocket. He went out to buy rice and miso and fixed him a meal.

“While my vassals are trying to take my life, a thief fed me. What a

crazy world!”

So Shigenobu murmured and opened the wrapping the thief had left for him. In it were three big balls of rice mixed with miso.

## 5.

The thief came back when it was dusk.

“Howdy? I’m back.”

He called at the verandah.

“I got late. Ya must be hungry. I’ll get dinner ready right away.”

While seeing the back of the man going around the back of the house, Shigenobu was touched by the emotion as if his heart were warmed. It was the kind of emotion he himself could not apprehend but it was warm and permeated the heart with feelings. He sat at the desk for the first time in a long time, rested his elbows on it, and kept listening for the sounds of the kitchen with a feeling that would call back good old days.

The trays were laid out with miso-soup and rice together with a bowl full of pickled plums.

“Did you buy all of this?”

“Oh, c’mmmon. Don’t be mean.”

The man showed his embarrassment with a huffed look of his eyes and pouted mouth.

“When ya got one that ya must feed, ya know how can ya get by by bein’ a thief, eh?”

“—It beats me. Is the world the way you say?”

“If yer single, well, maybe, ya can make a livin’ by bein’ a thief. But I got you to look after. Just ya think, if I don’t work to earn seriously, then I’ll fail to feed ya.”

“—Well, you have a losing battle. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want ya sayin’ that. I don’t like it. You’re sorry? Tell ya, man, ya may be sorry but I got a hankerin’, if I can, to stay away from bein’ a thief. Anyways, shall we eat? —The rice may not be cooked well, it’ll

be a little hard to chew.”

In the night, they made their beds side by side and slept. The man seemed to be terribly exhausted. As soon as he lay in bed, he fell asleep. He snored loudly. He threw out his limbs with thuds and thumps and rolled out of the bedding. In sleep he had no manners at all. —As was his habit, Shigenori read till well after midnight with a smudge fire to keep away mosquitoes and the light pulled close to him.

The next morning, the man went out Shigenori didn't know where. As he went off, he showed Shigenobu where he could find his lunch and said he'd buy and bring back dried fish or something tonight.

“By the way, don't you find it's inconvenient we ain't introduced each other yet? Denkuro is my name. Denk's good enough. And what's yours?”

“—Mine? Mine's . . . Nobu, yes, that's my name.”

“Simply Nobu, is it? Don't sound like that of a samurai warrior. Yer family name's such an' such an' then yours is Nobu, isn't this the way?”

“—Forget it, that's that. Just call me Nobu.”

“Simple Nobu. Well then, yours is *Simplenobu* or Sato *Tadanobu*, right?”

In a Kabuki play, he said, Sato Tadanobu (*Simplenobu*) was the part to play, coming to the rescue with an anchor on his back. This was a mistaken play on word using a name. Denkuro thus took off playfully.

As he promised, Denkuro returned with dried fish called hachime rockfish that evening. This was almost the very first fish Shigenobu had had since he had been put under house arrest. “It's so good” would come itself onto his lips for a number of times but he checked it unvoiced. — In this way three, then four days went by. Denkuro told Shigenobu he was working at a dike construction site on the Ozuma River. That was fine by him. What troubled his mind were the queries he had of what had become of those who had been keeping strict tabs on him; and how come they let it go at that that a man like Denkuro was in and out.

He asked once, “You've been in and out of this place and haven't you ever been questioned by anyone?”

“I ain't no such man as to pull such a boner.”

Giggling, Denkuro looked slick.

“Neither will boors in this neighborhood know we’re here, I bet. Nor will my coworker navvies at the construction site the less, not to mention. That’s where I’m careful, ya see?”

He left in the twilight at the crack of dawn and returned well after dark. He added that on the way to and from work he would take a narrow mountain path along the stream running down the Kurotani Ravine, and that he had not so far met a single soul on the way. Their watch had been so rigorous as to let any pretentious moves go unnoticed. They could not have missed them, but if it was true what Denkuro said, well, then they might have loosened their watch.

—Well, to think back on it, there hasn’t been a patrol from the castle for a time, either.

This is the way Shigenobu took the current situation.

A most peculiar relationship of living together thus went on on a quotidian basis. Denkuro was equal in the way he spoke to Shigenobu, but other than that, he was like a valet serving his master. He worked and made money, cooked for, fed, and as much as did laundry for Shigenobu.

—Even Shigenobu himself, although he had been in the habit of being always attended at home by his vassals since he had been born, felt bad and therefore was inquisitive about why the man would go to the trouble to do this much for him.

“Hey, you’re darn somethin’ that makes me wonder.”

Denkuro came out:

“This is the first time I ever felt like this in my born days. That is, I got an odd feelin’, lookin’ at you. That I feel peculiarly lighthearted, pleased, —how can I say, well, look at this, I got a feelin’ that the world don’t treat me as bad as it all seems . . . that’s the way I feel, strange enough.”

“—Didn’t the world treat you like this?”

“Naw! That’s why I got to think ’bout bein’ a thief. I been maltreated, viciously, I tell ya. It makes my blood boil savagely just to think back upon it.”

6.

Only seldom did Denkuro talk about himself. When he did, he did it in fragments to boost.

That their living circumstances had been disparate from each other and that his talks were just fragmental, only gave the audience a rough sketch of the narrator's past, but, as a whole, the sketch drew such a luckless past and it made the audience feel it heart-rending and drove him to despondency. —He had been born in a downtown of Edo. His father had been a grocer of some means. He had been a quiet and affable type of person, but once drunk, he would become a totally changed person, who would go away with all the money in the house and stay away from home for five, six days in a row. This had happened quite a few times. After all, he had gone out of business due to drinking. Soon after the three of them, he and his wife and son, had moved into a tenement, he died a sudden death. His sudden death had been caused by nothing but the accident in which he had drowned in the river after having become blind drunk.

“Therefore, I gotta work fer money by vendin’ freshwater mussels when I was seven.”

His mother had got remarried and he'd had to serve a wholesaler of marine products in Nihonbashi as an apprentice. His father-in-law would drink peerlessly like a fish, who had apparently given his mother loads of trouble and pain, which eventually caused her to die in three years' time.

“Therefore, I became an orphan when I was thirteen. I became an authentic orphan all right, but I had a father-in-law left to cope with. This man was a plague to me.”

This man called Shinzo had frequented the wholesaler's establishment for which Denkuro was working, nay, haunted the place after he had had his wife die, in order to call Denkuro out to mooch money. Whenever he came, he was three sheets to the wind and hollered and bellowed some

times and other times ranted and raved. Denkuro had been told that this rogue, alias his father-in-law, was a craftsman of some sort but had not worked in ages; and that, having become a gambler or something, he appeared like a scoundrel and looked like a detestable person. — The proprietor of the establishment, supposedly bothered by frequent visitations, got the better of the visitor who said, “I can’t tolerate my son workin’ fer such meager wages,” and politely agreed to dismiss him in less than two years.

Denkuro, then, took the job of “barrel pickup” in which you took orders for a liquor house by visiting from door to door. He baby-sat. He took various jobs as an apprentice for, to name a few, a stone dealer, a plasterer, a cartwright, and a rice dealer. But the change of jobs did not let him acquire skills in some specific line of business but allowed his father-in-law to get advances that came from the agreement of his son-in-law’s service of apprenticeship. The trick of it was that he would get away from those masters in a little bit of time much before the expiry of apprenticeship. To put it into a nutshell, the purpose was for advances. —Some of the houses treated him so well he preferred to remain there. And by the same token as at the wholesaler’s in Nihonbashi, his father-in-law came almost every day, dead drunk, and hollered and bellowed for an increase in advances or about the wages being too small. Then he would lie down and sleep at the threshold of the establishment or go on a rampage. Therefore, in most cases, it was the employers that got him to leave his job.

When he got married at the age of twenty-five, he was a helping hand of the plasterer in Honjo. The wife, who had, it seemed, been working at a tavern of a sort, was brought and made to settle down with him by his father-in-law. Since then, one of the rooms of the tenement had become all but a gambling den. Weirdoes were incessantly in and out and the rattling of dice and the shuffling and slashing of cards with twelve flower suits went on through the night. He was distanced by his wife, completely out of her mind. She binged boisterously with her playmates, saturated in gambling and partaking of drinks. Nothing she did was what a wife would do.

“I don’t remember, but was she my wife for a hundred days? She left me alone. She eloped somewhere for keeps with someone in her band of playmates. As it turned out later, this someone was her true husband.”

His father-in-law persisted in sponging Denkuro to the last penny that would have been due to him, until finally he died of a gastric disease. For more than a half year between taking to his bed and breathing his last, he kept cursing Denkuro for being “impious toward his father.” — Denkuro had turned thirty. The time had come when he could, for the first time in his life, have his way in anything, live any way he liked, by himself. This was what he anticipated at that time wholeheartedly, but he was skilled in nothing at all and too old for any specific trade. He had to hop from job to job that came his way to make a living and no choice.

At thirty-one, he got married for the second time. The bride was a no less than twenty-three, toughened woman. Therefore, more likely than not this was not her first marriage. It was good to have a diligent hard-working woman for his wife, but she was a termagant. She was not only that but also invariably grumping, cheap and tight and narrow in a horrible way, and to top it off, an unfeelingly guiltless liar.

“At that time, I was drivin’ a cart fer a livin’. In time I won the confidence of my master, who trusted me with a counter I’d sit behind in Furuishiba. He must of trusted me fer my honesty. He gave a dozen carts and three drivers fer me to manage, well, this included rentin’ carts. —Amon’ the drivers, there was this man called Kichigoro. He’d been employed longer than me but . . . he was a bad fella. In less than three months that I sat behind the counter, he took a grab of the money there and got away with it. Well, it could of been manageable, but he also took away the money fer the twelve carts. They’d been promised to be sold to someone. Why, only then was I flabbergasted.”

The relationship with his master was of course cut off. He was, on the other hand, fed up with his wife’s parsimony, lies, and shrewishness. She was brutal in her own way, not caring about her husband’s feelings, always having her fill of termagancy. At meals she would cut short three bowls of rice to two and instead laid it up in secret money for herself. —He had grown so abhorrent of seeing her face and hearing her voice.

Hardly had the shop in Furuishiba been closed down before he took to flight from Edo.

7.

“I been places, yes quite a few places, before I settled down this here. But I couldn’t find no place in this world fer the purpose of settlin’ down. The world been hard fer me to get by, people been mean an’ un-feelin’. I got tripped up, pushed down into pitfalls, an’ this an’ that an’ all the other. I done always had a hard time. —I, such as I am, got exasperated, desperate, then, . . . Darn it, if ya go yer way, I’ll go mine—but it’s helpless to be on the daft side. I done gone an’ ended up landin’ in this darned haunted house, . . . heh! I swear it, served me right.”

His stories went sporadically in snatches, entangled, tails came before heads and the same things repeated time and again. On top of these, plenty of things were beyond Shigenobu’s understanding, such as “barrel pickup,” hawking freshwater mussels, and day laborers’ life. —None-theless, Shigenobu found his stories enjoyable. It may be blasphemous to apply “enjoyable,” though. The facts in the yarns were tragic and pathetic. They often made Shigenobu draw a sigh of grief before he knew it as he listened to them. However, they depicted lives full of vigor no person like Shigenobu knew of and made the listener feel tangibly candid ways of human beings.

In the dead of night, waking from sleep, Shigenobu imagined with a pang Denkuro’s real father who had drowned to death in the river, dead drunk, while listening to Denkuro breathing in sleep in his bed next to Shigenobu’s. In his eyes he tried to build up a picture of the quiet scenes of frost-bitten streets in a raw early morning in which a boy of seven was hawking along freshwater mussels.

—Supposing I had been born into those circumstances.

Shigenobu replaced Denkuro with himself, and to his feeling, the new Shigenobu was more human and had more to live for.

