



HAYASHI FUMIKO

*Hayashi Fumiko (1904–1951) had an impoverished nomadic childhood, an experience that is reflected in her work. Indeed, her first book bore the title *Journal of a Vagabond* (1930). As an adult, she worked as a waitress, a domestic, a street peddler, and a clerk. Her fiction uses the strategies of the I-novel, treating autobiographical materials to express strong and resistant female consciousness. A pioneer feminist piece, "Late Chrysanthemum" received the Women's Prize for Literature in 1948. The story is an early yet still startlingly topical and vivid critique of women's roles of dependency on male approval. It sets forward the grounds of difference between male and female desire and the need for women to find a separate and independent economic base.*

Late Chrysanthemum

"I'll be round this evening, about five," the voice on the telephone had said. Well, it certainly was a surprise, after a whole year of silence. But then, one never knew. . . . Kin looked at her watch; there were still some two hours to go before five. First and foremost, then, a bath: she gave the maid instructions to prepare an early meal, and hurried off to the bathroom. She must look younger than ever, younger than when they had last said good-bye; one suggestion of her age, and all was up. So thinking, she allowed herself a leisurely soak. 1

Back from the bath, she got out some ice from the icebox, crushed it finely, wrapped it in a double layer of gauze and spent ten minutes with it before the mirror, massaging her face all over. Her face grew red and numb. Somewhere at her woman's breast there gnawed the realisation of her fifty-six years but, determined that her years of experience should help her to cover up mere age, she took out her long-treasured jar of imported 2

cream and smeared it over her cold face. In the mirror an elderly woman's face, with a deathly, bluish pallor, stared wide-eyed back at her.

For a moment as she worked she was seized with a sudden disgust for her own face; across her mind floated a vision of the bewitching beauty that had been hers, that beauty once celebrated on the picture postcards of the day. She pulled up her clothes, and gazed intently at her thighs. Their former ripe plumpness was gone, and a network of tiny blue veins stood out over the skin. And, yet, she was not skinny—that was one thing to be thankful for—and her thighs when closed still met each other firmly and squarely. Whenever she had a bath, she would seat herself on her heels in formal fashion, knees together, and pour water into the hollow of her thighs. The water remained, forming a pool in the groove between her legs. At this, she would feel a comforting sense of relief, and her age no longer seemed to matter so much. She could still attract a man: while that was true, Kin felt, life still had some meaning. She spread her thighs apart, and furtively, almost as though shy of herself, stroked the skin on the inner side. It was smooth and soft, as doeskin becomes after long treatment with oil.

Kin had once read a novel by the eighteenth-century writer Saikaku, an account of a journey through Japan. In it were described, among the attractions of Ise at the time, two beautiful girls who played the samisen, one named Osugi and the other Tama. Around them as they played were stretched ropes of vivid scarlet, and people would play a kind of game, throwing money through the ropes in an attempt to hit the girls' faces. This scene, with the two girls inside the red ropes, came to Kin's mind with the beauty of some old colour print. Beauty like that was for her, she felt, long since a thing of the past.

In her youth she had been consumed with the lust for money, blind to all else. But now she was getting old; she had lived, moreover, through the fearful ravages of war, and life without men seemed somehow blank and forlorn. Her beauty, too, had altered by imperceptible degrees with age, and the advance of the years had wrought a change in its very character. The older she became, the more careful she was to avoid the gaudy in her dress. She despised the strange wiles resorted to by some women over fifty who ought to know better—the necklace above the sunken breasts, the check skirt in a red more suitable for an undergarment, the too-full white satin blouse, the broad-brimmed hat hiding the wrinkled forehead. Equally did she dislike the woman in Japanese dress who affected a little scarlet peeping out around the neck in the manner of prostitutes.

Kin had never once worn Western dress. Her kimono was of a dark blue silk, freshened with a neckband of purest white crepe. Her sash was of pale cream silk with raised flecks of white; the belt beneath it was pale blue, but she never, as some did, let it show above her sash in front. Her bosom she made to look full and round, her hips narrow; next to her skin, a girdle drawn as tightly as possible, and at her buttocks a pad lightly stuffed with

silk-wadding. Her hair had always been lighter than average and, taken with her fair complexion, never suggested a woman of over fifty. Perhaps because her height made her wear her kimono rather short, the hemline at the bottom was always neat and trim, and had an air of freshness.

Before a meeting with a man, Kin would always dress, as today, with a restraint which betrayed years of experience. Then, seated before the mirror, she would gulp down a cup of cold rice wine, never forgetting afterwards to clean her teeth to remove the smell. The merest sip of alcohol, she found, did things for her physically which no cosmetics could ever do. The slight intoxication it produced gave a flush to the cheekbones and the right misty look to the eyes. Her face, smoothed over with face lotion and cream, took on a fresh glow as if new life had been breathed into it. The best-quality lipstick, and that in a dark shade, was the only touch of red she allowed herself. Not once in her life had she painted her nails, and she had even less intention of doing so now that she was old: on an old woman's hands it only contrived to look grasping, undignified and quite incongruous. She confined herself, therefore, to patting lotion into the back of her hands, keeping her nails almost morbidly short and polishing them with a piece of cloth. The colours that peeped out from inside the sleeve of her under-kimono were all pastel shades. Her perfume—a sweetish brand—she rubbed on her shoulders and her plump arms; nothing would induce her to put it behind her ears.

