East Wind Melts the Ice
& Other Stories

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East Wind Melts the Ice
& Other Stories

Gail Sher

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For Brendan

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

These fragments are renditions (often simple retellings) of stories from modern Japanese literature and journalism. By highlighting (zeroing in on) a particular aspect or portion of a larger piece, the focus shifts (narrows and intensifies) so that a certain quality becomes more evident, poignant or simply celebrated. To Yasunari Kawabata, Nagai Kafu, and other modern Japanese writers who inspired these versions, I offer them with a deep bow.

GAIL SHER

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EAST WIND MELTS THE ICE

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"The four children playing twenty questions downstairs in the children's room could be heard clearly on the second floor." Such was the opening sentence of (in her opinion) a way-too short story.

The quickest child turned out to be the youngest, a second-grader, who correctly guessed the word "raindrops" from four hints. The precocious boy's mother was insisting that the neighbor's child (the child who asked "Does it sound like—drip drip drip?") had clearly known the answer and "let" her child win. "If rain makes noise, it's raindrops," she'd said.

"That's not true. The sound of rain and the sound of raindrops aren't the same," retorted a supporter of the second-grader—not his mother—who, it turned out, was, to begin with, embarrassed by her other (older) child's choice of the unpleasant word "raindrops." She felt that the neighbor's youngster, knowing that her boy (when leader) always picked unpleasant words, would easily have guessed "raindrops." It was obvious to her, and therefore doubly humiliating, that he had more or less "given" her little one the glory of winning.

The squabbling of the children plus the symbolic distances of both the parental eavesdropping and subsequent commentary, duplicated later in their

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own marital squabbles and distances, fascinated her. But the real hold, what carried over to the next day and even the next, was the author's unequivocal distinction between the sound of rain and the sound of raindrops. Of course it was so, but she had never thought about it.

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DOVES SPREAD THEIR WINGS

It was upon comparing the portrait she had once made as a tribute to her dead mother with Nakamura Tsune's *Portrait of His Aged Mother* that her insight slowly began to emerge. Whereas her portrait, sketched from an early photograph of her mother, made her mother seem younger and even more beautiful than she actually had been at the time the photograph was taken, Tsune's, completed while his mother was still alive, had been done in a simple style with dark, cold coloring. His stooped, emaciated woman, seated in profile against a half-wainscoted wall, prayer beads dangling from her wrinkled fingers, probably reflected Tsune's feelings toward his own approaching death. Her painting, on the other hand, done while grieving the loss of her mother, her lover, and their miscarried baby, seemed shallow and self-indulgent by comparison.

Which is odd. How can one explain the fact that she, with her triple sorrow, painted a sort of sweet, pretty likeness void of any sense of pain, while Tsune, whose mother yet lived, conveyed his suffering starkly and profoundly? It must be that both of them, choosing as their ostensible subject the aging and death of their mothers, were actually painting self-portraits. Even as she thought this, the memory of her frequent glances in the mirror to check the contours of her face as she painted, rose vividly before her. At the time she had rationalized

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this tactic by reminding herself of the strong resemblance she bore to her mother.

Her musings brought up the question of the degree to which one's love for others is, in reality, self-love. In her situation, for example, all three persons mourned were fully alive within her. Her experience of them therefore had to be affected by her ever-changing experience of herself. Somehow the part she played, perpetually infusing them with life, had never occurred to her.

The two pieces of this that were most disturbing, and suggested that her behavior, to a much larger degree than she cared to admit, had been solipsistically driven, were first her portrayal of her dead mother as young and beautiful, insisting on this, in fact leaving any trace of death out of the painting altogether, and second the conviction to which she has been quite wedded of having lugged another around in her heart for a quarter of a century, when more accurately the weight she has borne was a split-off part of her self. Reflecting on the former, and taking a lesson from Tsune, she couldn't help but feel that her sole purpose in having created that portraiture was to perpetuate her mother's function as mirror to the beauty and youth she herself was terrified of losing. Her mother was dead. If the painting had been about her

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mother, it would have had to include something on this subject.

But wait. Within the striking image she drew of her young, beautiful mother, an ardent brunette, spunky, feisty—within the glamour and sweet smells, exotic and exciting, did there not lurk a whirlwind of life force expending itself to keep itself alive? One could argue, given her own circumstance of extreme youth at the time of her mother's death, that this was the side of death with which she was most familiar—the only side in fact that she could have painted with authenticity. Just as a giant red balloon contains within its sheath of air a shriveled knot of rubber that one instinctively tosses (and that this is evident to the eyes of an observer if she will only see it)—metaphorically speaking this explained what was happening to her now. She was beginning to see it.