The man, in Denkuro’s stories, who took away money from behind

the counter in Furuishba. His wife, who was a miser, liar, and termagant. His father-in-law, who troubled and sponged his son-in-law to his last penny while he cursed him as “impious toward his parent.” His first woman, who stayed a nominal wife to him while binging boisterously as she gambled and drank with her playmates, but who turned out to have already been a wife of another man. —They were all wily and mean in their individual way. But in spite of the fact that they thus ravaged him, deceived him, hated him, filched from him, and robbed him, most probably they themselves did not live all that comfortably off. . . . Somewhere in a corner of the world they were, in their own way, as likely as not hard put to it with no means to live by and once in a while gave a solitary sigh.

—Each and every one, Shigenobu mulled, was pitiable, wretched, and good in the core of heart. They were at least more human than those who attended him. In something like twenty days he had lived with Denkuro, he came to really like him. Denkuro himself smelled of living worlds. Shigenobu felt in Denkuro that stark, honest humanhood was breathing in the everyday life he was living with all in one that was good and ugly and clean and base.

“Hey, Nobu-san, will ya care fer loach-soup?”

“—Don’t know well what it is, but I may care for it.”

“Ya say ya may eat it. But ya ain’t got the least idea of loach-soup? Huh, what the heck do ya know? Ya know nothin’.”

“—Well, yes, that’s about it.”

“To my feelin’, ya were born into a real poor family, or else, ya were born young lord of a domain lord family.”

In this way, Shigenobu had various foods he had not had yet. Different from that of samurai families, common people’s lifestyle was felt to be lacking in manners and indecent but it had hearty feelings and rings of truth. —It was so good to eat porridge with freshly cooked rice soaked in hot soup; to pour hot green tea over a bowl of hot rice and wash it down, your naked torso exposed; to eat chilled tofu topped with green shiso herb whose scent stung your nose; and to eat rice balls by sprinkling salt over the rice left burnt in the color of fox fur and stuck to

the bottom of the rice-cooking pot, scraping it off and making rice balls of it. They were really good regardless of decency or politeness. In his feeling, they were nothing but real foods.

“Lemme tell ya, Nobu-san, that there’s a funny thin’.”

One evening while eating dinner, Denkuro said so.

“The world’s such a huge place. I thought I was the biggest dolt ever produced, but I found it wrong. There’s a fella is more stupid than me.”

“Oh, there should be, I trust.”

“Ya say there are, but, ya know, what I mean is, a thief.”

“—Don’t get under my skin. How could . . .?”

“Yes, there is, it seems. He appears like a peasant. He’s sometimes hanging ’round the front wall and the inner part of the backyard. Although I usually watch him, pretendin’ I don’t notice him, I caught a glimpse of him while makin’ dinner, —ya know, there’s a dilapidated stable and it was in the shade of it that I happened to see him.”

Shigenobu veered his face aslant. He did not want his companion to see his expression to change. Denkuro was so into his story he did not notice his companion’s embarrassment and went on with it, grinning and interested:

“Maybe he’ll steal in tonight. It’s my turn to enjoy scenes that’ll unfold. Heh! He’ll trip over, stomp through the darned floor, raise a ruckus on his own, an’ end up bein’ grimy from dust and soakin’ wet with sweats. After all, with no loot at all to take away, well, well, well, wait ’n’ see, —he’ll be just bewildered an’ will go nuts most probably.”

But nothing happened on the night.

## 8.

“What’s he up to, that dodo? How come he don’t stop dawdlin’ but get a move on? I wonder he ain’t made up his mind yet.”

Denkuro smacked his tongue impatiently.

“Why don’t he take the plunge and get in? We won’t bother him, no way. We’ll just keep watchin’, so we’ll have a big laugh. That’s all. We’re

waitin' to welcome him, all directions all open. He gotta be such a big coward."

No matter how he grumped, there was no hint of a thief getting into the house. —Then one day, it had been some seven days since Denkuro had talked about someone lurking to attempt theft, in a muggy cloudy afternoon when he was lying reading in his small study, Shigenobu heard a voice call in the direction of the front yard, "My liege, my liege—" He only turned his head in the direction and said wearily, "Who's that?"

"I'm Hyoma, my liege, I'm Samejima Hyoma."

Shigenobu threw away the book jadedly. Samejima Hyoma? he mused, Aha, well, he was an attendant in the second house in Edo. He was disinclined to sit up, stand up, and go to answer the attendant.

"—What is it? Do you have any business with me?"

"I'm in a hurry, my liege, so please excuse me for giving your highness just the drift of it. Our Lord has passed on. Has your highness been informed of it?"

"—No, no information at all. This is the first time I've ever heard."

As he was told the lord had passed away on May 10 (lunar calendar), Shigenobu softly murmured in his mouth, "Father." Hyoma further added that Kajita Ju'emon had been inducted into the office of senior counselor, that Takizawa Zushonosuke had been placed on the reserve list. All this meant that the circumstances were beginning to revolve. But the young lord was not interested in such affairs any more. It did not mean anything no matter who had won and who had lost and no matter how the powers that be would shift.

—Ah, 's that so. My sire is gone finally. Was he in peace when he went? Has my mater in the second house visited him to bid him farewell?

While so thinking, Shigenobu found Hyoma still continuing. That he and his fellow attendants had been protecting this villa since early times; that the watch of the Takizawa group had been loosened; but that they could not get the guard down yet until the state of affairs would completely settle down to either side; that since they were in the quan-

dary that the opponents might take emergency measures, they would keep on the alert on their young lord for the time being, safely hidden; that, with all this in mind, his highness was desired to stick it out till the end; and so forth.

One thing among others that Hyoma said drove Shigenobu into discomfiture. All those who had made an attempt to murder him three times and who had sought to assail him by piercing arrows through him had been what the Kajita group had done. He was really taken aback.

“We all knew it couldn’t be helped. We took those measures under the pressure of necessity, my liege.”

Hyoma said so through his clenched teeth. He continued:

“The Takizawa group seemed quite a while to take your highness’ life. On detecting their intention, we took the counter-measures, and it was fortunate that they failed to detect them. Ostensibly, they had expected to achieve their goal without having recourse to gory acts. —Since the circumstances have been as such, we have come up with each and every measure on the demand of the pressure of necessity. Therefore, we’d like to cordially ask for your highness’ excuse for lacking manners.”

Shigenobu remained lying until Hyoma finished. When Hyoma was just about to take leave of him, he said:

“—All shall be informed that they leave me once and for all. Remember, leave me alone.”

The fact that the assassins had been from the group which backed him up made Shigenobu more than displeased. Wasn’t he treated with derision? He had been serious when assailed. He had thought he would really be assassinated. His habit had formed of placing his sword close to his pillow and his inclination had developed of being unable to sleep fast in the night, and so on and so forth. All this had come to him since the assassinations had been assayed.

—Were there to be assassins and the like, they must be dispatched by the Kajita group.

So the officials, coming from the castle for the routine inspection, had said and laughed scornfully. In actuality they had been foiled. On the part of Shigenobu, however, he was more ashamed to “foil someone.”

“Oh I hate it. It’s this ruler’s world I hate through and through.”

So muttering, Shigenobu shook his head violently to and fro as if he wanted to shake one and all off his head.

“—Hey, Denk, shall we both of us go away somewhere?” he said on the same night.

“That ain’t a bad idea. Should ya stay wi’ me, I’d be willin’ to do anythin’, go through hell an’ high water, anyplace. I promise.”

“—Why, I’ll do something, too. I promise.”

“Of course, Nobu-san. In the future ya must. What excuse would ya make to the fire-chariot coursing Heaven if ya darn play an’ eat an’ waste yer time? But there’s no rush. It’s only when ya get strong enough to think ya gotta work.”

“—I’m strong enough, Denk.”

“Ya say you’re strong, but I don’t say you ain’t. Yer body’s sick. It won’t be what’s ordinarily called as sick, though, maybe.”

Denkuro turned to look at Shigenobu with a serious expression.

“Yep. I ain’t got no idea whether it’s yer body or heart. Anyways, someplace in ya is terribly damaged. I’m such as I am, but my hunch rarely fails when it comes to stuff like this.”

“—It’s a wonder. Do I look like it?”

“Piss ’em off, your worries. Nobu-san, be sure I’m this here wi’ ya. Ya can sit back an’ relax . . . well, it won’t go like this, but I got a firm intention. I’ll do what I can do fer ya, that’s that. Depend on me, yes, that’s perfect, an’ stay relaxed fer the time bein’. Ya get it?”

## 9.

Shigenobu was serious about it. He mused that he would go away from here with Denkuro; that he would make a living no matter where it was and live a humble life like a good and honest man. He would anywhere meet the kind of people who had cheated, sponged, filched from, cursed, and humiliated Denkuro. This would not be bad because it would be more human by far than being made a puppet of scrambles for

power and he would have something to live for.

—That’s right, he decided, I’ll go away from here, along with Den-kuro. Like him, I’ll work for my own living.

Contrary to Shigenobu’s decision, it did not seem that Den-kuro would get a move on there and then. The foreman at the dike construction site was so intent on Den-kuro he had already given him a promotion to an assistant foreman. The boss was suggesting he could entrust him with a construction site as foreman, depending on the future.

“I myself hate it, but in another’s eye I seem to have the streak of it.”

Den-kuro turned embarrassed in the look of his eye.

“Yep, I hate it, tell ya. I hate stuff like that, but ya know, —it’s the same old story as Furuishiba. They give credit to me fer what I am, funny ain’t it? I ain’t no apple-polishing type of person, though.”

However, once given credit, he did not feel bad, or rather, he felt obligated to return the favor in kind eventually. He did mean it.

“This here is, as you see, a torn-down haunted house. There ain’t no worry of bein’ disturbed by no one. Quiet and relaxin’, there ain’t no place like this here fer us to stay the way we are now, don’t ya think so? —What about we stay this here a bit longer?”

Some ten days had gone by while they were discussing like that.

On that particular day it was a clear day. A bit strong west winds were making the branches of trees rustle incessantly. It was so refreshing it made you think autumn had come. Had it been something like one toki (two hours) since Den-kuro left to work? The clip-clop of hoofbeats approached from afar and stopped in front of the main entrance.

—There were five, six men. Shigenobu’s heart missed a beat at that and pulled his sword over to him and looked in the direction. Men of the Takizawa group may be here to put an emergency measure into action like Hyoma said.

—No, I won’t let them get me all that easily, he was getting determined, when five samurai warriors got around the plants in the front yard and came in. Among them was a samurai wearing a lacquer-painted conical headpiece. He took off the headpiece there, handed his swords to an attendant, and proceeded toward Shigenobu. The other four sat be-

hind waiting with one knee touching the ground. Shigenobu saw Samejima Hyoma among the waiting four.

It was Muro Kyuza'emon who stepped forward. Shigenobu had seen him a number of times in the main house in Edo. The warrior, in Shigenobu's memory, was at the helm of the lord's mounted guards, treated equally as a senior councilor. He must be forty-three or -four, an expert of the Yagyu swordsmanship school, so Shigenobu had been told, —he was much scrawnier now than Shigenobu had known him to be and his hair on both sides had turned white. In his pointed-chinned, suntanned face were sunken eyes, only which held reservoirs of strong light.

“Does your highness remember me? I am Muro Kyuza'emon.”

So he said as he bent himself, one of his knees touching the ground a step away from the verandah. Remaining in the same posture with his head bent down, he apologized to Shigenobu for having made him undergo all those pains and stresses, and told him that he had come to escort him to the castle, that he would tell him the detailed circumstances after they got to the castle. He asked Shigenobu to get ready so as to leave for home immediately. A horse was taken here for him.

“—Don't bother me. Hyoma was told so.”

Shigenobu sat squarely and quietly reproved his attendant.

“—I won't go to the castle. No way.”

“I got here from Edo five days ago, my lord. Before I came here I learned at large of the heartrending life your highness has been leading day in and day out. But in the five days since my arrival I have been told the detail of how your highness has spent the past three years. I felt as if my whole self might have been dashed to smithereens. I was disheartened, my pitiful lord.”

“—Were you told I had been starved?”

So Shigenobu asked, rather wearing a smile on his face.

“—Were you told too that I have been being fed by a thief?”