Kin refused to forget her femininity. Death itself was preferable to the blowsiness of the average old woman. There was a poem—composed, they said, by some famous woman of the past—

Never could human form
Aspire, I know,
To beauty ripe as that now bends
This rose. Yet, somewhere here,
I see myself.

A life bereft of men was too dreadful to bear thinking of: Kin gazed into the pale pink petals of the roses Itaya had brought her, their splendour conjuring images from her past. Times had changed since those far-off days; her own tastes, the things that gave her pleasure—these too, little by little, had changed; and yet she was glad. Sometimes, when she slept alone, she would wake in the night and amuse herself by secretly counting over on her fingers the number of men in her life since she had been a girl. There was that one, and that one, and him, and oh yes, I'd forgotten him! But perhaps he came before? Or was it after, now . . . ? And as she reeled them off the memories whirled up in her breast and clutched at her throat. Some of them made the tears flow when she remembered how they had parted, so she preferred to think only of the first meetings. "There was once a man . . ." She always remembered the beginning of the old romance. Her own mind was piled high with men who, as in the story, had

"once been," and for this reason, perhaps, it gave her pleasure on her nights alone to drowse in bed over the men of the past.

The call from Tabe had come as a surprise to Kin, like a rare and expensive present out of the blue. He was coming, of course, for old times' sake—coming, as it were, to inspect the burnt-out ruins of love, in the sentimental hope of finding some relic from the past. But she would not let it be enough, this standing and sighing among the weeds and rubble. Nor must any suggestion of the wretchedness of age or poverty be allowed to intrude. Her manner towards him must above all be dignified, the atmosphere that of a discreet tête-à-tête. When he left, he must carry away with him an indelible impression of the unchanging beauty of the woman who had been his. 10

At last her toilet was successfully completed and Kin, like an actress waiting for her cue, stood before the mirror anxiously surveying the result for possible omissions. She went into the living room. The evening meal was already on the table and, seating herself opposite the maid, she ate the frugal meal of thin *miso* soup and substitute rice with pickles. The meal finished, she broke an egg and swallowed the yolk. 11

Kin had never been in the habit of giving her men visitors a meal. She had not the slightest wish to be the kind of woman who prepared meals carefully and laid them proudly before a man in the hope of winning his heart with her cooking. Domesticity had no appeal for her. What need had she, who had not the faintest intention of getting married, to put on a show of domesticity for men? Such was her nature, yet the men who came to Kin brought with them presents of every kind. She found nothing strange in this. Kin would have nothing to do with a man without money; nothing held less charm for her. The man who made love in an unbrushed suit, the man who did nothing about the missing buttons on his underwear—such men were damned at once in Kin's eyes. Love in itself, she felt, should be like the creation of a succession of works of art. 12

When she was a girl, people had claimed that she bore a likeness to the famous geisha Manryū. She had once seen Manryū after her marriage. Her beauty was as dazzling as ever; it had produced an unforgettable impression on Kin, who realised then that the one thing indispensable to a woman who wished to keep her beauty indefinitely was money. 13

Kin had first become a geisha when she was nineteen; her beauty alone had won her acceptance, for she had little training in the necessary arts of the trade. Soon after she started, she had been summoned to entertain a Frenchman—no longer young—who happened to be in Japan in the course of a sightseeing tour of Asia. He took a fancy to her, dubbing her a Japanese Marguerite Gautier, and at one period, indeed, Kin had seen herself as a kind of Dame aux Camélias. Though he had proved surprisingly inadequate as a lover, something about him had made him stay in Kin's mind ever after. His name had been Michel, and judging from his age at the time he doubtless already lay at rest somewhere in the north of France. 14

On his return home, he had sent Kin a present—a bracelet studded with opals and tiny diamonds. During the war, even when things were at their worst, she had resolutely refused to part with this particular possession, whatever else had to go.

All the men whose mistress Kin had been had ended by making names for themselves in their own particular fields, but she had lost touch with most of them during the war and did not even know their whereabouts. Some people claimed that Kin had acquired in her time no small amount of property. True or not, she resisted any temptation to follow in the footsteps of other former geisha and start a tea-house or a restaurant of her own. She was not, in fact, as rich as rumour had it; her only property consisted of the house—spared in the war—in which she lived, and a villa by the sea in Atami. The villa she got rid of, seizing the opportunity afforded by the postwar housing shortage.