The case of her lover (or "ex-lover"—it was difficult to call him that since her inner world belied it) was more complex. A part of her perfectly understood that he lived with his wife and three children in a travel-to-able city. But did he infuse her as she infused him with abundant, exuberant life? Did she owe the very transformation she was presently undergoing to the power of his imagination? One wondered.

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As in a dream whose various figures represent various sub-personalities of the dreamer, so in this "relationship" it must be that its various aspects, fashioned though they were on external originals, had nevertheless, over the course of years, quietly melded into the character of their maker. Lovers though they may have been in the past, their hearts had flowed along separate streams of time. The qualities she once admired in him were her qualities now—the "him" she thought of herself as loving, a mental "balloon" inflated with devotion that would as surely shrivel the second she withdrew it.

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EARTHWORMS COME OUT

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Kawabata's fifty-ninth birthday had been only a month away when the collection of stories written at the end of his career (he had been ill but at the height of his power) was published. That was her age now, she thought, unsure of the import.

One story, "This Country, That Country," had been the title of an article featuring England's Princess Margaret, who apparently had changed her mind about her betrothal to Group Captain Townsend.

Four years previous (while visiting Balmoral) the lovers had hoisted a stone onto a mound of similar stones, publicly acknowledging their feelings. The journalist made the point that while it was impossible to tell which stone the Princess and Group Captain Townsend had added to the pile, since none looked as though the Princess alone could have lifted it, they must have lifted it together.

When reading the article, Takako, Kawabata's heroine, had tried to picture the princess as she would have looked hoisting the stone onto the mound in tandem with the Group Captain, but the image that came was "simply an image." Whereas the previous day Takako had felt sorry for the princess (who had been forced by church law and royal custom to abandon her beloved), that feeling was now gone. Her empathy itself "seemed like a foreign story."

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THE BUTCHERBIRD IS SILENT

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"The idea that her kittens might be sacrificed by her mother—that in the hierarchy of values held by her mother the lives of kittens were certainly of less importance than, for example, Frank-san's slightest whim—must have been alive to the girl before the animals were even born." Such were her thoughts as she re-read the story by a casual friend of the child's mother:

Indeed, now that I remember the first conversation I had with her, that strange afternoon inside the shabby cottage, Mariko huddling over the pregnant cat curled up on the tatami and commenting, quite out of the blue, "She's going to have kittens. Do you want a kitten?" What strikes me most is how the child, ignoring my "Oh really? How nice...I'm sure they'll all find nice homes," became surprisingly insistent, almost demanding. How could I have failed to notice the anguish and despair arising from her helplessness in the face of (in her mind) certain disaster. By screaming at her mother that most unchildlike, "Why do you always go away with Frank-san? Frank-san pisses like a pig. He's a pig in a sewer..." she made her analysis of the situation abundantly clear. If Sachiko's own life was held in abeyance, it would be foolish to expect (and this is what did not escape Mariko's perspicacity) her own or those of her kittens to be more highly regarded.

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There were many occasions when Mariko's preoccupation (one could almost say obsession) with her kittens, for now there were three, Atsu, Mee-Chan and Suji-Chan, was in evidence, but by far the most poignant of these was the day of our outing. The outing had been planned to celebrate the imminent departure of Mariko and Sachiko for the home of Sachiko's uncle. Frank-san for the moment was out of the picture. Sachiko, while procrastinating, giving her uncle a moving date and then doing nothing to prepare so that weeks after the established time she still had not packed a single item, held firm to her intention. She and Mariko would live in her uncle's spacious house and Mariko would have tutors and private schooling. After all, wasn't Mariko's education what she must concern herself with above all else? The outing was designed to be one last day together at our ease. The lift up the mountainside had indeed proven spectacular, the picnic on top and the vistas on our little hikes exceedingly pleasant. Toward evening, after a department-store supper, we strolled through sidestreets in little hurry to reach the final tram depot. On one such sidestreet we chanced upon a kujibiki stand. Mariko instantly asked to play, and noticing Sachiko's reservation, I handed her a coin. Since Mariko appeared to be a child, the stand-keeper instructed her to close her eyes while drawing her ticket and visualize the big furry bear. Mariko: "I don't want the bear. I want the basket,"

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pointing to the back of the stall. The man shrugged. "All right, princess, close your eyes tight and imagine your basket. Ready?" The first time Mariko's ticket won a flower pot. The second time she (now it comes back to me clearly) won a pencil. We were about to leave when Mariko pressed to try yet a third time. She seemed so desperate, so single-minded, her emotional intensity so unsuited to the "we-all-know-no-one-ever-wins-anything-serious" attitude with which most passers-by play. Mariko, just then, was not a mere passer-by but, for whatever reason, both her mother and I refused to see that.