“Would your highness mind letting me dare to say with the utmost humbleness that I know everything? That your highness has eventually developed the liking for the life together with that fellow, and that your highness is thinking about merging into plebeians by throwing away your

highness' status of lordship. And now everything is in my knowledge, my lord."

This was the last thing Shigenobu had expected. He suspected Hyoma had told him, but it was next to impossible for Kyuza'emon to know that much. His thought of getting away to become plebeian was, in all possibility, known to nobody but Denkuro. —Then, is it Denkuro? Coming this far, he lifted his eyes of all sudden.

"—Is it you that stymied Denkuro's previous decision?"

"Local attendants plotted it, my lord. They have arranged so he may not know it. They have given him more wages and a promotion, so he will prefer to stay here longer and make a decent living."

"—And you think I'll change my mind and go back to my castle?"

Shigenobu said coldly, but emphasized:

"—I won't do that. Don't bother me any more. No more thanks for being a puppet for you all. I've come up with a way I can live like a downtown uncle, like a really human being. I will live humanly."

"We are here well prepared to hear it from your highness."

So saying, Kyuza'emon quietly looked up at Shigenobu.

## 10.

"In accord with the intention of your highness, your highness becomes a member of the citizen class and lives as free as he wills. Surely it will enable your highness to live a carefree life and, being on his own, live in peace without any trouble at all. But will that be enough? On condition that your highness lives alone comfortably as he wills, he does not care a hair no matter what things out of his league will be. Is that what your highness intends?"

Kyuza'emon's eyes glinted.

"Your highness said just now that he is the puppet of us activists. In regards the imbroglio of who to be heir, three have executed themselves by committing a happy dispatch, my lord. Mr. Kajita and his companions, all of them put their all, never caring about their lives, cudged

their brains, by devoting themselves to the interests of the matter, my lord. —The various hardships your highness has had to undergo to this day are awesome to form in words. However, we have also undergone all that on our part, prepared to die at any minute, . . . The reason the Takizawa group has persisted in his highness Hyobu as heir is that, taking advantage of, let me be excused, his highness's amentia, they have intended to take the liberty of usurping their power with his highness above them on the throne and made it the means of administering their despotic office.”

As his voice got more intense, the tone of speech gathered strength.

“In the bystanders' eye, the despotism of Mr. Takizawa and his group has been too much to bear. I am told that our Lord, too, was greatly anguished; that, after his highness Hyobu had been stricken with amentia, our Lord considered superseding his highness Hyobu by your highness for heir and, by so doing, reshuffling important posts and innovating the government. —This is why Mr. Kajita and we, his companions, have exerted ourselves to the utmost, in behalf of the House we serve, in order to get our government back on its feet, that is, in behalf of the people of the domain which is worth a revenue of 75,000 goku of rice (375,000 bushels), . . . And now today is here. For this day, we have worked our fingers to the bone, —your highness, our lord to be, will forsake all those who have devoted themselves for all they are worth and want to leave us all and live alone in comfort. Does your highness mean it?”

Shigenobu had cast down his eyes. Kyuza'emon turned down his tone, caught his breath quietly, and went on to say:

—Each one has their own responsibility regardless of their standing. Common people have theirs, samurai warriors theirs, and domain lords their own. Only when each and every one of them fulfill their responsibility, does the world go on. It is harder and more painful than to be a citizen, to be lord of the domain and lead his attendants for good government which makes the lives of citizens easy and comfortable. However, the current lord and the previous lord, too, exercised the tall and painstaking responsibilities of the domain lord. . . . Now your highness needs must think of his responsibilities first and foremost before think-

ing about living a carefree and comfortable life. Not only our group but also the entire domain is waiting for your highness to ascend the throne. All of them are earnestly awaiting your highness so they can extend their hand as he walks up to the throne.

—So saying, Kyuza'emon watched Shigenobu with his teary eyes.

“Please come back, my lord. We do entreat your highness.”

Eyes cast down, Shigenobu remained silent for a while. His cheeks looked to have grown sunken, but somewhere around his eyebrows there was a sign of magnanimity. Presently he looked up quietly and said, faintly nodding:

“I understand. I will go back.”

Apparently his words reached the rest of the four young attendants. They were crouching beside the plants but now had their hands planted on the lawn all in one and began to sob aloud, unable to stymie it any more.

“—I am deeply indebted to Denkuro, my benefactor, so I call him. Do take care of him, forevermore.”

“We will do as your highness wills us, without fail.”

“—I will go back on my own tomorrow. I want to spend the very last night with him and share the time of it. Now leave me.”

Shigenobu remained seated where he had been for what seemed ages after they had left him. Then he went down into the backyard and walked here and there around the deteriorated premises. His face was taut and in his eyes that were registering this estate emerged a tint of strong will.

“—Denk, . . . I will go home.”

He whispered so under his breath. He lifted his rueful eyes toward the bottomless clear sky where winds were traversing their way across.

When Denkuro came back, Shigenobu was making soup on the kitchen stove. He was grimed with ashes from head to foot. Maybe enveloped in smoke, he was smeared black with soot around his eyes. Surprised, Denkuro rushed to him and snatched the bamboo blowpipe from him.

“What, what the hell made ya do crap like this? No kiddin’, the

weather will change.”

“—Let me do it today. I have a reason.”

“With a reason or without, this isn’t in yer line. I’ll take yer place, so go away.”

“—No need of it, it’s done.”

Shigenobu took the lid from the pot and poured the finely-chopped radish from the bamboo colander.

“—Rice is cooked and fish is broiled, too.”

“Wow, it’s amazin’! Will ya piss it off? It’s been clear, thank God, fer days on end and the party’ll be over.”

“—Stop it and wash your feet. And shall we have dinner?”

## 11.

Denkuro sat at the dinner tray and was surprised again.

“Nobu-san, why, this is a pro’s job. Wonder it’s perfect!”

“—Pro’s job? What do you mean by that?”

“The rice is cooked very well, the fish is also grilled very well, and to top it off, look what it is, parboiled water dropwort with soy sauce dressing, it’s superb, it’s a real wonder! I throw up the sponge.”

Shigenobu only laughed. He didn’t say anything.

“It comes home to me they say samurai warriors are awesome. They affectedly put up a tough front, but when it comes the zero hour, they can do stuff like this, too, it’s amazin’. They’re trained in the true sense of the word.”

“—You’re overdoing it. It’s just a fluke.”

“Don’t ya be that humble. Oh, I just remember ya sayin’ there’s a reason to this. What did ya mean?”

“—Yes, but let it be after we eat.”

“Don’t ya raise my hopes. I’ll be in a dither.”

Shigenobu had intended to talk during dinner. But when they began to eat, he could not find when to start. So, he put it off for a bit of time. When the dinner was over and the dishes cleared, they sat by the fire-

side. But he felt the words stuck in his heart. They could not anyhow find a way out onto his lips.

“What’s on yer mind? What’s the reason?”

“—Well, that is . . . not a big deal.”

“It ain’t a big deal for cryin’ out loud, but I gotta remain dyin’ fer it unless you have it out. Will ya tell me the story?”

Shigenobu was choked with the fume of a mosquito smudge. Coughing, he turned aside and said laughing that the truth was there was no reason and that he had come with what had just come into his head on the spur of the moment.

“No kiddin’. Yer sure is it true? Is it true there ain’t no reason at all, Nobu-san?”

“—I’ve always wanted to cook a meal just for once and have you, Denk, eat it. You’ve taken trouble for me and looked after my needs for ages.”

“Oh, ho-ho-ho, knock it off! Come off it, ain’t we friends, ha!?! Stuff and nonsense an’ let me hit the sack.”

Denkuro rolled down on his back there and stretched out his limbs as far as he could reach out. —He would do this every day and talk about what happened on his job site and all on the day, then toward the end his tongue would be entangled and his stories pester out into yawn after yawn completely out to sleep as he was. Around the midnight when the temperature would go down, Shigenobu would shake him awake and help him into his bedding. That night he shook him awake around ten, earlier than usual.

“—Now go to bed, Denk. You’ll catch cold.”

Denkuro was almost in sleep. He crawled onto his bed, he threw out his limbs and fell fast asleep. —Shigenobu was watching Denkuro for a while as he was sleeping, but at the sound of the winds that blew over the trees in the backyard, he stood to his feet as if come to.

—It’s now, if I don’t go, then my heart will be discouraged.

The more time elapsed, the more reluctant he would be. He had intended to stay until morning, but on deciding the earlier the better, he left everything as they were and stood to go where he changed his

clothes. —He had only to put on his hakama skirt and take his swords. As he eschewed where it creaked in the verandah, he fumbled out his straw sandals on the stone on which one took off their footgear. Then the instant he stepped out into the yard, he heard Denkuro say from behind:

“You’re goin’ away, Nobu-san?”

Shigenobu was arrested in his tracks, quailing.

“You’re leavin’ me an’ goin’ away?”

“—Denkuro, forgive me.”

Shigenobu bent down his head and said under his breath:

“—You can live here like a good and honest man. I want to live as I want to. I now want to live as a samurai warrior. As you live your own life, so I want to live my own, Denk, . . . I’m sorry I’ve always depended on you and that I’ve always been unable to do anything for you in return. I’m sorry from my heart but please let me go.”

“You cooked dinner tonight fer this partin’, didn’t ya?”

So said Denkuro, hugging a pillar in his arms in the verandah.

“Truth is, I wanted to stay wi’ ya, Nobu-san. I thought we could share a livin’ fer the rest of our life. Since I began livin’ wi’ ya, I done found the meanin’ of life fer the first time in my life, and the world done begun to look bright. Only then, ya know, did I begin to feel I’m a real human. —An’ now I gotta let ya go. I ain’t got no Nobu-san anyplace next to me, he’s gone, . . . Don’t ya, Nobu-san, feel sorry fer Denk? Feel pity fer him?”

Shigenobu looked up at the night sky. He shook his head violently, and determinedly, with a force, he said:

“—We’ll see again, Denk. Each individual has their own way. I’ll go mine. Fare well. God bless you.”

With abundance he began to walk fast in a decisive long stride.

“Then, ya’ll go, Nobu-san?”

Denkuro’s voice came after Shigenobu.

“I won’t stop ya no more, —Go up in the world, like a good man, please. I’ll pray fer ya. Keep in one piece, —some day, if possible, come an’ see me, Nobu-san. I’ll be waitin’ fer ya.”

Shigenobu clenched his teeth and pretended not to hear. He proceeded step by hurried step out of the main gate, where he found someone who sat with one knee touching the ground.

“I’ll attend you, my liege.”

It was Samejima Hyoma. Shigenobu nodded and went down the road as he come. The west winds were still strong and the sky was studded with twinkling stars.

—Nobu-san, ya goin’ away, hey Nobu-san? Denkuro’s sadly puling voice stayed with Shigenobu for a long time.

## Pop

### 1.

The dwellers of the tenements never missed the blather the drunken Jyu-san orated on the nights of the fourteenth and the last of every month.

As you know well or even better than me, the fourteenth and the last day of the month were pay days, when craftsmen were paid their wages and their family would await the breadwinner to come back with them.

Other than day laborers who were paid by the day, craftsmen in general who were on the payroll of their firms would, along with a good number of their families, look forward to the two pay days a month more than anything else. Good foods were arrayed on dinner trays and especially for the breadwinner some saké ought to be on the way with them.

After all bills for the past fortnight were paid off, children would be able to hope for something to be bought the next day. In any case it was surely enough a little treat. Little as the treat would be, the night was, of necessity, replete with joyous anticipation and a little heart-warming.

A while after ten, sometimes later, on the selfsame nights, Jyu-san, coming by the wicket at the entrance of the tenements, would orate the blather:

“I ain’t got no money, mind ya,” Jyu-san would slowly say word by word. “I done spent it all, mind ya. I drank on it all, mind ya.”

Dead drunk, he would totter. He would, wobbling and tottering, step on the planks of the sewage, which would sound, *clonk, clonk*. He would shamle into a dust bin. And he would hiccup.