She did no work, living entirely from day to day. She had a maid, Okinu, who had been found for her by her foster-sister. Okinu was deaf and dumb. The outsider would have been surprised at the austerity of the life Kin led. For her, neither the cinema nor the theatre held any attractions, nor did she care for pointless outings. She shrank from the light of day, for it exposed her age to the gaze of all and sundry. No costly clothes, she knew, were of any avail beneath the pitiless glare of the sun.

She asked no more than to live the life of the kept woman, and she had a passion for reading novels. Occasionally, people would suggest that she adopt a daughter to comfort her in her old age. To Kin's mind, however, the thought of old age and all it entailed was repugnant. All her life, moreover, she had never been used to attachments of such a kind.

Hers, indeed, was a special case. She had no parents; all that she knew of her origins was that she had been born in Akita Prefecture, in a village called Osagawa. When she was about five, a Tokyo family had adopted her. She had taken their name, and lived with them as their daughter. Her adoptive father had been a civil engineer, and one year his business had taken him to work in Manchuria. He never returned; letters ceased to arrive from him while Kin was still in primary school, and no more was heard of him from that time on. His wife Ritsu was, fortunately, no mean business woman. She dabbled in shares, and built houses which she let. As a result, the family acquired, even in the well-to-do area in which they lived, the reputation of being quite wealthy.

About the time that Kin reached nineteen, a man called Torigoe started to frequent her home, and from that time on the fortunes of the family began almost imperceptibly to decline. Then Kin's foster-mother Ritsu took to drink, and would storm and rage in her cups. Before long Kin led a new life of hardship. The climax came when Torigoe, whose habit it was to flirt with Kin, one day became violent and assaulted her. Kin, past caring what happened, fled the house and eventually took refuge in a tea-house in Akasaka, where she was taken on as a geisha. She made her debut under

the name of Kinya, and in no time her photo was appearing in popular story books and on the picture-postcards which were the rage at the time.

Though all these things, for Kin, were now part of the dim and distant past she still found it difficult to accept herself as a woman on the wrong side of fifty. At times the years weighed heavily on her, but she was also smitten occasionally by a sense of the shortness of her youth. On the death of her foster-mother, the dwindled remains of the family fortune had gone to a daughter, Sumiko, born after Kin's adoption. Kin was freed thus from all further sense of obligation to the family. 20

She had first met Tabe about the time of the outbreak of the Pacific War, during a period when Sumiko and her husband were running a boarding-house for students in Totsuka. She had broken with her patron of the past three years, and was now living a life of leisure in a room she had rented in the house. Tabe was one of the students she saw from time to time in the living room. She struck up an acquaintance with him, and though he was young enough to be her son their friendship had developed before they realised it into a full-blown clandestine affair. Kin's beauty was still that of a woman of a mere thirty-seven or so rather than the fifty she really was, and there was enchantment in her thick black brows. On graduating, Tabe was whisked into the army as a sub-lieutenant. His unit, however, instead of going straight to the front, was stationed for a while in Hiroshima, and twice Kin went there to see him. 21

On each occasion, no sooner was she installed in her hotel than the uniformed Tabe put in his appearance. She shrank from the odour of leather that clung to his body, but spent the two nights with him at the hotel nevertheless. She had come far to see him and her utter weariness left her like a scrap of paper tossed in the storm of his masculinity; as she confessed later, she had felt as if her end were near. She went to Hiroshima twice, but refused to go to again despite repeated telegrams from Tabe. In 1942 he was sent to Burma, and came back demobilized in May of the year following the war's end. He at once came up to Tokyo and called on Kin in her house at Numabukuro. He had aged terribly, and his front teeth were missing; seeing him Kin felt let down, her dreams shattered. 22

Tabé came originally from Hiroshima, but with the aid of his eldest brother he started an automobile company and within the year was back in Tokyo. He came to see Kin, who scarcely recognised him, so grand was his appearance now, and announced that he was soon to take a wife. Since then more than a year had passed, during which time she had not even seen him. 23

Kin had bought her present house in Numabukuro, complete with telephone, for a mere song during the worst of the air raids, and had evacuated herself thither from Totsuka. The two houses were little more than a stone's throw apart, but while Sumiko's house had been burnt down Kin's had come through unscathed. Sumiko and her family took shelter in Kin's house, but when the war ended she promptly turned them 24

out again. By now, however, Sumiko actually seemed to feel grateful to Kin for this, for she had had to build a new house on the site of the old without further ado; this was just after the war, and, as things had turned out, she had managed it more cheaply than she could have done at any time since.