As luck would have it, on her third try Mariko won, not the basket but what the stall-keeper described as a "major prize." This turned out to be a large wooden box. Made of smooth, unvarnished pine, it was light, like an orange crate, and had two sliding panels of wire gauze. Mariko, thoughtful, inquired, "Couldn't we carry the kittens in here when we go to Uncle's? We could put down a rug. I'm sure they'll be quite comfortable." Sachiko wasn't so sure but on reflection could picture it working as Mariko described. Several days later, however, Frank-san's car was back and their plans had changed.

They weren't going to go to America immediately. Frank-san would put Sachiko and Mariko up in Kobe while he went to America to send for them after he

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found work. They were leaving tomorrow. Sachiko was quite agitated, throwing essentials into valises, boxes, what-have-you. She kept repeating that she couldn't take everything. Some things would have to be left behind. She hoped I could use some of the things as they, many of them, were quite valuable. Mariko sat in the corner of the tatami playing with her kittens, expressionless.

"Have you decided yet?" she asked abruptly. "We'll talk about that later," her mother began when Mariko broke in, "But you said I could keep them" and began to intone to me, "She said I could keep them. She promised I could keep them." Sachiko turned toward her daughter, spotted the orange crate and yanked a kitten from the tatami, tossing it inside. Mariko was still hugging one of the tiny black kittens to her chest. She said nothing as her mother shut the other two inside the crate. Then she held the kitten out to me. "This is Atsu. Do you want to see him?" Mariko grabbed it away from her yelling, "It is just an animal. Like a rat or a snake. It's just an animal." She dropped the creature into the crate and left the cottage.

Mariko, still blank-faced, shadowed her. Sachiko headed for the river. First she took one kitten in her hands and tried to drown it by holding it under the water. When after a few minutes it wouldn't die, she put it back into the box and edged the entire crate into

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the river. To prevent it floating, she leaned forward and momentarily held it down. Mariko watched, transfixed, from the top of a slope behind her mother. As the box began to bob its way downstream, it caught in some reeds, was freed by a current and continued its journey. Mariko ran along the bank, stopping to watch the box till only a small corner was visible above the surface. Sachiko, who by now was aware of her daughter's presence, called to her before turning back to the cottage but her voice was the perfunctory voice of a weary mother doing what is expected of her. She shrugged her shoulders and walked back with the exasperated step of one who has experienced an unwanted delay. I turned in search of Mariko. Toward dusk I found her crouched on a bridge staring into the water.

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THE EAGLEHAWK STUDIES AND LEARNS

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If the truth be told, though the report of the Master's retirement game had been serialized in an exhaustive sixty-four installments, we were only now, through more heuristic means, beginning to grasp the momentous nature of this occasion. No one could have been more respectful, more knowledgeable, more observant nor sparing of himself in his reportage than Uragami, whose newspaper, the Tokyo *Nichinichi Shimbun,* had sponsored the match and whose devotion to Honnimbo Shusai had been entire. Yet, having read what he had to say, one feels that the account, focused primarily on externals, served rather to elegize (lament) than to parse (examine closely) the illusive events for posterity.

For example we learn that the match itself, lasting fourteen sessions, began in Tokyo on June 26, 1938, and ended, not quite six months later, on December 4, in Ito. The Master died on January 18, 1940. Most certainly the ordeal had taken his life.

But such facts tell us little. Their very paucity arouses a strange interest in minutiae, like the very long hair Uragami noticed in the Master's left eyebrow, as if something ultimate in our understanding hinges on getting these correct. Mr. Uragami himself says that his noticing the hair and writing about it was a trifling matter. The important point was that he had

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noticed it at a difficult moment—that it had come as a sort of rescue. But such thinking is apocryphal and now that we realize it, our inclination is to extrapolate—to posit that hidden within this single feature of the Master's visage (a sort of metaphysical heirloom/philosopher's stone) is an elixir with transmutative properties compensatory to our age's precise shortcomings.

Buried in Uragami's treatment of a day's session at Hakone was the following brief paragraph:

> *Today I discovered for the first time a white hair about an inch long in the Master's eyebrow. Standing out from the swollen-eyed, heavy veined face, it too somehow came as a savior.*

Several days after this article had appeared (and two days before he died) the Master and his wife had made a trip to Atami to get the Master a shave. Phoning a reliable barber, the Master had told him that he had one very long hair in his left eyebrow, that it was a hair of good luck, a sign of long life and that he, the barber, was not to touch it. Of course the barber agreed. Amazingly the Master had not himself previously noticed the hair. He had only recently read about it in Uragami's newspaper article. While his wife related this story, the Master remained silent

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but, Uragami tells us, a flicker crossed his face "as if it had caught the shadow of a passing bird."