“I drank on it all, mind ya,” Jyu-san would say in the way his tongue was languid, “I ain’t got no money, mind ya. Yeah, I got only darned 1-kan 200 left, mind ya.”

The tenements would be quiet. Jyu-san would totter to the entrance of his tenement at a snail's pace and slump down at the doorway. Then, either Ryokichi, his first son, or o-Nao, his wife, sliding the shutter door noiselessly, would call to him.

"Will you come in, hon?" would say o-Nao when it was her, "You're a nuisance for our neighbors, so don't talk loud. Come enter, will you?"

She would whisper to him as she said so.

"Pop, come in, will ya?" This was Ryokichi. "Don't sit there. That ain't no place fer you. Come in this here, I'm telling' you, Pop."

"Nope, I can't, mind ya," Jyu-san would say in an arcadian tempo. "I been an' gone an' done it again, and I got darned 1-kan 200 left only, ya know. Ah, wellaway! 'Cause I done spent it all on drinkin', I can't go in, mind ya."

Notwithstanding, all the rest of the tenements would stay quiet. Some tenants were still staying up but they would keep mum, pretending not to hear it or to be in bed. —

Neighbors of the tenements were fond of Jyu-san and his family. Jyu-san was a good-natured person and so was o-Nao, his wife. Their children, Ryokichi, fourteen years old, o-Tsugi, thirteen, Kamekichi, seven, and o-Yoshi, three, were all well-bred and hardworking.

The reason Jyu-san blathered on and on like that was because he had recently been luckless of his work. O-Nao, Ryokichi, and o-Tsugi were each working hard to make up for the breadwinner's lucklessness. Jyu-kichi himself was normally good-tempered and of very few words. You may chuckle to compare the scene he was now making with what he was normally like. This is why his fellow tenants remained quiet and overlooked him.

Most of the time, Jyu-san would go into the house with the help from o-Nao and Ryokichi. However, when he would not budge, that was when o-Yoshi the youngest daughter would come in. Three years old though she was, she had not yet really learned to talk. She would sometimes talk affectedly in unclear language.

"Pop" means pop, not to mention: "E'rybody say 'weird', don't dey? You're a weird fop."

2.

The winter was dawdling around Jyukichi.

The season was unmistakably progressing toward the spring. There were now fewer times of frost and winds less biting to the skin. Plum blossoms were over and now daphne flowers were beginning to bloom. The vague flower fragrance wafted away to you as you walked. The balmy air was telling you that daphne flowers had replaced plum blossoms. —

However, such vicissitudes were taking place way out of Jyukichi's way. He, now walking in the streets at twilight, felt the breath of air cold, the cold seeping to the marrow of his bones, and the road he was walking down as hard as if ice-bound. Shivers came on him constantly as if he was traipsing in the piercing cold.

The side street Jyukichi was passing through was beginning to be lighted. A woman of middle age came out of a shop on the street and hung a lighted andon from the eaves. The andon was small and posh, lettered "O-Cho" in woman's penmanship.

"Look who's coming, there you are, Jyu-san," the woman called to him. "What's up? You're a bad boy. You mean to pass my place, don't you?"

Jyukichi's step slowed down and undecidedly he looked back.

"Why not stop by? Shin-san's here, too."

"Shin-san, —uh, of Himono-cho."

"Shin-san, of Kinroku-cho."

When the woman said so, a man poked his head out of the entrance and greeted him, Howdy?

"Long time no nothing. Will ya join me in a drink?"

"Um, umph," he faltered. "I could use it, but lemme wait 'til next time."

"Thanks much for your crap," the woman came straight. "That's where you pussyfoot, a bad habit, Jyu-san. Knock it off and go in."

Quick, go in.”

She pushed him on the back to put him in. Then she hung out her shop-logo noren curtain at the entrance. In she came and found Shinsuke alone fumbling his saké cup.

“He’s in there in the washroom,” he said to her. “But what’s wrong, o-Cho-san?”

The woman called o-Cho appeared to be the proprietress of the place. She stepped around the earth-floor entranceway to get behind the counter and sit down by the big oden pot. The entire place fell short of three tsubo in the area, a tiny place. The counter was encircled with board benches. The inner part separated by the inner noren was her kitchen and private part.

“What the heck is wrong?” Shinsuke said and motioned his chin toward the noren at the entrance. “You said, That’s a bad habit. What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” o-Cho said. She took out a tokkuri saké container from the copper boiler fixed to the inside of the oden pot. She touched the bottom of the tokkuri. Putting it into a cradle, she placed it in front of Shinsuke. “I’m sorry, it got too warm.”

“Did it?” Shinsuke nodded. He giggled and said, “Oh, that *is* him.”

“What d’you mean, that *is* him?”

“Oh, forget it. It’s my business,” Shinsuke said. “In any case, I must tell you, remember that I’ll pay today’s bill. I’ll get hot under the collar if you put it on his tab.”

O-Cho turned to look back and called loudly, “O-Tama-chan.”

From the inner part came a reply that she was coming soon. Jyukichi came out through the inner noren.

Shinsuke made room for Jyukichi to sit. Then the two men began to drink together. Shortly a woman called o-Tama turned up and replaced o-Cho, who went into the inner private part. When she returned after having made her up over, the place had been added by two fresh customers in her absence.

This side street in Otowa-cho, Nihonbashi, was lined with smallish taverns. Every tavern, having two or three young maids, became lively

with the plucking of the shamisen strings and singing voices when the evening fell. On that same evening, the sound of shamisen had already begun to drift away from neighboring taverns. In time some more people joined and the benches encircling the counter were almost filled up with customers.

“Did you see Himono-cho?”

Suddenly Shinsuke changed his tone and asked so when the talk broke off.

“No,” Jyukichi shook his head.

“He was sayin’ he’d go see an’ talk to ya, though. Didn’t he come to your home, either?”

Jyukichi shook his head for a second time. “No, it doesn’t seem he did. He got any business with me?”

“Umph,” Shinsuke kind of hesitated and left it unfinished. Instead, he took the tokkuri and poured Jyukichi, saying, “Have another, —Ya got to get easily drunk lately?”

“What business does Himono-cho have with me?”

“Have one more.” Shinsuke served him more saké. “These days Himono-cho and I been talkin’, Nagasawa-cho, —that is, you, Himono-cho, and me were brought up together under the same roof. We’re companions.”

Shinsuke started in on the reminiscence of those days when they had been apprenticed at the main shop of “Goto.”

The shop, situated in Ryoga’e-cho, Nihonbashi, manufactured craftwork called Five-Paulownia-Leaf braziers. The current proprietor was the third generation. Until the second generation the establishment had been enjoying the popularity of the craftwork. Paulownia was cut out where it was more than 16 inches in the diameter. The outside of the conical brazier was decorated with the maki’e technique. Maki’e was drawn with gold and silver dust particles sprinkled over wet lacquer which designed paulownia leaves and flowers. The maki’e design was never changed. It always had to have five paulownia leaves. Therefore, the craftwork was called the Five-Paulownia-Leaf brazier. The making of it required a particular technique, which made it impossible for any-

one else to imitate it. It was a rarity.

The three of them had been craftsmen of the establishment which had given them training in the craft since their boyhood as it had brought them up. Jyukichi was the oldest, one year older, and Shinsuke and Shinjiro the same age. Something like five years before, Shinsuke and Shinjiro had taken their leave of their master. One had had his own shop in Kinroku-cho, Kyobashi, and the other in Himono-cho.

The two of them had washed their hands of the FPL brazier. It had been cherished for its rarity until the previous master's time. But the popularity declined as time changed. Hence, orders plunged. Instead, inexpensive imitations of the craftwork increasingly came onto market. Perhaps the predilection of general people changed with the passage of time. Despite the price which was brought down below the cost of production, the sales kept on the decrease. —

Finally, they were unable to keep the business going, they had nothing but to change to a new product line at "Goto" the Five Paulownia. But since they wanted to keep up the name, Jyukichi alone remained there and was making the original brazier. Shinsuke meant to focus his talk on this. Jyukichi had turned as old as thirty-five, had as many as four children, and was as skilled a craftsman as any. Nevertheless, he was still living in a tenement, just employed by, commuting to, the shop for a mere song. It was time he had thought of himself, Shinsuke suggested.

Jyukichi was listening as he drank. He did not respond any. Only, he drank bit by bit faster. He emptied into his cup by himself unless o-Cho or Shinsuke did for him.

"Many sincere thanks fer worryin' about me, but," Jyukichi said in a long while, "it seems there ain't nothin' I can do except what I'm doin' now, nothin' specific fer me."

"That's why I talked with Himono-cho."

"Will ya wait a bit more?"

"Look, you stop an' listen to what I say," Shinsuke interrupted. "Yep, I look up to ya where ya stick to the FPL brazier and keep the tradition of it. But the world never looks at it as it is worth. Look at the maki'e for one. It's ridiculous to take a solid ninety days to spread lacquer over

from the first layer to the last so the patterns are thrown into relief. Or else, the choice of the wood's grain, the degree of the seasonin' of the wood, ev'rythin's ridiculous. Ev'rythin's too outdated to be welcomed by the world, way away from the world.

"Jyu-san," Shinsuke continued. "Lemme be candid wi' ya. Will ya think it over? Time's changed. Fads come first an' foremost. People buy things when they're new and inexpensive. Probably they'll use it for a year. When it breaks or they are tired of it, they'll buy another new one. A brazier is a brazier. That's that. Ya must make do. The world *is* the way it is now."

### 3.

Shinsuke had a draft and went on:

"For all ya put heart an' soul, put your all, into your work, take all the painstakin' care, the world ain't slow enough to enjoy the best part of the hard work no more. There ain't no customers with the eye for it no more, either. Why not change to a job that meets the trends of the world, shan't we? If ya feel like it, Himono-cho an' me will do anythin' we can."

Jyukichi gave a weak snicker on his lips. "A brazier's a brazier. Ya can't say it better."

"We've been brought up together. Himono-cho an' me were narrowly able to have a shop of our own. We've just grown strong enough to socialize. We can be of some help to ya now. It's yer turn. Now it's time ya made up yer mind. Don't ya feel pity for o-Nao-san an' yer kids?"

Jyukichi stared at the saké cup in his hand, into which he poured himself and swigged. Then he shook his head slowly.

"Friends are appreciated," he said in a low voice. "Why, because they're friends, their heart goes out to me on my trouble. Yep, I'll think on it."

"Do I have yer understandin'?"

"You do," Jyukichi nodded. "You went out an' said it. I understand it all." Then all of a sudden he began to talk in a lively tone. "—To be

honest, the main shop in Ryoga'e-cho doesn't give much work for me to do. Of course, it's because what I make doesn't sell well, I reckon. Wait fer customers? Nope, you ain't got no customers at all. I get around the good ol' ones and take orders myself from 'em. That's that and no choice."

"Do you do it yerself? —Do you?"

"Oh, it was humiliatin'. Now I'm used to it. But at first it was so humiliatin' it made me sweat." Jyukichi poured himself and downed two consecutive cupfuls (usually a cup holds a mouthful). He looked into the empty cup in earnest. "I'm used to it. However, it's exactly what ya say. I'm already thirty-five, with a wife an' four kids to feed. If I stay as I am, my family will have a pitiable time."

"Let's not hear about it no more, shall we?" o-Cho said without warning. "Let me pour you, Jyu-san. Get drunk, will you?"

"Wait, wait, o-Cho," Shinsuke said. "We got yet to talk turkey."

"That's too much. Will you stop? It's too much," o-Cho said and furiously shook her head. "Jyu-san's saying he got it. This is a drinking place, so won't you stop talking about business and drink? I'll drink, too. May I, Jyu-san?"

"Yeah," Jyukichi said and hung down his head. "Sure thin'. Why not?"

Friends are appreciated, Jyukichi mumbled in his heart and drank as he was poured. Customers hustle-bustled. They came and they went. O-Tama, left alone to serve them, let out a scream.

—I'm about to cry.

Jyukichi shook his head to and fro. They're friends. That's why they say so. I must thank 'em, he silently mumbled to himself. O-Cho said something. Shinsuke responded to it. He sounded harshly retorting. Jyukichi simply drank. His head wobbled. He uttered, "I gotta thank 'em."