Kin now sold the villa at Atami. With the proceeds she bought old and dilapidated houses, had them refurnished, and sold them again at three or four times the original price. Where money matters were concerned, she was never known to lose her head. Money, long years of experience had taught her, brought its own returns, growing steadily like a snowball provided only one kept one's wits about one. She took to lending money also, preferring low rates of interest with reliable securities to higher rates without them. Since the war, she had lost her faith in banks, and kept her money circulating as far as possible, not being so foolish as to keep it stored in the house as a peasant might do. To carry out these transactions, she employed Sumiko's husband Hiroyoshi. It was also part of her knowledge that people would work to one's heart's content so long as one paid them a percentage of the profits by way of commission. 25

She lived alone with her maid. Though the four-roomed house looked lonely from the outside, yet Kin was by no means lonely. Nor, thanks to her dislike of going out, was it at all inconvenient that the two should live alone. Where burglars were concerned, Kin had more trust in firmly-fastened doors than in any watchdog, and no house could have been better locked at night than hers. Whatever men came to the house she had no fear of gossip, for the maid was deaf and dumb. 26

Despite all this, there were times when she visualised herself meeting some horrible death. Even she was not immune to that disquieting feeling of suspense that hangs over a perfectly silent house, and she invariably kept the radio turned on from morning to night. 27

Kin's affair of the moment was with a man called Itaya, who grew flowers at a place just outside Tokyo; they had met through his brother, the man who had bought Kin's villa in Atami. During the war, Itaya had started a trading company in Hanoi, but had been repatriated when peace came and had launched into horticulture with capital supplied by his brother. Though only forty or thereabouts, he was almost completely bald, which made him look old for his age. He had visited Kin two or three times on business connected with the villa, and these visits had somehow or other become regular weekly affairs. 28

From that time on, Kin's house was gay with the flowers he brought her. Today was no exception: into a vase in the alcove had been thrust a mass of yellow roses. Somehow, they reminded her of the beauty of a mature woman, and their scent brought back the past in all its poignancy. Now that Tabe had telephoned, she realised that his youth gave him an appeal that Itaya did not possess. She had suffered at Hiroshima, true, but then he had been a soldier, and the very violence of his youth seemed now in 29

retrospect only natural, somehow touching and a memory to be treasured. For some reason, she thought, it was always the most tempestuous times that made one feel most nostalgic later.

It was well past five when Tabe arrived. 30

From within the bundle he carried he produced whisky, ham, cheese and other things, then plumped himself down by the charcoal brazier. He had lost every trace of his former youthfulness, and his grey check jacket and dark green trousers were typical of the mechanical engineer of today at his leisure. 31

"Beautiful as ever, I see," Tabe said once they had settled down. 32

"Really? Thank you for saying so. But I've had my day, you know," Kin replied. 33

"Not a bit of it. You've still got more of what it takes than my wife." 34

"She's young, I expect?" Kin asked. 35

"Oh, she may be young, but she's only a country girl." 36

Kin took a cigarette from Tabe's silver case. He lit it for her. The maid brought whisky glasses and a plate on which slices of the ham and cheese had been arranged. Tabe looked at the maid with a leer. 37

"Nice girl you've got there," he said. 38

"Mm. But she's deaf and dumb." 39

"Is she, now?" Tabe raised his eyebrows and fixed the maid with a look of new interest; she bowed her head deferentially. Kin, her attention drawn for the first time to the maid's youthfulness, suddenly found it irritating. 40

"You get on well together, I suppose?" Kin asked. Tabe recalled himself with a start and puffed out a cloud of smoke. 41

"We've got a kid due next month," he replied. 42

Her face registering due surprise at this announcement, Kin got up and fetched the whisky. She gave a glass to Tabe, who drained it at a gulp and poured out a glass for Kin in her turn. 43

"How I envy your life here," he continued. 44

"Why, for goodness sake?" 45

"Well, however rough the going is outside you seem to stay the same as ever. . . . I can't make it out. Of course, though, when a woman's got all you have she's sure to have a good patron. Lucky devils, women." 46

"Are you getting at me? I've never done anything to you to make you say that kind of thing, have I?" 47

"Don't get angry, now. You didn't understand me." His tone was pacifying. "I just meant that you were lucky. You made me feel what a hard time men have, having to work. A man just can't afford to take it easy these days. Either you do someone else down or he does you down. Take me, for instance—life's a sort of continual gamble for me, you know." 48

"But business is good, isn't it?" Kin asked. 49

"That's what you think! You feel you're walking on a tightrope all the time. Money's so tight it hurts." 50

Kin sipped at her whisky without replying. A cricket chirped dismally in the wall. Tabe drank a second glass of whisky and suddenly, without warning, reached out across the brazier and seized Kin's hand roughly in his. The softness of her ringless hand was insubstantial as a silk handkerchief. Kin remained still, scarcely breathing. Her hand, which rested in his with deliberate passivity, was terribly cold and limp. 51

Through the drunken fumes in Tabe's mind came crowding and whirling a host of pictures from the past. There she still sat, her remembered beauty untouched. He felt a sense of wonder: time rolled by relentlessly, one gained experience bit by bit, one had one's ups, one had one's downs—and all the time this woman from one's past sat there as large as life, changeless and unchanging. He peered intently at Kin's eyes. Yes, even the little wrinkles around them were as they had always been. Her face, too, retained its firmness of outline. He wished he knew more about the way she lived. For all he knew, the social upheavals of the past years had left her untouched. There she still sat and smiled, secure among her possessions—the chest of drawers, the brazier, the magnificence of the roses heaped in the vase. Tabe did not know her real age, but she must have passed fifty by now. Into his mind there came a picture of his wife at work in their apartment home, already tired and haggard though barely twenty-five. 52