Uragami has reflected that more than a decade has passed since the Master's death and no method has been devised for determining the succession to the title "Master of *Go*." Instead, rationalism, with its tedious rules, meticulous point system, and emphasis on winning, had wrung the concepts of dignity and afflatus out of the process. "Victory" has become a commercial asset for a competitive person (read "disciple of *Go*"). The life of a player today, far from lustrative, is consumed by contests, annual title matches, and recitals of strength in flashy championship tournaments.

In all three matches played in the last decade of his life, the Master fell ill midway through. After the first he was bedridden. After the third he died. Each game took inordinately long. It was as if, in these final play-offs, an epoch (a complete system of values and aesthetics) virtually embodied in the Master, came grinding to a halt. The last, nimbus of an eon, should, in its own right, have been a masterpiece, but as Uragami says, "By this time the Master could not stand outside the rules of equality."

Witness the contrast between the Master and his opponent, Uragami continues. Once the former,

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quiet and nerveless, sank into a game, he did not leave. Otake, on the other hand, frequently excused himself, presumably as a consequence of his habit of drinking copious pots of tea. (Otake's difficulty, however, did not stop at enuresis. Often he would leave his overskirt behind him in the hallway and his *obi* as well.) His way of sitting down and getting up were as if readying himself for battle. Typically a long deliberation would be capped in the final minute by a hundred or a hundred fifty plays of surging violence—quite unlike the Master's steadfast immobility, suggestive of one who has lost all consciousness of his own identity.

One indeed got the impression that when the Master was seated at the *Go* board he had the power to quiet his surroundings. This power, the result of long training and discipline, "alchemically" affected the Master's physical body and was especially noticeable (Uragami reports with some authority, since he took the last photographs) in his dead body where his large, longish face with its bold features, his strong jaw and his disproportionately long trunk seemed exaggerated. Even more pronounced, we read, was the eerie sense one had of his torso disappearing from the waist down. His legs and hips, insubstantial to the extreme, seemed inadequate even for his weight (which we know to be about sixty-five)—a

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child's weight. His knees (in *seiza* it was obvious) appeared transparently thin.

The Master's physique confirms what those knowledgeable about the spirit of *Go* have long suspected—that the intense concentration required will chisel away at a player's manifest being (it is almost as if concentration itself replaces a player's body). One would imagine that when in recess the Master would prefer diversions of an altogether different nature, but Uragami explicitly noted that the Master was literally addicted to games—mahjongg, billiards, chess—which he passionately played day and night, even in the interval between a professional session and dinner.

Uragami's description of a glimpse he had one day of the Master walking the hundred or so yards across the garden from the outbuilding of the Naraya Inn to his apartment in the main building bears this out on the one hand, and ironically (that it should come from a mere glimpse) gives us more of an insight than we get anywhere else in the report of the true magnitude of what is before us. Just beyond the gate of the outbuilding was a short slope and the Master, palms lightly clasped behind him, bent forward as he climbed it. His body, held perfectly straight from the hips, made his spindly

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legs seem all the more accessory. "The retreating figure of the Master against the background sound of flowing water carried along with it the retreating fragrance of *Go* as a graceful and elegant path," Uragami eulogized. From photographs of the dead body, in which there appears to be only a head, a doll's head, almost gruesome (as if severed), the Master's martyrdom (we name it from our present vantage point)—the sacrifice of an invincible life for the sake of an art that is no longer relevant—was all but conclusive.

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SWALLOWS RETURN

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Nagai Kafu idealized prostitutes and set the scene, no doubt as a statement of mutability, of a story which still haunted her, on the *Ginza* in "second" Tokyo (which succeeded "first" Tokyo, destroyed in the Great Earthquake of 1923 and which, in its own turn, disappeared in the American incendiary raids of 1945). Perhaps he envied their cavalier style, their freedom to eschew the social constraints that he, raised in a respectable family, had to suffer. He was certainly aware that their feckless ways were also precarious. Take a waitress, for example. Her livelihood might easily have depended on the generosity (read "loneliness or sexual neediness") of strangers—customers who dropped into one's restaurant—or, after-hours, passers-by on the street who responded in kind to a seductive "Hey loverboy, how 'bout a cup of tea?" And of course, as he pointed out, among themselves these people made their own fine distinctions. The combs in one's hair, the "flying" pattern on one's kimono, the twill of one's *haori*, the embroidery on a sash—if the slightest bit frowsy, mockingly declared one as incult. Or even those between waitress-prostitute, geisha-prostitute and out-and-out prostitute. This nomenclature clearly signaled a level of expertise in the work of giving pleasure that closely affected the bearer and toward which she must have bowed. The bottom line was one's ability to arouse a fantasy,

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the suggestion that anything might be possible, that "with me one might enter the highest realms of the unknown"—which allure, by the way, was the same as that offered by houses of God. From this standpoint Kafu's attraction to his subject made sense. In fact, now that she reflected, she thought her own fascination with this particular story had to do with the loyal nature of the bond between its hero and heroine, held firm despite their obvious character flaws and wild vicissitudes in the back alleys of their external lives.