—I'm almost cryin'.

Should I cry, I'd be ashamed, Jyukichi said to himself. There, he went out. Shinsuke called to stop him and o-Cho, in turn, stopped Shinsuke. Jyukichi, hearing o-Cho say, Toilet, said, Oh yeah, as he exited the shop.

After "O-Cho", he drank at "Gempei". Like o-Cho's, Gempei's place

was his other everyday haunt. Gempei would get as cross if he didn't stop by. He had been an habitu  nearly ten years. On evenings when there were few customers, he would be invited into the private part of the place. There they would exchange their cups, sitting across the rectangular brazier from each other, which took place not a few times. The couple of the proprietor and his wife had no children. They ran the place on their own. Therefore, the place lacked sensual charm but boasted Gempei's cooking and his wife's, o-Kuni's, affability. Apparently they were the selling points of this place.

Jyukichi merrily drank two or three tokkuri of sak . Only then did he get to be three sheets to the wind. There were three other customers. Gempei, cooking with his knife for them, was eyeing Jyukichi dubiously. The sudden inebriation came over him because of the previous drinking. Jyukichi did not like Gempei's eye. He was about to say, Don't gawk at me in a funny way, when o-Cho came in. —She was completely blind drunk with a stiff pale face and a glazed look in her eyes. On greeting Gempei and o-Kuni, she sat beside Jyukichi and took his cup from his hand.

“O-Cho-san,” o-Kuni said and swiftly winked at her, “—our private part's better for you.”

“Oh, thanks, o-Kuni-san,” o-Cho said, “but I'm goin' back soon.”

“What's the matter?” Jyukichi looked at o-Cho, “Bills? I'm sorry I can't pay. 'Cos I ain't got a single penny.”

“Pour me, will ya?”

“I got bills yet to pay here, too, tell ya.”

“Pour me,” o-Cho persisted.

When she drank the cupful Jyukichi poured her, o-Cho took the tokkuri and swigged two cupfuls as if splashing it into her throat.

“I wanted to see yer face, Jyu-san,” o-Cho said, staring him in the eyes, “—I was vexed.”

“Hey, there are other customers.”

“Ya got insulted and yet didn't ya have nothin' to answer back?” O-Cho had lowered her voice but the voice was charged with feelings. “Ya did have somethin' to answer back, didn'tcha? Did ya, Jyu-san?”

“Uh-huh,” Jyukichi said and gave a sudden wave of one hand, “I got somethin’ to say. I forgot to say it, but I’d meant to say I’d appreciate their offer.”

Silently, o-Cho fixed her eyes intensely on Jyukichi’s. The silence, though it only lasted for a short while, felt exactly as if it were giving off sparks of hundreds of and thousands of words.

“Now here you go.” O-Cho returned his cup to him, poured into it, and stood to her feet. “Look, I slapped him, with this hand, on the cheek. It made a good sound.”

Jyukichi gazed at o-Cho, cup in hand.

“Good night—” o-Cho said in a childish, bright voice.

The other customers looked back over their shoulder toward her. Gempei and o-Kuni exchanged glances. Jyukichi was about to rise to his feet, but o-Cho waved goodbye with a bright smile on her face toward him. She took off, faltering a little.

“Good night—” they heard her say from outside, “See ya again soon. Thanks much.”

“Jyu-san, go with her,” said o-Kuni, “Seems dead crocked. It’s dangerous. Walk her to her place?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jyukichi stood up.

When he was out, he saw o-Cho’s back six to eight yards ahead. She was picking her way with a fairly steady step. It was the time when taverns on either side were becoming alive with customers. It was lively with the sounds of playing the shamisen and singing songs, with shouting and laughing voices. The street was boisterously alive. —Jyukichi kept his watch, silently standing where he was, until she disappeared into her shop. Then he himself took off to get out on the moat.

#### 4.

“Don’t. Don’t, please,” Jyukichi said, “don’t slap me.”

His talk in sleep woke him up.

Awake, he found he had been napping. Immediately next to him was

o-Yoshi. He had rolled down directly on the tatami mats, but he found he had a pillow to rest his head on and a kaimaki covering over him, a cotton-stuffed sleeping garment. O-Yoshi, the three years old youngest, had a papercraft doll made of chiyo-gami folding paper. She was watching her father with nagging, quizzical eyes.

“Fop,” o-Yoshi said, “who slaps you?”

Jyukichi felt thirsty.

“Who slaps you, Fop, do you hear me?”

“Where’s your Mom?”

“I wo-oon’t tell you.” She pouted. “Fop do-oon’t tell me and I wo-oon’t tell you Mom went to de wholesala’s.”

Jyukichi sat up and said, “You’re a good girl, Yoshi-bo. Bring your Fop a drink of water.”

“I ain’t a good girl.”

Jyukichi sighed and looked around where he was with his blood-shot heavy eyes. This six-tatami-mat room was cluttered and grimy. It looked wretched. However, in fact, o-Nao had the habit of putting things away neatly, so the room was tidied up. From the start of their married life, they had bought a secondhand chest of drawers, meat safe, rectangular brazier, and looking-glass stand, all of which they had used over fifteen years. Lined along with all these was a nagamochi container whose lid was missing. Placed on this container was the kit of tools for o-Nao, his wife, and o-Tsugi, his daughter, to use for their domestic piecework. —

All those sticks of furniture were getting weak sunlight filtering through the shoji sliding doors. The sunlight on a cloudy afternoon was rusty and altogether lacking in warmth. It made the furniture look much more grimy and cheerless than they really were, so it all looked so wretched Jyukichi might have been depressed. He looked up at the Buddhist family altar on the chest of drawers. It was a built-in tiny altar. Its doors, shut now, were covered with lacquer. But the lacquer had flaked off in parts. Among his parents’ memorial tablets was his first son’s, Wakichi’s, too, in the altar. Since he had only lived short of fifty days since he had been born, Jyukichi was unfamiliar with the features of the boy’s face. But in his mind, Wakichi appeared to be bigger than Ryo-

kichi and maturer by far.

—Were he living, he'd be fifteen.

Until o-Tsugi, the older children were born within one year of each other. Jyukichi again looked around the inside of the room and thought everything had remained the same as of old, the same as when he had got married with o-Nao. Nothing had changed except some bric-a-brac that had been added later.

—Ah, all that newly came are kids.

He had worked and worked through the solid fifteen years, and what he had left among others were four children alone. And besides he had failed to raise them satisfactorily, for he had two of the elders already working, to cap it all.

—Ya were lucky, Wakichi.

It was lucky fer ya to die, Jyukichi thought to himself. Were ya livin', ya'd be stricken wi' poverty an' got to make money before yer bones are still too tender fer any work. Look at Ryokichi. He's only fourteen. He's big fer his age. But his waist an' legs are thin. He's still a mere child.

Such as he is, Jyukichi continued, he's makin' money. He peddles his goods loaded on either end of a pole which is balanced on his shoulder. He rises before dawn when it's still pitch dark and goes to the fish market. Come rain, come snow, come what may, he walks streets, peddlin' fish. His pride is his future aim to be a catering-fishmonger. In truth he's 'round the age when he should wanna horse 'round wi' his playmates, ya know, Wakichi.

—Ya bet you're lucky to be dead.

It's true, Jyukichi went on. Ya shit on this world, the world as it is. There ain't nothin' to live for. No matter how ya put yer all into yer work an' go heart and soul into yer work, ya can't get on in the world yer whole life if you're like me, well, if you're clumsy. The more sincere you are, the more slighted you are. Ya get ridiculed. Ya get chased by Poverty all the time. An' yer wife an' kids gotta share trouble an' pain wi' ya.

—That's enough. Darn it, I had enough.

Shit on it. No thanks fer this world. I had darn enough, Jyukichi

thought.

“Fop,” o-Yoshi said. “Shall I bring you water?”

While she was gazing at his father, she instinctively felt pathetic of her father. The look of her eyes (despite three years of her age) had changed from a nagging tone to a pitying tone now. Although three years old, a girl is a girl. Evidently, she knew of her mother’s, brothers’, and sister’s compassion and commiseration and consideration toward her father in their poverty-ridden living. Her face wore an expression which was at once maturity itself and seriousness itself.

“Thanks, darlin’,” Jyukichi averted his eye, “I’ll go get it by myself. Ya don’t go out to play, do ya?”

“I won’t,” o-Yoshi said. “Fop, Mom sayed to me, Watch yer Fop, watch him ’til I get back.”

Jyukichi stood up and went to the kitchen. He scooped three dippers of water from the water vat and drank it directly from the dipper.

—O-Nao-san and yer kids are pitiable, think on it.

So Shinsuke said. It was three days ago, Jyukichi chewed over, dipper in hand. That came out of his kind heart. Shinjiro in Himono-cho is the same. I was brought up an’ trained with ’em under the same roof. Both Kinroku-cho an’ Himono-cho have foresight. They put an end to “Goto” an’ took their leave clean of it. Then they had their own shop. They changed their business to that which deals in fashionable merchandise. It’s because they have foresight. With their foresight, business is flourishin’ an’ their family can live as they like. Himono-cho is sendin’ the older daughter to dancin’ and nagauta ballad singin’ lessons an’ Kinroku-cho, I hear, has a mistress outside home.

“Notwithstanding, they’re worried ’bout me,” Jyukichi muttered as if absentminded, staring at the dipper in his hand. “—They’re friends. They’re appreciated.”

Jyukichi was taken aback. The tall-skirted screen door was slid open from the outside without warning. It was Ryokichi, the first son, that opened it. Ryokichi himself seemed to be surprised. He looked at his father, arrested in his tracks, mouth agape, shouldering pole in hand.

“Pop!” Ryokichi stammered. “What’s up?”

Jyukichi showed the dipper in his hand perplexedly. “Water, I’m here to drink.”

“Drinking water,” Ryokichi said. “You make me surprised, Pop.”

“Same to ya.”

“Did you take a day off?”

“Somethin’ like it.” Jyukichi said, returning the lid on the vat and placing the dipper on top of it. “I visited Mr. Yoshioka in Honjo if he got an order fer me to take and directly came home.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“I hear she was off to the wholesaler’s with o-Tsugi.”

“Let’s go to the bathhouse, Pop,” Ryokichi said as he took the scrubbing brush and the box of polishing powder beside the sink. “I go wash up my job kit. When I get it done with, let’s go out to the bath.”

“We got o-Yoshi to look after.”

“She can stay home alone. I won’t be long, so ya wait, Pop.”

Jyukichi had no sooner been back to the six-mat room than Kamekichi brought home the girl next door and started playing with o-Yoshi. The next-door girl, o-Tatsu, was five and Kamekichi seven. But both of them were at the disposal of o-Yoshi. When they played house, the role of Mom was always played by o-Yoshi, o-Tatsu was her daughter, and Kamekichi her “incorrigible, helpless son.” The casting curiously went well and the role of Mom came naturally to o-Yoshi.

“Children, shall we have dinner?” o-Yoshi would say like it was a hassle. “Today, we ain’t got noffin’, let’s make do wid rice an’ miso-soup alone. Now hurry, boff of you go wash your hands.”

## 5.

“Mom gotta work night. So, be a good boy an’ a good girl an’ go to bed” was the line o-Yoshi had. “Now hurry up an’ go to bed. I gotta work night. I gotta take de work to de wholesala tomorra. Or we ain’t got no money. We can’t buy rice. Be a good boy an’ a good girl an’ go to bed.”

The children at play copied realities. The little family in the play was really hard up. O-Tatsu was too small. Kamekichi was too troublesome to be of any help. O-Yoshi alone, fixing meals, sewing, starch-and-drying after unsewing, did something to make money night and day.

“Quiet! Don’t make a noise,” o-Yoshi said this time again. “Don’t get in de way over dere. I can’t work. Two of ya, go out an’ play.”

At that Jyukichi wanted to stuff his ears. Not able to stand any more, he left where he was.