Kin opened the drawer in the brazier and took out a slender pipe of beaten silver. Thrusting in the end of her cigarette, she lit it. Something in the way Tabe's knees twitched nervously from time to time made her feel uneasy. Could it be that he was in financial straits? She scrutinized his face carefully. No longer, now, could she feel the all-absorbing love she had felt in Hiroshima. Now that they were actually together again, the long silence seemed to have created a barrier between them, a barrier which made Kin feel impatient and desolate at once. Somehow, the old emotions refused to be kindled. Was it, she wondered, overfamiliarity with him physically that had robbed him of his old appeal for her? Why, she thought with something approaching panic, why, when everything in the setting was right, did the heart remain so cold? 53

Tabé spoke. "I suppose you couldn't find someone willing to lend me about four hundred thousand, could you?" 54

Kin started. "Money? Four hundred thousand's an awful lot, isn't it?" 55

"It is, but I've just got to get it somehow. Now. No idea of anybody?" 56

"None at all. But why talk to me about such things, when you know I don't even have any income to begin with?" 57

"That's as may be. Look here, I'd give you a very good rate of interest. How about it?" 58

"It's no good, I tell you! Whatever you say." 59

A cold chill crept over Kin, and the even tenor of her relationship with Itaya seemed suddenly eminently desirable. Despair in her heart, she 60

reached for the kettle that had begun to sing on the brazier and filled the teapot.

"Couldn't twenty thousand be managed somehow? I'd be eternally grateful. . . ." 61

"I don't understand you at all. Why talk to me about money when you know very well I don't have any. . . . I could do with it myself, I can tell you. Did you come to talk about money then, and not to see me?" 62

"No, I came to see you, of course. Well, I admit it, I did think at the same time that you being the one person I could talk to about anything. . . ." 63

"Why not speak to your brother about it?" Kin asked. 64

"He's no good in this case." 65

Kin was silent. Another year or two, she thought, and she would be old. She could see now that for all its intensity that love of theirs had passed, and left them both untouched. Perhaps, then, it had not been love at all, but only the relationship of two animals drawn together by lust. A fragile tie between man and woman, to be blown away like a dead leaf in the winds of time, leaving Tabe and herself sitting here now, bound only by a trivial bond of acquaintance. A cold ache filled Kin's breast. She picked up her tea and started to drink. 66

"Mind if I stay the night?" Tabe asked with a leer. His voice had dropped and its tone was casual. Kin looked up from her tea in feigned surprise. 67

"Yes, I do. You shouldn't poke fun at me like that at my age." She smiled, deliberately emphasizing as she did so the crow's-feet round her eyes. Her false teeth flashed brilliantly white. 68

"Don't be so horribly cold and hard," Tabe said. "I'll stop talking about money. Must have got carried away, thinking I was talking to the same old Kin I used to know. But . . . that's all done with now, isn't it?" He paused. "You have the devil's-own luck, don't you? Come through smiling whatever happens. Don't know how you do it. None of these young girls nowadays could do it. I say, go in for dancing at all?" 69

"What do you take me for! And you?" 70

"A bit," he replied. 71

"Aha, I expect there's someone special you take, isn't there? Is that what you want the money for, then?" 72

"Don't be a fool. Do you think I earn enough to waste it on keeping a woman?" 73

"I don't know about that, but look at the way you're got up. You couldn't put up a show like that without quite a profitable job." 74

"This is only so much show. Look in the pockets and what do you find—nothing! Everybody has their ups and downs, but things lately have been getting just a bit too fast and furious." 75

Kin was laughing quietly to herself, her eyes riveted on Tabe's shock of black hair. It still showed little sign of thinning, and it came forward over his forehead. He had lost the youthful freshness she had found so charming in his student days, but something in the line of his cheek had the 76

mature appeal of middle age and, while his bearing lacked refinement, he still retained a certain brute strength. Kin poured Tabe a cup of tea, her eye on him the while in the way one animal scents another in the distance.

"They say money's going to be devaluated soon," she said, half in joke. 77
"Is it true?"

"Oh, so you've got enough to get worried, have you?" Tabe enquired. 78

"How you do jump to conclusions! You certainly have changed, haven't you! I just asked because I'd heard rumours and was interested." 79

"I don't know, but I shouldn't think Japan could afford to do anything like that just now. At any rate, people who don't have any money don't have to worry, do they?" 80

"That's true," Kin replied, and with a cheerful air poured Tabe another whisky. 81

"How I'd like to go to Hakone or somewhere else quiet," he said. "I think it would do me good to do nothing but sleep and sleep for two or three days in a place like that." 82

"Tired?" 83

"Yes. All this worry about money, you know." 84

"But it suits you to be worried about money. It's not a woman's worry, at least." 85