One of the most notable features of this world, at least for her what stood out and stayed with her, was the constancy of its ephemerality. While nothing lasted, nothing significant appeared to change even over the course of generations. The story began in typical desuetude—the couple, dishabilled from having just awakened, were calculating, what with the New Year approaching and her in her late thirties/early forties, how much longer could they go on living off her earnings? Granted she was still lovely and looked much younger than she actually was but...did they need to begin...at which moment she was called to the phone. Her immediate presence was required at an assignation house. But they were used to this. She wanted to be called as much as possible. Frequently there wasn't time even for a bowl of rice. She dressed and flew off, leaving Jukichi to

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eat his soft-boiled egg and warmed leftover milk alone. He tidied up and ran whatever errands. O-Chiyo could be back tonight or tomorrow some time, possibly tomorrow night, in which case she'd call or have someone call. Other men would resent this eclipsed existence, but the decisive turn toward intimacy in their relationship had happened on the occasion of his letting her know that he "got" the nature of her work (which was not in a bar as she had told him) and that it was okay. So long as she was straight with him, whatever she did was fine. The relief for both of them at this extraordinary conversation—most of it conveyed through gesture and facial expression—left its indelible mark. They became inseparable from that moment.

The specifics shifted. The woman's house from where originated most of O-Chiyo's work was raided and they had to evacuate the neighborhood immediately on threat of arrest. Shortly thereafter O-Chiyo, in a crowded street with a new customer, got separated from him and when she ran to catch up, joining hands again, she found herself holding the hand of the wrong person. This man, however, a genial, philandering ex-official who had lived down a bribery scandal, whisked her into a cab and in the end set her up in a house of her own choosing as his concubine. Jukichi, being the one with free time, found the house and, in addition, an apartment

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several blocks away for himself so they could stay together except for the nights the man came around.

These little developments, beginning with his discovery of her working as a prostitute, only served to strengthen Jukichi's connection to O-Chiyo. The idea that other men found pleasure in her body somehow made her all the more appealing. Unlike O-Chiyo, Jukichi held a university degree. He had tried his hand at writing but his enthusiasm at every employment opportunity trailed off shortly after he was hired. Should he be ashamed of allowing a woman to support him (of battening at her expense) or just resign himself that this was how he was? After all, within its own definitions, their way of life was honest. O-Chiyo seemed happy. They were neither hypocritical nor materialistic, which was saying a lot in the day's land of lies.

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BURROWING BEETLES WALL UP THEIR DOORS WITH EARTH

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Gentle, quiet, graceful though Yukiko was, she was (they would never have said so, which—as she became increasingly engrossed—increasingly irked her) an embarrassment to her sisters. The fact that she had passed the marriageable age (she had reached thirty without a husband) was like a thorn in the family's side, reminding them of the gradual decline in status of the Makioka name and the concomitant need for adjustment in their attitude. It used to be that the willful rejection of an even slightly deficient suitor was in keeping with their prosperity and reputation as members of an old and established household. But extravagance (their father had been an ostentatious spender) and mismanagement had taken their toll. Tatsuo, the eldest sister Tsuruko's husband, who had become head of the family after their father died, discovered the deceased man's business to have been heavily in debt. It was Tatsuo ultimately, against "loud" protests from his sisters-in-law, who had taken the decisive step to sell the shop. Worried about his responsibility as family heir, he had chosen what for him would be the safer, more familiar course—to stay in banking. Oddly, it was also Tatsuo, austere, retired, almost timid, who had taken up the cause (apropos the Makioka's new lowered standards) of finding Yukiko a husband.

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One of the executives in Tatsuo's bank had acted as the go-between. The candidate was heir to a wealthy family, himself an executive of a bank in a provincial city. Though Tatsuo knew Yukiko was loath to leave Kobe, her wishes on this score were too irrelevant to be taken seriously. (In his opinion, the provinces suited her shy, non-urbane ways.) Since the two banks corresponded, Tatsuo was privy to all the information he needed concerning the man's character, finances, and social position, which was, if anything, a little too high for the current standing of the Makiokas.

Yukiko, however, had not been predisposed to approve of a choice by the very brother-in-law who, in selling the family's business, had behaved in a way that violated (she was certain) her dead father's wishes. What's more, she had found the man countrified. Yukiko didn't need her degree from a ladies' seminary to spot his lack of breeding. She would be quite unable to respect him.

Rather than saying so directly, she hemmed and hawed, giving vague answers that could be taken to mean anything. Tatsuo, conveniently, had taken her reticence to mean that she was not hostile to the proposal. So that when, in the end, she said a flat "No—the fellow lacks an intelligent face," Tatsuo was stunned. He privately suspected her of deliber-

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ately trying to embarrass him (a grave misreading of Yukiko's nature).