“At the 10-January Festival of Ebisu, O, the God of Wealth, they sell,” coming into the two-mat room, from which to directly step down to the entrance, he began to hum out of tune, viewing outside, “—bags of pop-rice and bowls to put it in, moneybags, oval gold coins and cashboxes.”

There he stopped singing and shook his head, “I can’t sing a song satisfactorily, either, can I, huh?!”

Jyukichi glanced over to the outside as absentmindedly as if dispirited. From over there at the well side, a voice came to him in which Ryokichi was talking to the wives of neighbors as he washed his round fish tub. He heard a high-pitched water sound mixed with his son’s strong, lively voice. Ryokichi had a firm voice, and the tone of voice as he spoke sounded like an adult’s. Jyukichi was listening to his son talking with a feeling that his spirits were taken away, just the way the prop was withdrawn from his body.

Presently o-Nao and o-Tsugi came back and so did Ryokichi from the well. When they did, o-Nao and her daughter were loaded on their back with piecework materials. They were obliged that they had been told the work would continue till the end of next month. As they were reporting this and that to Jyukichi, they went into the six-mat room and unloaded the packs. Ryokichi nimbly put away his kit of peddling.

“Mom,” Ryokichi shouted in the dirt-floored room, “may I go to the bathhouse with Pop?”

“What a shout! Shame on you,” o-Nao said in the six-mat room. “When you go, take Kamekichi with you, will ya?”

“No, I can’t. I can’t today,” he answered back. “I’ll have a word with Pop, today.”

He signed to his father with his eyes, and said, "I'll do it next time, Kame. So, go with Mom today."

"Not fair, Ryo," O-Yoshi's affected voice was heard to say, "Take him wid ya, Ryo. Dat ain't fair."

"Heh!" Ryokichi shrugged and said, "I wanna see the face of a fella who will marry that chit of a girl. Pop, off we go, shall we?"

O-Tsugi brought Jyukichi a towel.

The bathhouse was across the moat from Kawaguchi-cho. Ryokichi, walking along the dusking street, smiled at his father, and told him that he would treat him to a drink on the way back. Oh, no kiddin'. No, I ain't kiddin', honest, said Ryokichi, who pouted his mouth. On the way home, he went on, we'll drop by Azuma-ya. Today, business was good. Trust me, it's true, Pop. Forget it, said Jyukichi, I already had one just now. So saying, he felt as if his throat were making a guzzling sound. It was not bath time yet and there were few people in the men's bathroom. Get a quick wash, shall we? Ryokichi said. Then he scrubbed his father's back.

"I have an odd question for you, Pop," Ryokichi said, scrubbing his father's back, "but what is a woman called o-Cho-san like, Pop?"

For a split second, Jyukichi's shoulders stiffened.

"Ya ask about o-Cho-san, —which o-Cho-san do you mean?"

"The one who runs a tavern in Otowa-cho."

"Then, ya don't need to ask what is she like? She's the proprietress of a tavern."

"Is that all?"

"That's all. To add one thing, I've run up bills to pay her, that's all," Jyukichi said and changed his tone, "—Ryo, how come you ask me stuff like that?"

Ryokichi lowered his voice. "If that's really all there is, there ain't no problems, I, er," he stopped there and went on, thinking seriously, "—'Cos Mom's worried."

"That so?" Jyukichi answered after a pause, "I didn't notice that."

"Mom said she'd been a friend of Mom's."

"She lived in our neighborhood," Jyukichi said. "Her dad was a plas-

terer. He died when o-Cho was fifteen. Her mom was a timorous woman. 'Bout two years' time, she had a man for her husband. He forced her to accept him, like."

The second husband was a man-about-town. Mother an' daughter apparently had a real hard time. It was just about the time Jyukichi and o-Nao got married. O-Cho used to often come by their place, and with sobs she used to moan about her trouble and pain to o-Nao. In time, the family disappeared into thin air without warning. Like doing a moonlight flit, they moved nobody knew where. They completely lost track of contact.

—O-Cho-san was sold to the Yoshiwara red light district or somewhere else, so she must have.

That had been the way neighbors made a fuss about her. Jyukichi and o-Nao had talked about her in the same line. Then, one day something like five years had elapsed, Jyukichi had been called to a stop by o-Cho in the very side street in Otowa-cho. Only then had he learned that she had opened a tavern.

"She unfolded her story. Because of that father-in-law, she had a beastly hard time. It was too humiliatin' an' embarrasin' to put on her lips. So she didn't go into detail. But honestly she been treated like a subhuman. Hey boy," Jyukichi said and gave a sudden twist of his body, "hey, stop it. You're overdoin' it. The skin of my back will be scraped off. Careful."

"Ah, that's done it." He was helter-skelter. "C'mmon, that's done it," he said. He spat saliva on his palm and rubbed it into his father's back. "It's got red. Does it hurt, Pop?"

"I'm fine. Let's get warm."

Father and son dipped themselves in the bathtub.

"Tell this to Mom," Jyukichi whispered softly in the bathtub where it was darksome, "Don't worry. I just drop by hers to drink an' I got some bills yet to pay her. That's all. Ya get it?"

"Got ya," Ryokichi said. "—Is she, is she still troubled?"

"Probably," responded Jyukichi. "The father-in-law gave up his ghost. But her mother's kept her bed fer such ages she seems to be somebody's

mistress. She never goes into detail. But she seems to have constant trouble.”

Ryokichi remained silent. Then, he said searchingly, “—This woman, o-Cho-san, meant to marry you, Pop. Is it true?”

“Don’t talk crap.”

“But Mom was sayin’ so. That o-Cho-san herself ever told it to Mom.”

“Crap, that’s a bad joke,” Jyukichi interrupted. “Even if o-Cho herself said so, it ain’t no business of mine. Tell Mom, Piss it off, such crap, —I got more serious business to mind.”

“Let’s get out, Pop,” Ryokichi said. His sprightly voice had come back. “Get out quick and set out our way to Azuma-ya, shall we not?”

## 6.

Azuma-ya was an eatery on the moat close to the Kamejima Bridge. The place was popular because everything they served there was inexpensive and, above all, saké provided there was good. The establishment was large enough to sit something like forty or fifty. It employed no maids. Instead, five boys of fourteen to sixteen and five young men served customers.

When they got there, the lights had only just been put in. The place was pretty packed, but Ryokichi swiftly found two consecutive seats, so they could sit side by side.

“Your poison is saké, Pop. And what would you like to go with it?” Ryokichi said lustily. “I’ll have a loach-soup and rice, —I wonder why there ain’t absolutely no loach for meals at home.”

“Maybe I was born in the year of the Usagi (Rabbit).”

“It’s forbidden for those who were born in that year?”

“It’s equal to practicin’ cannibalism if I eat unagi (eel) because the rabbit and the eel sound the same at the head and foot. Yer Mom fears the jinx.”

“C’mmon, eels and loaches are two different fishes, ain’t they?”

“It seems to yer Mom they’re the same.”

“That’s a laugh,” Ryokichi snorted.

Jyukichi drank with gobby simmered in soy and a tofu-soup as his tidbits. Ryokichi went without drinking. He asked for another helping of the loach-soup. He ate heartily and talked without a pause. It seemed that he was proud and gratified to be having a man-to-man talk with his father, the same sex, rather than to be treating him to a meal.

Soon he talked about his future aim to be a catering-fishmonger, about the proprietor of Awaji-ya, and about the master of Uomasa. Jyukichi was unfamiliar with either name, but what he learned about them this evening was that Ryokichi was a favorite of the proprietor of Awaji-ya, who promised him that he would lend a fund when his son had his own shop, and that the master of Uomasa would train him in the secrets of catering business.

“Wait ’n’ see, Pop, I’ll get you to live a comfortable life,” Ryokichi said, blushing. “Wait patiently another five, six years. I won’t be long, just a little while. In time when I have a shop of my own, I’ll get you to live in comfort. I mean it, honest, Pop.”

Jyukichi smiled with a pleased look on his face and kept on nodding.

That was in the beginning of March and the fourteenth of the month arrived in a quick step. It was late but the night was still young, the lights having already been lit, Jyukichi turned up at o-Cho’s shop, drank only two tokkuri of saké, paid some of the amount still due, then dropped by “Gempei.”

He had drunk before he appeared at “O-Cho.” The wages he had received were scarcely half as much as he had expected. The master had equivocated but what he had really meant had been, in a nutshell, that the FPL brazier had not made profits. So, what he had received as the wages was in proportion to the number of FPL braziers sold.

Shit on it! Jyukichi had cursed. Do what ya want! Should you have your darned way, then I’ll have mine. Now that it’s come to this pass, I’ll be anythin’ darned I need to be. Thief, that’s good. Robber, oh that’s better, I can be ’em. Any crap. Wait ’n’ see! On getting out of “Goto,” he had ricocheted to taverns that his eyes fell on, drinking. He had guzzled

cold saké in three taverns and made a beeline to o-Cho's. It was not until he went to "Gempei" that the drinking began to take effect.

He himself was not aware that he was inebriated. It was on the evening of the pay day. The place was crowded. Jyukichi's eye focused on one customer among the gathering of them. He was forty-five or -six. He was wearing a worn-out hanten livery coat with the firm's logo, a long john, and worn-down plaited-hemp sole sandals. His face and physique were skinny and unpresentable to look at. He looked small as he drank only with the tidbit that the shop served with the saké. —

He felt a sharp pain as if it were caused by a gimlet boring a hole in the innermost of his heart. The customer seemed to be here for the first time tonight and conscious of being in the wrong place. Invariably he looked right and left nervously as he drank in a cringing manner. Jyukichi felt as if the man were Jyukichi himself. The man, feeling small, lacked the pluck to talk to the customers on either side of him. He was hunched over a cup and tiny tokkuri from which he was licking saké. He treasured it like anything. It was as if his current self were being projected onto the man, a figure he was shown as he was now.

"Hey," he called o-Kuni, the proprietor's wife. "May I use the inner room?"

"Of course, go ahead. I'm sorry the place is so noisily crowded."

"That's not the name of the game. I wanna drink with that man."

Jyukichi lifted his chin up to point at the man. "Hey, that's him. I'll go ahead. Sorry but will you get him to come to the room?"

"But why, he's a stranger here."

"I don't mind. Will you please?" he said and pressed his hand on the inner chest pocket. "I'll pay a little of what I done run up today."

O-Kuni glared at him and said, "Keep quiet about it or my husband will get mad."

Jyukichi stepped up into the inner room. O-Kuni, in her efficient way, brought drinks and tidbits and, when it was ready, she called the man to the room. The man was servile as he said he was really ashamed. Nevertheless, he came in and took his seat on that side of the table and was as pleased as Punch to get poured a drink. When they finished the fourth

tokkuri, Jyukichi could not stand any more and said:

“Call that off, quit bossin’ me bosses, will ya? Jyukichi’s my name. I ask ya to call me by my name. And,” he looked at the man, “ya been just stiff an’ formal all alon’, it ain’t fun. Saké don’t taste good. Just relax an’ have yer way.”

The man gave a perfunctory smile and, scratching his head, said, “I’m sorry. Kisuke is my name. If I got on yer nerves, would ya please excuse me?”

“That way, you’re stiff an’ formal. Can’t ya be more easygoin’?”

By that time, the alcohol had taken effect.

The man named Kisuke called him “Jyu-san Boss.” He would make Jyukichi pleased that he talked how luckless he was and how hard the living was. Nonetheless, Jyukichi’s raging mind was obsessed by other thoughts and almost incapable of lending his ears to what Kisuke was talking about. He only learned that Kisuke had three children, one of whom had only just been born; that his wife was doing poorly after having given birth to the third one; that he was jobless, earning daily wages, which he would fail to get most of the times, thus being often unable to feed the children even with rice porridge with sweet potato; and that he was thirty-six years old, younger than Jyukichi had expected to be. These were the things that vaguely stayed with Jyukichi.

“Should things go the way they do,” Kisuke gave an obsequious smile and said, “I’d be better off doing theft. Or, I’d rather kill my wife and children and follow after ’em by doing away with myself.”