The smug correctness of Kin's manner irritated Tabe intensely, but at the same time her likeness to a rather refined piece of antique ware amused him. To spend a night with her, he thought, would only be like giving alms to a beggar. His eyes strayed to Kin's chin: the firm line of the jawbone betrayed the strength of will that lay behind it. Suddenly, a vision of the dumb maid—of her freshness and her youth—seemed to impose itself before his eyes; she was not beautiful, the maid, but she was young, and youth was like a breath of fresh air to a connoisseur of women such as Tabe. Probably, he thought, if this were his first meeting with Kin, he would not have this sense of fretful impatience. The tiredness in Kin's face had come nearer the surface now, and she suddenly seemed old in his eyes. 86

As if sensing his feeling, Kin got up abruptly and went into the next room. Going to the dressing-table, she picked up a syringe full of hormone and jabbed it into her arm, then, while she was scrubbing at the place with a piece of cotton wool, peered at herself in the mirror. She picked up a powder-puff and dabbed at her nose with it. A wave of mortification swept over her at the pointlessness of such a meeting between a man and woman who were physically dead to each other, and the unbidden tears stood for a moment in her eyes. If it had been Itaya, she could have wept on his lap, wheedled him even. But the Tabe who now sat by the fire in there—she had no idea what she felt for him. One moment she wished to see him gone, the next she had the desperate feeling that he must not go till she had moved him to some further recognition of her. There had been many other women in Tabe's life since they had parted. . . . 87

She went to the toilet; on her way back, she peeped into the maid's room. Kinu was absorbed in practising her dressmaking, cutting patterns out of newspaper. Her large buttocks were planted firmly on the mat, her body crouched over the scissors she was plying. The nape of her neck beneath the tightly-bound hair gleamed white in the light, and her whole body had a striking buxomness. 88

Kin left her working and went back to the brazier. Tabe was sprawled asleep on the floor. She turned on the radio. Music blared out with a startling volume. Tabe sat up with a start and raised the whisky glass to his lips again. 89

"Remember the time we went to that hotel at Shibamata together?" he asked. "There was a terrific downpour and the rain came in, and we ate the eels by themselves because there wasn't any rice." 90

"So we did. Food was terribly scarce then, wasn't it. Before you went in the army, that was. Do you remember, there was a red lily in the alcove and the two of us knocked the vase over?" 91

"So we did, didn't we." Kin's face seemed suddenly to fill out, and her expression became younger. 92

"How about going again some day?" Tabe asked. 93

"That's a nice idea, but, you know, I'm too lazy these days. And I expect you can get anything you like to eat there now—it wouldn't seem the same." 94

Fearful lest the sentimental mood that had overtaken her a while back should disappear, she tried gently to coax back the past once more. In vain though, for it was not Tabe but another man who came at her summons. On one later occasion, just after the war, she had gone to Shibamata with a man called Yamazaki. He had died only a day or two ago, after a stomach operation. They had gone to the hotel on the banks of the Edo River one muggy day the previous summer, and the atmosphere of that dusty room came back to her vividly now . . . the clanking of the motor pump drawing water outside, the incessant song of the cicadas and the silver flashing from the wheels of the bicycles pacing along the embankment. It had been her second meeting with Yamazaki, whose youthful naivety where women were concerned seemed, to Kin, almost sacred. There had been plenty to eat, and now that the war was over the wearied world had seemed strangely quiet, as if one were living in a vacuum. They had come back to Tokyo in the evening, and the bus by which they had returned to the station had run along a wide road once built for army use. 95

"Come across anybody who took your fancy since I last saw you?" Tabe asked. 96

"Me?" 97

"Yes." 98

"Took my fancy? There isn't anybody but you." 99

"Liar!" 100

"Why? It's true! Who's likely to be interested in me any longer?" 101

"I don't trust you!" 102

"You don't? . . . Well at any rate, I'm going to blossom out and enjoy 103
 life from now on. I'm alive like anybody else."

"Got a long time to go yet, eh?" 104

"That's right. I shall go on and on, till I get too old and decrepit for 105
 anything."

"And just as fickle as ever?" 106

"My God, how you've changed! You used to be such a decent boy. 107
 What's happened to you, to make you say such nasty things? You were so
 nice, once."

Tabé took the silver pipe from Kin and tried a puff at it. A jet of thick 108
 bitter liquid struck his tongue. He took out a handkerchief and spat into it.

"It's blocked, it needs cleaning." Kin took it from him with a smile and 109
 shook it with short, vigorous movements onto a piece of paper.

Tabé was mystified by the way Kin lived, by the way the cruel world 110
 outside had, it appeared, left life in this house completely untouched. One
 would think she could manage two or three thousand somehow, judging
 from her present circumstances. Her body no longer awoke any response
 in him, but he sensed beneath the surface of her daily life an abundance
 which seemed to Tabé to offer a straw at which he might clutch. Back from
 the wars, he had gone into business more for the fun of it than anything
 else; the capital his brother had given him had vanished in less than six
 months. He was having an affair with another woman outside his mar-
 riage, and she was to have a child by him shortly. He had remembered Kin
 again, and had visited her just on the chance that she might be able to help.
 Kin's old simplicity, however, had been replaced by a dismaying degree of
 worldly wisdom. She remained utterly unmoved, even at meeting Tabé
 again after so long. The stiffness of her posture, the correctness of her
 manner kept him helplessly at a distance.