Yukiko was happiest when allowed to live out her life in the household of her second oldest sister, Sachiko. Their Kobe home was modern and casual and Etsuko, her niece, thrived on the exclusive ministerings of her cultured aunt. In some ways Yukiko was closer to Etsuko and a better "mother" to her than Sachiko (which fact Sachiko recognized and was grateful for). Forever useful here, Yukiko dreaded being called to the Main House in Osaka, where her brother-in-law and Tsuruko periodically got it in their heads that she more properly belonged. She also dreaded the increasingly infrequent *miai* arranged on her behalf by an assortment of matchmakers.

She said nothing of course. Silently she participated in one after another. They seemed frequent because of her mortification at being paraded before the unappreciative—her delicate, slender, old-world beauty was not what was wanted (therefore placing her in the demeaning position of entertaining rejection by her cultural inferiors) as well as the fact that they jeopardized her present living arrangement, which privately she found most satisfactory. To her credit, Sachiko, determined to find a man who preferred, nay, who would downright insist on, a woman of

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Yukiko's calibre, ardently defended her. But as time wore on, a promising candidate weakened even Sachiko's integrity.

Ironically it was Sachiko's lively presence, her more accessible beauty, that dwarfed Yukiko's more subdued one. Indeed the younger sister appeared, beside her ever-bright elder, a bit moody. Recently a faint spot, a mere shadow that came and went in cycles, was showing itself over Yukiko's left eye. Sachiko and Teinosuke were worried it would negatively affect the opinion of a new prospect that had been found through the good offices of Itani, their hairdresser. (Sachiko, knowing Itani's fondness for arranging marriages, had left Yukiko's photograph with her.) Itani, it turned out, had sent the picture to a man she'd heard about but hadn't heard back from for so long, she'd nearly forgotten him. Later she had learned he was busy investigating Yukiko's background. Itani meanwhile had gleaned the following about the man: 1) He was an office worker at M.B. Chemical Industries, a French company. 2) He lived with his mother in a small house that he had purchased some time ago by installment. 3) Though he was over forty, he looked younger. 4) He had never been married. (This was the biggest plus. The Makiokas had more or less given up hope of finding a previously unmarried man. Also that he might

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know French was of interest.) 5) His photograph had revealed a plain enough person, a middling office worker—one could tell at a glance. 6) His income accordingly was moderate—what one might expect.

Segoshi had actually managed to spend a few moments alone with Yukiko at the hasty *miai* that had been conducted. When he later requested a second interview (just with her), she hadn't refused, which was uncharacteristic of her, nor had she objected to an x-ray and skin examination when at one point the question of the strange mark over her eye had become the focus of attention. Though she revealed by not the slightest quiver her true feelings on the matter, her docility—could this in itself be an indication that even Yukiko was concerned about spinsterhood? How seriously had she taken the old adage "bad luck chases women born in the year of the ram"?

Segoshi's investigations were completed and he was anxious to move forward, but the Main House in Osaka, for some reason, dallied. Itani was relentless and Sachiko in turn grew impatient with the Main House. She watched herself become more and more hopeful that this time the negotiations would succeed. With a little distance and greater objectivity,

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however, she realized that their very desire for a match (out of all proportion to what they could reasonably expect) had the perverse effect of dazzling them, heightening their excitement. Was a contract with this man really suitable? The check-and-balance system provided by the two houses, much as she resisted it—the slowness especially—had its advantages.

Finally a call had come from Tsuruko. "It's a good thing we took our time," she began. "It seems that the mother, whom we were told had palsy, is in fact mentally ill. She doesn't even recognize her own son." Sachiko understood. A strain of insanity in Segoshi's blood posed an insurmountable difficulty. He would have to be refused. "There is nothing to be done, Yukiko," Sachiko consoled her, gently enough.

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THE TIGER BEGINS TO ROAM

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It is possible that a full understanding of what happened in those few hours on the train to the hot spring would diminish its meaning. And that would be a shame. For Shimamura's idle life lacked meaning (reading along she knew he knew it—it was some small shred of meaning in search of which he made his solitary trips). It had occurred so unexpectedly, in transit, time usually hazed away. Hindsight, however, and distance had set the incident in bold relief.

His first trip to the snow country had been in the summer. As he left Tokyo, he remembered, his wife had cautioned him that it was egg-laying season for moths. Indeed there were moths—large corn-colored ones under the eaves clinging to a decorative lantern. In his dressing room also a queer-looking moth lay motionless, seemingly glued to the screen. Against the crimson glow of the mountain ranges, its gossamer wings fluttered in the wind. Transfixed, Shimamura had rubbed his hand vigorously over the inside of the screen. When the moth hadn't moved, he'd struck the screen with his fist. Sure enough it loosened and, like a leaf, wafted to the ground.