“Oh, don’t be fine and dandy,” said Jyukichi who left his head to wobble, “It’s me, it’s me, wanna do theft, yep theft,” he said and lifted his head, “—Theft? Who do theft? Whoever do ya mean do theft?”

“You’re drunk, Jyu-san Boss.”

“Oy, shall I tell ya the darned truth?” Jyukichi sat over again, “May I be excused fer tellin’ ya the truth?”

“Of course you may, Jyu-san Boss.” Kisuke gulped and said, “Tell me the darned truth, would you? I’m all ears.”

“I am called Jyukichi.” He stiffened the sitting he had only just done over and squarely. On the lap he made he planted both hands, fists

clenched, and said, "I'm a craftsman trained from childhood at establishment "Goto" in Ryoga'e-cho. If ya don't mind me sayin' so, nobody ain't no match fer me when it comes to makin' FPL braziers. Do ya—doubt it?"

"No way, Jyu-san Boss," said Kisuke, who hurriedly shook his head. "Everybody in the world knows it for sure."

Jyukichi took up his cup and drank.

## 7.

"I work fer all I'm worth. Ev'ryone honest in their trade would do so unquestionably. I got trained so by the previous master. I expect I did more than I got trained." Jyukichi looked at the man sitting opposite, empty cup in hand. "Look this here carefully. Listen, —Supposin' you are true to yer trade, ya'll do to the best of your skill, so nobody else can't mimic, you oughta do what work you alone can do, not work nobody else can do. Work—that's how it gotta be, or ain't I wrong?"

"You're quite right. You can say that again, Boss."

"You're a good man," Jyukichi said. "By the by, who are you?"

"Oh, forget it. Let me pour you." Kisuke filled the empty cup.

Jyukichi downed the draft of it and jerked down his head. Kisuke, in no time flat, gulped two cupfuls which he filled himself, and picked, with his fingers from the bowl on the tray, arrowhead boiled in a thick sugar and soy sauce and threw it into his mouth.

"That's what I done lived for," said Jyukichi. "No use askin' whether the ability you acquired be great or poor, but, whether it be great or poor, ya work without no fear of cheatin' or lyin'. Ya give yer work all yer spirit and all yer might. This is all I been faithful to through the years. But then, they say I'm in the wrong. Time done changed. No such work ain't good for people in the world. Should I stay where I am, pity my wife and kids gotta have a hard time."

Jyukichi lifted his head. He contorted his mouth and said in a little spiteful tone, "First an' foremost comes popularity. People buy yer

works if they look new an' if they're cheap. They'll buy a new one when it breaks or they get tired of it after they used it fer at most a year. This is the world as it is. After all, a brazier is a brazier, they say."

"What do *you* think?" Jyukichi looked at Kisuke and said, "Do ya think it is good? Ev'ryone says in one voice, popularity's the first to come. *Because* it sells well, it's good. *Because* it makes money, they don't give their work much. They just make it look fine an' dandy. Wi' it, do ya think things in the world go alon' in a sound an' honest way? —Well, if ya try an' meet the demands as they come, maybe ya can make money. This I know. As ya know well, Himono-cho and Kinroku-cho done shot into the world an' have their own shop. They done saved up money an', gainin' popularity, looked up to by the world. That's fine. They wanna do so, an' I don't give a darn 'bout it. —Do ya happen to know Kinroku-cho an' Himono-cho?"

"Well, that much, yes I do, you know, Jyu-san Boss." Kisuke fabricated an affable smile. "Right, may I fill your cup?"

Jyukichi gazed at the cup.

"In their eyes, I'm a bungler, a faux pas, a slow blockhead. But then again, I'm me. I feel bad for my wife, but I wanna keep up my craftsman's pride. I can't cheat me or do the darned kind of work which only makes money." Again Juekichi's head hang listlessly. "—For all that Kinroku-cho went an' told me. Shinsuke went an' told me. A brazier is a brazier. A bra-zi-er, is, a bra-zi-er . . ."

And then Jyukichi began to cry. The ending words were ridden over by the sobs thrusting their way up. His head that had hung down went up and down as if nodding. Kisuke was embarrassed. He tried to say something, but instead, pouring himself, he gulped three cupfuls in a haste.

"It really made my blood boil," said Jyukichi. He wiped his eyes with the hand holding his cup and said, "It can't be helped no more, 'cos he's what he is. He ain't a craftsman no more. It's useless to give a darn about the craftsman's pride to the fella who washed his hands of the craftsman's trade. I kept mum while he talked. Although I remained mum, I migh of got my rag out. Do ya understand this feelin'?"

“Yes, yes, I can understand very well.”

“You are a good man,” said Jyukichi, who, lifting up his eyes, looked at the man seated opposite and said, “—Who are you?”

“Come on, Boss. Ain’t I telling you I am Kisuke?”

“Ah, you are Kisuke-san. —In Udagawa-cho, ain’t you?”

“Right, let me pour you.” Kisuke served him.

After that, it was Kisuke that ordered more saké. Jyukichi had the memory of it. O-Kuni came and saw him drunk as a skunk. She said he’d do better not to drink any more. Jyukichi took out his wallet. Then Gempei turned up. The two argued a bit. Gempei was in a huff and said something vigorously, and on the other, Jyukichi threw his wallet and stood up.

“Crap! The pair of us, this gentleman an’ me, will make darned partners to each other and do theft,” Jyukichi shouted at the top of his voice. “Now that things turned out as they are, I can do anythin’, be anybody, such as a thief. I can be a robber, even. I’ll announce it to the world, Darn it, wait an’ see.”

It may have been after they got out of “Gempei.” Kisuke was out to assuage him. They tottered and wobbled along, bumping into each other. Jyukichi, staggering along, praised each and every member of his family, his wife, o-Nao, then, Ryokichi, then on, o-Tsugi, and lastly Kamekichi and o-Yoshi. He boasted every one of them while he gave himself hell, denigrated himself, and in addition had Kisuke on the carpet, too.

“Darn no good, nope, darn no good, don’t ya think?” Jyukichi said as he leaned on the companion’s shoulder. “Ya and me, both of us, ain’t no good. Just like crap, I tell ya. The world would be better off without us. —Ya gonna go against me?”

“I’m walking you to your home. Is it in Nagasawa-cho?”

“Ya stay overnight wi’ me,” Jyukichi said. “Tonight ya an’ me gonna have a good talk. It makes ya happy to talk to a good ol’ friend, will you stay wi’ me tonight?”

“I’ll decide when you get home, Boss. I think your family will have their convenience.”

“Ya mean ya ain’t gonna stay?”

“Look out. You’ll run into the palanquin.”

Kisuke held Jyukichi and got him out of the palanquin’s way.

In that way, they got to Jyukichi’s home in Nagasawa-cho. Jyukichi forced Kisuke to stay overnight with him. As it turned out later, it was late at night, but he introduced him to his wife as a friend from olden times. He said that since they had got together for the first time in a long time, they would talk the night away over a drink. In his memory the children were all asleep. He heard o-Nao prepare drinks and Kisuke heartily declining something. As he was hearing it, unspeakable fatigue came over him and made him sleepy. He lay down where he was.

“Ya get goin’,” Jyukichi said to Kinsuke as he rolled down. “I’ll get a little rest, excuse me just a little while.”

And he turned to o-Nao and said, “I’ll get up in a moment. Ya’ll be sorry fer it if ya let this buddy go.”

He had fallen fast asleep. He did not wake up. He knew nothing at all. Probably it was at dawn. Half awake, he heard, Thief!, twice or so. He thought he was dreaming. Thinking, he found himself parched in the throat. His listlessness was such that he refused to reach his hand for the earthen kettle and slept on and on, lost to the world. —Half asleep and half awake, it seemed, he heard the voices of o-Nao and his children and the sounds of the clinking and chattering of the rice-bowls and chopsticks at a mealtime. When the sounds died away, he fell fast asleep again. He was awakened by the calling of a tofu vendor. He heard o-Nao stop him and ask for “A cake of yakko,” when he turned into the alleyway.

Now Jyukichi was wide-awake. Shit!, he said and ducked his head under the kaimaki covering.

“It seems I made a blunder,” he mumbled under his breath, “it does seem I been an’ gone an’ done a great big blunder. Oops.”

There, somebody came to his bedside and softly whispered:

“Fop, get up.” It was o-Yoshi. She said, “Dat man, a fief.”

8.

"I told you not to repeat it. You're a hopeless girl," o-Nao said. "— Well, these pieces seem ready to eat."

She shuffled the tofu pieces in the pan with the chopsticks. The tofu was briskly boiling in the water, sending up white steam, in the pan heated on the handy clay charcoal stove set beside the eating tray. Jyukichi, saké cup in hand, was gazing at the steam as if it were hinting there was more than met the eye. He had got up a half toki (one hour) before and been to the bathhouse. He sat at the tray and drank two tokuri of saké. But its repugnant smell only stung his nose. He did not enjoy drinking at all, nor did his spirits arise.

"Try them, hon," o-Nao said. "You'll feel refreshed when you eat something boiling hot."

"What did he take away?"

"Forget it, I'm telling you. It's more regretting to let the good will we showed him come to nothing than having things taken away," o-Nao said. "And it'd have been a trouble that the thief had been your friend. It was a good fortune he was a total stranger. Supposing it was done by a stranger, we can take it just for an accident."

Jyukichi lifted his eyes and looked at o-Nao, "Did anyone see him go out?"

"Ryo told me he did. The thief looked back over his shoulder at the door and thanked us in a low voice." O-Nao eased off the heat of the handy stove by narrowing the ventilation window. "Ryo took him for trying not to disturb none of us, so, without responding, pretended to be sleeping."

"That boy," Jyukichi opened his mouth a couple of times soundlessly, then said as if ashamed, "Ryo Boy was mad, wasn't he?"

"What will he get mad at, hon?"

"Me bringin' a scum of a fella . . . into my house."

"Shall I tell you what Ryo said? Are you interested?" o-Nao looked

his husband into the face. “If Pop had done the stealing, it’d have been much worse. In fact, it was much better to have things stolen. That’s all he said.”

“’s that so?” Jyukichi said. His voice was thin when he said it. Suddenly he raised his saké cup higher than his mouth. He had intended to say something or did say in his mind. On returning the cup on the tray, he lay rolling down where he was and said, “I’m still sleepy.”

“Eat a little and go to sleep. It’s bad to go to sleep on an empty tummy.”

“Well, leave me, lemme take a nap.”

O-Nao got to her feet, grumbling.

She brought him his pillow, put it under his head, and covered him with a kaimaki. By lying down, Jyukichi tried to think. He thought he was wide-awake, or that he had a hangover, or that his head was muddled. He felt as depressed as any. He thought he was awake but he had slipped into sleep before he knew it and again woke at the children’s voices. Head covered up by kaimaki, he remained as he was, awake though he was.

When the light was lit and it was dinnertime, Ryokichi came to wake him up. Jyukichi answered vaguely, not discernible whether it was yes or no. O-Yoshi said something over there in the other room, at which Ryokichi chided her, saying to be quiet. He left his father and began to eat. —Jyukichi had turned the matter over and over before he reached his decision. He made doubly sure whether or not he was sure of his decision. And he waited until they finished eating.

“Hey, ev’ryone, will ya wait?”

The meal over, Jyukichi got up and came to where his family gathered. He sat there squarely. “Will you stay put? I got somethin’ to tell y’all . . .”

“Knock it off,” said Ryokichi. “No need of bein’ so formal. Saké, isn’t it, Pop?”

“Yep,” Jyukichi nodded. “—Saké, please.”

“I’ll get it ready,” o-Tsugi stood up.

Jyukichi said to o-Nao, “Don’t clear the things away. Leave ’em. Ev’rybody, stay this here.”

“Drung, ain’tcha, Fop?” o-Yoshi said.

O-Nao arose and said that, before saké was ready, she would clear away the trays because they were uncomfortably dirty. She did the job in her efficient way with the help from o-Yoshi and Kamekichi. Ryokichi was attending terakoya to learn the three R’s. On the alleyway on that side of the next tenements was living a masterless samurai warrior, who was running a small terakoya. There Ryokichi was attending only night classes. He gathered study things and stood up, paying no attention to what his father was determinedly trying to deliver. He said, “I’m late tonight.”