He took her hand again and gave it a tentative squeeze, but Kin showed 111
 no sign of response. Perhaps he had hoped she would come round the
 brazier to his side; instead, she carried on cleaning the pipe with her free
 hand.

Exposure to the years had engraved a complex and different pattern of 112
 emotions on both their hearts. They had gradually grown older, he in his
 way, she in hers, and the old fondness was gone beyond recall. Plunged in
 a sense of disillusion, they took silent stock of each other as they were now.
 They were weary with a host of different emotions. Nothing could be less
 like the storybook meeting with its charming fictions than this reality. It
 would all, without doubt, have been made much prettier in a novel—the
 truth about life was too subtle. To reject each other—this had been the only
 purpose of their coming together today.

The idea of killing Kin drifted through Tabé's head. Yet—and the idea 113
 seemed somehow strange—to kill even this woman would be murder.
 Why should it be wrong to kill a woman or two who meant nothing to

anybody? Even as he thought this, he realized what it would mean. It was fantastic. This old woman's existence was as unimportant as that of the lowest insect, and yet she must be allowed to go on living her placid life in this house. The two chests of drawers must be crammed with all the clothes she had made herself in the past fifty years. That bracelet from a Frenchman she had shown him once—she must have that and other jewels too somewhere or other. The house must be hers, too. She was a lone woman, with a maid who was deaf and dumb: to kill her should be easy enough.

His fancy led him on and on. And yet, at the same time, the memory of his student days when she had been all to him, the memory of their secret meetings, came back with a painful freshness and vividness. He was drunk. Perhaps this was why the past and present seemed to become blurred, and the image of Kin as she sat before him seemed to take possession of his body. He did not desire her now, but their past together pressed heavily on his heart. 114

Kin got up. Going to a cupboard, she got out a photograph of Tabe taken when he was a student and brought it to show him. Tabe stared at it in surprise. 115

"Good Lord, fancy your keeping a thing like that!" he exclaimed. 116

"I found it at Sumiko's, and got her to let me have it. Taken before I knew you, wasn't it? You know, you were a proper young gentleman when this was taken. Look at that kimono you were wearing—don't you think it suited you? Here—you have it, I'm sure your wife would like to see it." She paused. "You know, you were so nice-looking in those days—not the kind of man you'd think could say such unpleasant things." 117

"So I was really like this once, was I?" he asked, studying the photograph. 118

"You were. I should know. If only you'd gone on in the same way, you'd really have been something, you know." 119

"By which you mean that I didn't go on in the same way, I suppose?" he asked. 120

"Yes I do." 121

"Well, no wonder, what with you, and all those years of war." 122

"Don't try to get out of it! Things like that have nothing to do with it. You've just got coarser somehow . . . awfully so." 123

"I have, have I? Coarser, eh? But aren't all people the same?" 124

"What about me?" Kin replied. "Haven't I kept this photograph by me all these years? Doesn't that show people can sometimes keep their finer feelings?" 125

"I suppose it just gave you something to look back on. You didn't give me one of you, did you?" 126

"A photo? Of me?" 127

"Yes." 128

"Photographs give me the creeps." She reflected. "But didn't I send you 129

one of me as a geisha, though—while you were in the army over there?"

"Believe you did, but it must have got lost somewhere, I . . ."

"There, that shows you!"

Still the brazier remained between them, an apparently impenetrable barrier. By now Tabe was quite drunk, but Kin's first glass remained hardly touched before her. Tabe picked up his tea and drained the now cold liquid at a gulp. The photograph of himself he laid to one side with an apparent complete lack of interest.

"How are you for trains?" Kin asked.

"Trains? I can't possibly go home. You wouldn't turn me out drunk like this, would you?"

"Yes, I would. Out, like that." She gestured with her hands. "There are no men in this house, and I don't want the neighbours talking."

"The neighbours? Come off it. Since when have you started worrying about things like that?"

"Well, I do worry."

"Got a gentleman friend coming, have you?"

"Oh, what a beastly mind you've got! Oh, really. . . . ! I hate you when you say things like that!"

"Go on, hate me then. But if I don't get the money, I just can't go home for a day or two. Thought you might put me up here for. . . ."

Kin, chin cupped in hands, gazed with fixed, wide-open eyes at Tabe's bluish lips. So this was how it all ended, that love one swore would last for ever. . . . Silently, she took in every detail of the man slumped before her. Gone, quite gone, was the romantic excitement they had once felt. No trace now of the young man's bashfulness he had once had. . . .