On his return (it had been December) he was startled to see the stationmaster's face stuffed inside a muffler, the flaps of his cap turned down over his

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ears. As soon as the train pulled up at the signal stop, a girl, who had been sitting on the other side of the car, opened the window in Shimamura's section and called to him loudly. Shimamura found himself unavoidably involved in their conversation, as if some critical piece of drama whose every nuance pertained to him were being acted out for his benefit.

Perhaps it was in part the contrast between her beauty and the desolation of the border range that so entranced him. This region of Japan, which he had chosen both for its remoteness and its hot springs (whose geisha, he reasoned, would protect him from excessive loneliness), was reputed to be the snowiest in the world. Throughout the winter, cold winds from Siberia picked up moisture over the Japan Sea and dropped it as snow when they struck the central mountain range. Frozen blankets spread endlessly over the bleak horizon. With little to relieve the monotony, one's life, hibernal, seemingly divorced from time, might easily sink into an undifferentiated darkness.

What registered with Shimamura after the girl drew herself back from the window was not so much the brightness of her voice as the pathos conveyed by it. Her concern apparently was for her brother who, though hardly more than a boy, was living and

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working in this town. The stationmaster seemed to know them both. Possibly because of the cold, he was trying to cut the conversation short, while the girl, sounding urgent, pressed for details of her brother's welfare. Shimamura couldn't tell if she was hurt by the stationmaster's curtness or simply, in her own excitement, hadn't noticed it. In either case she had struck him as sad.

Was it sadness then that attracted him? When she was seated, his view of her, depending as it did on a combination of the shifting light (both inside and outside the train) and the image of her cast by the partially steamed window-glass, was illusive. From her place, across the aisle and one section removed, she would have had no way of guessing that she was being observed. Even had she happened to glance his way, she could not have seen her own reflection and would have no reason to question the behavior of a man who appeared to be staring out the window at the countryside.

Since she was diagonally opposite to him, Shimamura knew he could just as easily have looked at her directly. A certain quality in her beauty—starkly cool, fierce, unreal—warned him against this. As if her purpose, karmic and foreboding, was to mirror something in himself that he preferred not to see.

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Truly odd was his awareness, on the one hand, of the suffering implied by her close connection with her traveling companion, an invalid, someone to whom she seemed mysteriously bound, and on the other, of the fact that his reaction to the two of them was as it would have been to a dreamlike pantomime (the distortion of them produced by the window's glare indeed lent them an otherworldly quality) rather than as one would expect it to be toward human beings in pain. Her overearnestness—both with the sick man (her constant ministrations—rearranging his scarf and the bottom of his overcoat that slipped open again and again so that even he, Shimamura, grew impatient) as well as earlier with the station-master—aroused in his imagination a ritualized figure from an old romantic tale where powerful feelings were metaphoric rather than an ordinary woman in the throes of anguish. He found it deeply disturbing that this inability (for he had come to consider it a kind of inability, having observed like failures in feeling in himself on numerous previous occasions) was being held up for him to watch.

Shimamura continued to peer out the glass. Streaks of red flushed the evening sky casting an eerie shadow over the terrain. Equally eerie and superimposed on his window view of the reddish landscape were the incandescent figures of the girl and the invalid. The silhouettes, though not motionless, held

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their position in the frame created by the window, while the landscape, a kind of unmitigated emotion, droned steadily past them. When he relaxed his gaze, it seemed as if the mountains had been cut off by the outline of the reflected forms (progressing around them), but when he made a conscious effort to look, peering into their filmlike shapes, he could see that the vista was actually whizzing through them. It almost stopped his breath, this furtive glimpse of what might be their inner emotional reality. When a light somewhere out in the mountains coruscated in the center of the girl's face, then moved across her face shooting a single ray through the pupil of her eye, for that moment her eye became a weirdly glowing phosphorescent jewel on a sea of scarlet. Shimamura, mesmerized by the inexpressible beauty of it, came to forget that he was confronting a mirror. The girl's face and the dim mountains melted together into a symbolic world of opaque coldness.

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MAGPIES NEST

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She didn't know what she felt reading about Yuji Nakamura, whose bum knee kicked in as he ran the second and longest leg of the 130-mile Hakone *Ekiden* relay. He'd hobbled and grimaced until his coach finally said, "You're out!"

His entire squad was disqualified. His teammates, wearing yellow sashes of dishonor, had run their paces to the end.

Fifteen 10-member, all-male squads from Japanese universities compete in the grueling New Year's Day race. Water is permitted once each relay leg, roughly at 10 kilometers (the halfway point). Millions line the asphalt route from downtown Tokyo to the resort town of Hakone. Millions more watch the race from their homes.