“Oh yeah.” Jyukichi remembered it and said, “Right, ya go out to learn to read and write.”

Jyukichi had his son take away the head start. He looked as if relieved from a disaster. He undid the formal sitting and sat cross-legged. —Off went Ryokichi. Saké got ready. O-Nao and o-Tsugi spread their domestic piecework. Jyukichi began drinking, serving himself. Drinking, he teased o-Yoshi and Kamekichi. This time he was able to enjoy drinking. He was beginning to get comfortably drunk.

“At the 10-January Festival of Ebisu, O, the God of Wealth, they sell,” Jyukichi began to hum low, “—bags of pop-rice and bowls to put it in.”

“Surprisin’, same ol’ song again,” o-Yoshi booed. “Same ol’ song again, Fop. And it’s outa fune.”

“Yoshi-bo,” o-Tsugi chided o-Yoshi.

“That’s fine. It’s exactly what o-Yoshi says.” Jyukichi laughed in good humor. “This been the only one yer Pop knows over time. And sings outa tune. Surprisin’, there ain’t no man with no merits like me, right?”

By the time Ryokichi was back, Jyukichi was completely soused, bragging, I drank wi’ all the wages I made last night. Soon he lay down and went to sleep while talking incoherently about something. He thought he was still talking when he suddenly woke up. The andon light was turned down and he heard the family breathing in sleep. —He found himself between the sheets all right though he had not changed to his night robe and Kamekichi sleeping nestling to him. He heard someone talk in sleep in the next-door tenement and a dog bark away in the

main street.

Jyukichi stayed still quite a while, listening for his family soundly fast asleep. Then he slipped out of his bed. Kamekichi gave a start in sleep but went back to sleep when the quilt was redone over him and he patted his son over the quilt. Jyukichi looked about and muttered under his breath, "One handcloth will do." Just then, he heard the bell tell the time from afar. It had to be the bell in Shirokane-cho. He counted and knew it was toki 8 (2 o'clock in the morning). The sound of bell stopped. He stood on his feet to go to the kitchen.

The kitchen was located in the back of the two-mat room. Careful not to make a big noise in sliding the shoji door open, Jyukichi picked out a dry handcloth from among those hanging from the hooks. He tied it around his head. Then he was about to slide open the shutter at the back door, slowly, with utmost deliberate care, when he heard o-Nao's voice from behind. Startled, he looked back.

"What're you going to do?" O-Nao was in her night robe. It was too dark to see her face. Her voice was quivering like an aspen. "What're you going to do, hon? Whatever are you going to do, tell me?"

"I, er, well, I'm going to the backhouse."

O-Nao was quick in catching up with him and, pushing him aside, quietly slid shut the door which was four inches or so ajar.

"Do you need to tie a cloth head over chin to go to the backhouse?" she asked. "Now, let's move over there and hear what it's all about. Let us hear what you are going to do, will you?"

## 9.

The both of them were seated face-to-face in the two-mat room. The andon light placed in the six-mat room and turned down, they only could see each other's face vaguely. That was the least relief Jyukichi could get. He sat stiff and, voice lowered, told the whole story. He was not a good talker, so he was apt to fail to form in words what he had to say. However, he had it all out and begged her to let him go as he was.

O-Nao was so tremendously trembling, words would not come out immediately.

“s so?” o-Nao nodded shortly. “That so?” she said through her chattering teeth. “In this way, you gonna get to be a married couple with o-Cho-san?”

Jyukichi bated his breath and looked at o-Nao.

“You,” Jyukichi said, breathing in deep and breathing out long and quietly, “guess it wrong. It ain’t got nothin’ to do wi’ o-Cho, not at all. I’ll be a bother to ev’ryone if I stay with y’all.”

“Tell me, in what way you’ll be a bother to us all?”

“Didn’t I tell ya just now?” Jyukichi said as he, jittery, strengthened his voice, “Ya know, I’m useless. I talk big like a real one, of a craftsman’s pride, like. Not that I ain’t got it, but at least I do have the sense of feelin’ the same with other people. So, not that I don’t want my wife an’ kids to have a hard time. If I can, I want ’em to enjoy the time of it by makin’ works people in the world like to have today. I did it over an’ over but I failed in spite of the shots I gave. When I do it as I’m supposed to, I fail. No matter how I cheat me, I can’t do the way the world likes me to do, no way.”

“How on earth can you do what you can’t?”

“Can I get away with it?” Jyukichi interrupted. “The other day, Kinroku-cho also said to me, Think hard on the times. Stay the way you are and it’s simply pitiable for your wife and kids. I should know better than ’em how it is. I done known it all alon’ myself. But when I got another person to say so, it came home to me fer the first time in my life it’s real pitiable fer y’all. Himono-cho an’ Kinroku-cho are doin’ as well as all that. They say they’ll be too ready to be of any help to me. But I can’t do as they tell me to. No matter how I try, I’ll never ever be able to do like they do.”

“How in the world can ya do what ya can’t do?” o-Nao interrupted this time. “All people, each and ev’ry one of ’em, can’t go up in the world. They got their own nature they were born with. They can have either good fortune or bad fortune. Himono-cho and Kinroku-cho have been capable and tactful of becoming what they are now, haven’t they?”

But you lack what they have and there ain't nothing you can do about it, right?"

"Therefore, therefore I . . ."

"Therefore, so what?" said o-Nao. "You're getting hard put to it to do what you can be best at and can't make enough, but you aren't cut out for nothing else. If so, it is only natural we, kids and me, should do something to make it up, isn't it? Why, isn't it just a selfish man's talk? That you stay *because* you're making the family comfortably off; and that you go *because* you're making it worse off."

"I ain't sayin' crap like this 'cause I'm selfish, I'll tell ya."

"Very well, then who are you talking about? Do you *ever* think we'll be happy that you go? Hon, do you *ever* think so?"

O-Nao said, holding down her quivering voice, "—Something like twenty days ago, Himono-cho came by and he told me almost the same thing, that there ain't be no hope for you to get ahead, that I should urge you to do the share of work he was doing, and that that would ease our poverty a little bit."

"Oh he didn't. Did Himono-cho come?"

"He did, but I didn't tell it to you. I told him I don't meddle with what my husband does in his work. By saying so, I turned it down." O-Nao continued as if piqued, "—You oughtn't to do such a thing. Nor do we ever wish to live comfortably off by as much as making you do what you hate to do. Ryo's fourteen, o-Tsugi, thirteen, and I'm as robust as any. All the family, not one missing, six of us, being together is worth fighting troubles away. Ain't I right?"

"I thought about it, too. I took the whole day to think hard on it," Jyu-kichi said. "But it won't work. Yesterday I found out when I got wages that I got paid less than half as much as I'd expected. They said I'd get in proportion to what'd be sold. By this they meant me to please quit. I ain't so far earned satisfactorily fer y'all, but I done so far drunk more than satisfactorily. An' I brung home a total stranger an' let him steal out of what *little* we had, to boost. I'm fed up wi' my darned self. I'm the plague of the family. So please, don't stop me. I ain't got no reason whatsoever I'm allowed to stay here with y'all."

“That’s a clever idea!” said a voice.

It was a bolt out of the blue. Both Jyukichi and o-Nao could have jumped for surprise. They looked back. Over there at the entrance of the six-mat room was standing Ryokichi, behind whom were o-Tsugi, Kamekichi, and o-Yoshi as well seen standing, too.

“That’s a good idea, Pop,” Ryokichi said. “If you are no way inclined to stay here, let’s get out.”

“Ryo, you know what you’re saying?” o-Nao said.

“Pop, listen,” he continued, not bothering his mother. “If you insist to go, you shall not be alone. I’ll go with you, Pop.”

“So will I, Pop,” o-Yoshi said.

“You’re no use,” Kamekichi said. “Girls are no use. It’s Big Bro and me will go. We’re boys.”

“Everybody will go,” o-Tsugi said. “We might as well die by the roadside as be separated.” So saying, o-Tsugi began to cry. “Oh yes, we’d be better off that way, Mom? It’d be much better.”

“Fine. Agreed,” Ryokichi said in high spirits. “Nobody disagree? Pop, if it’s convenient fer you, shall we get ready?”

“Ryo, —” O-Nao called him with a voice overflowing with emotion.

Head down very low, Jyukichi applied one arm over his face.

“Y’all,” Jyukichi said in confusion, “all of ya, are fools. I tell ya, you are all, fools.”

“Ya betcha,” Ryokichi said. “Ev’ry one of us is Pop’s kid. There ain’t nothin’ weird about it.”

O-Tsugi broke into a laugh as she cried. Next came Kamekichi. And then o-Yoshi, not knowing why, burst into laughter. O-Nao pressed her face with both hands as if to pray for something.

## 10.

Not to mention, the family did not move out of the tenement. On the counsel of o-Nao and Ryokichi, Jyukichi quit “Goto” and decided to work at home.

He himself had so far gone around the customers from olden times and taken orders from them. When he left the shop and became independent, what he would make out of the orders would be all his. All the money would come to him no matter how few works would be sold. It should not necessarily be named the “Five-Paulownia-Leaf Brazier.” He could change the patterns of *maki’e* if he willed. In time, the world’s taste would change and his braziers might be popular again. In any way, it would be worth practicing this at home. This they came to agree upon.

There was no judging whether or not it would go as they speculated. His fellow tenants wished the best for him, because they were all fond of Jyukichi and his family—notwithstanding, they were slated to hear the voice of Jyukichi, blind drunk, blathering. This time, it was not regularly on the fourteenth or the last night of the month. He did it once in a month at most. His oration of blather would start around ten o’clock at the wicket, go on almost in the same order until he reached the door of his tenement.

“I drank on it all, mind ya.” Jyukichi would slump down outside the door. “I got darned 2-kan 500 only left, mind ya. Honest, I drank wi’ all I done made, take it from me.”

“Come on in, hon,” they would hear o-Nao say, voice lowered. “You’re making a nuisance of yourself to the neighbors, so for heaven’s sake, come on in, will you?”

“No, I can’t, mind ya,” Jyukichi was bucolic as he responded. “I done drunk wi’ all. I splurged on drinkin’. Money, why I got a wee bit left, take it from me. No, I won’t, mind ya.”

Ryokichi would take turns, then people would hear o-Yoshi say something, “Fop, weird.” She would say it affectedly. “People will say, weird, don’t dey? Weird, Fop.”

## **Acknowledgments**

Translating works by Yamamoto, Shugoro into English is almost always challenging to me because they are doubly cross-cultured, “doubly” because there is a yawning gap between contemporary and olden from 200 to 300 years ago even though close-knit correlations could be found; on the other because between the Japanese-speaking culture and the English-speaking cultures there also lie as or more yawning gaps, almost nothing in common. No matter how doubly or triply cross-cultured, however, one thing is infallibly common: humans are universally humans. That was a crutch for me, challenging proposition as translating works by Shugoro into English was. Another crutch was a large gathering of my backers anxious about my health condition.

Sincerest thanks must go to Toru Shimizu, the copyright holder, who willingly gave me permission of selecting some ten works from lashings of YS short stories and translating them.

I do not know how I can thank the Faculty of Economics and the English Education Committee of Yamaguchi University for shouldering all of my responsibilities so I will lessen stress and can hope for quicker recuperation and remission by doing things that will make me on cloud 9.

Had it not been for the medical skills and devotion of my doctors, Dr. Masa’aki Oka and Dr. Michihisa Iida, surgeons, Dr. Katsuya Tanabe, internist, and Dr. Koji Otsuki, psychiatrist, Nurse Nobuko Umemoto (and the other nurses as well,) I would not have been able to put down a word of translation, disappearing into thin air. They endowed me with life —what a wonderful thing! —along with time, strength, and mettle. A zillion thanks to them.

I acknowledge AM’s and FM’s devotion to making me as comfortable as any, especially when I, not always in good shape or in one piece, worked on translating the works which demanded me to rack my brains and nerves.