For a moment she was tempted to offer him a bribe to go and leave her in peace, yet something forbade her giving a single penny to this man now sprawled so drunkenly before her. Far rather would she give it to some man of the unsophisticated type; nothing disgusted her so much as a man like Tabe with no self-respect. She was attracted by a lack of sophistication in men—she had found it time and again among those who had fallen victim to her charms—and even found something noble in it. Her only interest lay in choosing the right men for herself. She despised Tabe in her heart for the way he had let himself go to seed. Why should he have come back from the wars when others had not? But then, Fate was like that. . . . She had done her duty by Tabe in going to Hiroshima after him, and she should have had the sense to ring down the curtain on their relationship at that time.

"Why are you staring at a man like that?"

"I thought it was you who'd been staring at me. What were you thinking—looking so pleased with yourself?"

"Just looking and thinking how you never seemed to change. Beautiful as ever."

"Really? Me too. I was thinking what a fine man you'd turned out."

"Coincidence, eh," Tabe said. It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he had been toying with the idea of murder, but he checked himself in time. 147

"You're lucky, you know," Kin said. "You've got the prime of life still to come." 148

"What about you? You've got a long time to go yet, surely," Tabe replied. 149

"Me? I've had my day. I shall just go on gradually withering. I'm thinking of going to live in the country in two or three years' time." 150

"Then you didn't mean it when you talked about going on as fickle as ever till you were old and decrepit?" 151

"I said no such thing! I'm a woman living on her memories. That's all. . . . Can't we be good friends?" 152

"You're only running away from the question. Why don't you stop talking like a schoolgirl? Memories can take care of themselves." 153

"I wonder. . . . You know, it was you who brought up our trip to Shibamata." 154

Tabe had started twitching his knees again. He must get money. Money. . . . Kin must lend it to him somehow. Even fifty thousand would be better than nothing. 155

"So you really can't manage it? Not even if I put up the business as a security?" He appealed to her. 156

"What, are you on about money again? It's no good, I tell you, whatever you say I don't have a penny, and I don't know anybody who does. I'd like to borrow some myself, let alone lend it to other people." 157

"Don't worry about that. If only things go well with me, I'll see you're more than provided for. You're not the kind of person I'd be likely to forget. . . ." 158

"Oh, stop that flattery! I've had enough of it. I thought you promised not to mention money again?" 159

A chill wind like that of autumn nights seemed suddenly to howl through the room and into Tabe's heart. He grasped the tongs on the brazier. A spasm of violent rage darkened his face. Drawn irresistibly by the image that floated sphinx-like before his eyes, he tightened his grip on the tongs. A thunderous roaring pulsed in his veins. Go on, go on, it seemed to say. Kin's eyes, riveted on his hand, were vaguely apprehensive. The feeling that somewhere, sometime, this had all happened before mingled with the reality in her mind. 160

"You're drunk, you know. Why not stay the night?" she said. 161

Why not stay the night. The tongs fell from Tabe's hand. He pulled himself tipsily to his feet and staggered off in the direction of the toilet. Watching him go, Kin suddenly sensed what had been in his mind, and felt a stir of contempt. The war had done something to people, she thought. 162

She took the philopon from the cupboard and hastily swallowed a tablet. She looked at the whisky bottle; it was still one-third full. He should drink it all, sleep the sleep of the dead drunk and the next morning she 163

would show him the door. Sleep was not for her that night. Picking up the photograph of the young Tabe, she fed it to the blue flames that leapt from the charcoal in the brazier. Smoke rose in clouds, and a smell of burning filled the room. Kinu the maid peeped in through the sliding doors that Tabe had left partly open. With a smile, Kin signed to her to put out quilts for the night in the guest room. To cover up the smell of burning paper, she laid a thin slice of cheese on the fire.

"Hey, what are you burning?" It was Tabe, back from the toilet. He peered through the sliding doors, his hands on the maid's ample shoulders. 164

"Thought I'd toast some cheese to see what it tasted like, but I went and dropped it out of the tongs." 165

A column of black smoke rose up through the white, and the bright disc of the lamp-shade was now a moon floating in the clouds. A smell of burnt fat assailed the nostrils. Coughing and spluttering, Kin got up and hurried round the room flinging open the sliding doors. 166

Translated from the Japanese by John Bester

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How are Kin's attitudes toward aging dramatized in the early part of "Late Chrysanthemum"? What are the values that support these attitudes?
2. Kin's life follows a dual yet reverse track: as she loses her beauty (and her ability to attract men), her success as a businesswoman increases. How does Kin's material success function as an element in the plot?
3. What are the different expectations Kin and Tabe bring to their meeting? How is each one disappointed?
4. What do their different expectations and desires tell you about the constructions of male and female identity in the story?



ISHIGAKI RIN

Ishigaki Rin (b. 1920) began working in a bank at age fourteen. She published short stories and poems during World War II, but established her reputation only after the war. Her first collection of poems, The Pan, the Pot, the Fire I Have Before Me, appeared in 1959 to critical acclaim. Winner of many prizes, her poetry underlines the inequities and shortcomings in women's lives while insisting on the social value of women's experiences and roles.