While there are no superheroes in the *ekiden* (a superhuman performance by one runner will not guarantee a win), anyone who lets the team down shoulders an overwhelming responsibility. A runner who gets sick, injured or for any reason fails to complete his "leg" often finds that the race haunts him forever, ruining his career, even his life.

Historical failures are dredged up annually on television and in magazines.

Nakamura considered suicide. "I was so sad, had so many regrets and was in shock because I'd done

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something from which I could never redeem myself," he'd said.

While *ekidens* are now run all over the world (with races tailored for high schoolers, professional squads and so forth), the Hakone *Ekiden*, journalists say, borders on the sadistic. One leg is up a paralyzing hill. The next, coming down, is brutal on the knees. Runners battle snow, ice, heavy wind, freezing rain and don't give up, for there are no substitutions once the race starts. They will kill themselves delivering the *tasuki* even one second faster. If any runner falls more than 10 minutes behind the leader, the entire team forfeits. A disqualified team automatically forfeits its berth in the following year's race.

"I must not stop—even if I die," is the feeling of most runners.

Doryoku (effort)—an end in itself—is said to be the ultimate motivation. The philosophy stresses endless training, dedication, team-spirit, obedience and self-sacrifice. Instead of letting athletes quit when they tire, coaches turn up the heat, continuing to drill to the point of exhaustion.

"*Gambare!*" (fight harder) fans scream, cheering runners on. Which ratchets up the pressure. When marathoner Kokichi Tsuburaya won a bronze medal, he apologized for letting his country down.

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WATERS AND SWAMPS ARE THICK AND HARD

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Reading *The Sound of the Mountains* by the Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata had brought to her attention the fact that she was more impressionable than she'd thought. The degree to which the characters in the book wrestled inside her—for days a part of her consciousness remained absorbed and distracted—was quite alarming. Shingo, for example, age 62, around whom the story revolved, held the image of a girl, now dead, to whom he was attracted in his youth, closer to his heart than the members of the family he had borne by marrying her considerably less handsome sister. As a result of his passivity, the marriages of both his children were flawed. Even now, as head of the family, he ought to intervene on their behalf, yet time goes by and he does nothing.

As wanton acts of his grandchildren caused the death or near death of others, his own part in it shocked and immobilized him. The cumulative effect, for example, of his preference for his son, out-and-out favoring him over his disappointingly homely daughter, pointed an accusing finger toward him, Shingo, in the lunatic behavior of his daughter's even homelier offspring. This understanding arose not so much as a thought but as a gradual accretion whittling away at his conscience.

For days now, like Shingo, she had felt a mounting disparity between her actions and her confidence.

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Repercussions of one's smallest deed, she realized (and can an interchange with another ever be considered small?), reverberate to infinity. There is only one opportunity to exert control, and that is over the initial idea. One must be vigilant about one's state of mind, and she wondered if she had the energy. "Merely thinking these things does nothing," she muttered out loud as she straightened the house, fluffing the pillows and emptying the wastebaskets. "That is precisely what Shingo does!"

*

"The way the human beings carry out each others' unconscious lives can be staggering," she mused as she toted a rather light load of groceries home from the grocery store. "Shuichi, for example, newly married to sweet and lovely Kikuko, blatantly goes out on her. Meanwhile, his father, scrupulous even in his dreams about remaining faithful to his homely wife, has longed for her sister, who died at the peak of intense, and, for Shingo, compelling, beauty. It was the sister he had wanted to marry and one supposes that it was the gesture to remain connected with her that after her death he married her less attractive sibling. Even the memories of her that he and Yasuko share Shingo remains silent about. Thus he presents himself as someone who long ago cared,

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whereas in truth, the image of Yasuko's beautiful sister is rarely far from his mind. Was it on the altar of the palpable though well-manicured passion of the father that the son sacrificed the fidelity of his own marriage vows, not really understanding this, not really choosing, and not really being chastised by his father, who on some level 'got' that this was an enactment of his own unfinished emotional business, however inept and aborted? Kinu, the other woman, of lower class and education, exacted the greatest authority. Helpless though she was to change the misguided circumstances of her husband's death, when it came to Shuichi, she was pretty much the master, at times flagrantly so."

*

It would be easy to criticize Shingo for his procrastination. His wife certainly did. Yet one sees in her very criticism a shortsightedness that is pitiful. Shingo's paralysis, indeed sometimes it did seem to take these proportions, objectively was inexcusable, yet he had found himself using this very term, paralysis, regarding his son's moral and emotional life. Shingo, unable to move forward, was at least the more conscientious. With information surging through him at such a pace, immobility was fortitude. Taking action before one is ready forecloses

and thereby stunts. “It can actually be cowardly,” she was thinking out loud. The connection between action and cowardliness (which heretofore she had associated with inaction) startled her.

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