

OTHER BOOKS BY YASUNARI KAWABATA

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YASUNARI KAWABATA

THE DANCING GIRL OF IZU

AND OTHER STORIES

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THE DANCING GIRL OF IZU

1

About the time the road began to wind and I realized that I was finally near Amagi Pass, a curtain of rain swept up after me at a terrific speed from the foot of the mountain, painting the dense cedar forests white.

I was twenty years old. I wore my school cap, *hakama* over my indigo-dyed kimono, and carried a student's bag over my shoulder. It was the fourth day of my solitary journey down the Izu Peninsula. I had stayed at Shuzenji Hot Spring one night, then two nights at Yugashima. And now, wearing high clogs, I was climbing Amagi. Although I had been enchanted by the layers upon layers of mountains, the virgin forests, and the shades of autumn in the deep valleys, I was hurrying along this road, my chest pounding with a certain expectation. Before long, great drops of rain began to pelt me, and I bolted up the steep, twisted road. I was relieved to reach the teahouse on the north side of the pass at last, but stopped short in the doorway. My expectation had been realized all too splendidly. The troupe of itinerant performers was inside, taking a rest.

As soon as the dancing girl noticed me standing there, she pulled out the cushion she had been kneeling on, turned it over, and placed it near her.

"Yes." That's all I said before I sat down. The words "thank you" stuck in my throat. I was out of breath from running up the road and from my astonishment.

Sitting so close, facing the dancing girl, I fumbled to pull a cigarette from my kimono sleeve. The girl took the ashtray sitting in front of her female companion and placed it near me. Naturally, I did not speak.

The dancing girl looked to be about seventeen years old. Her hair was arranged elaborately in an unusual old style unfamiliar to me. Although it made her striking oval face look quite small, it created a beautiful harmony. She gave the impression of the girls from illustrations in old romances who were depicted with an emphasis on their extravagant hair. The dancing girl was accompanied by a woman in her forties, two older girls, and a man of about twenty-five, who was wearing a jacket with the insignia of Nagaoka Hot Springs on it.

I had seen this troupe twice previously. The first time I encountered them, near Yugawa Bridge, I was on my way to Yugashima Hot Springs while they were going to Shuzenji. There were three girls in the group. The dancing girl was carrying a drum. After we passed, I looked back at them again and again. I had finally experienced the romance of travel. Then, my second night at Yugashima, the entertainers had come to the inn to perform. Sitting halfway down the ladderlike stairs, I had gazed intently at the girl as she danced on the wooden floor of the entryway.

"If they were at Shuzenji the other day and Yugashima tonight, then they would probably go to Yugano

Springs on the south side of Amagi Pass tomorrow. Surely I could catch up with them along the fifteen miles of mountain road over Amagi." Thus I had been daydreaming as I hastened along the road that day. Now we had ended up taking shelter from the rain at the same teahouse. My heart was pounding.

In a moment the old woman who ran the teahouse led me to another room. It appeared it was not used regularly and had no sliding paper doors. When I peered down into the magnificent valley outside the window, I could scarcely see the bottom. It gave me goose bumps. My teeth chattered and I shivered. The old woman came back to serve tea. I told her I felt cold.

"You're all wet, aren't you, sir?" She spoke with great deference. "Come in here for a while. Dry your clothes." Reaching for my hand, she led me into her own parlor.

There was a hearth in the middle of the floor of her room. When she opened the sliding door, the hot air flowed out. I stood at the threshold, hesitating. An old man sat cross-legged by the fire, his body pale and swollen like a drowning victim. He turned his languid eyes toward me. They were yellowed to the pupils as if putrefied. Around him lay piles of old letters and scraps of paper. They almost buried him. I stood stiff, staring at him, wondering how he could be alive, this mystery in the mountains.

"I'm embarrassed to have you see him this way. Don't worry. This is my old husband. He may be unsightly, but he can't move. Please be patient with him."

After thus apologizing, the old woman explained that her husband had suffered from palsy for many years and now his whole body was almost paralyzed. The mountains of papers were actually correspondence from every possible source describing treatments for palsy and packets

of medicine the old man had ordered from throughout the country. Whenever he heard of a treatment from travelers who came over the pass or saw an advertisement in the newspaper, he never failed to send for it. He kept the papers around him in heaps, staring at them, never disposing of a single one. Through the years he had accumulated mountains of aging scraps of paper.

Without a word to the old woman, I bent over the hearth. An automobile navigating the pass rattled the house. I wondered why the old man did not move down to a lower elevation, with the autumn already this cold and snow soon to cover the pass. Steam rose from my kimono. The fire was hot enough to scorch my face. The old woman went back out to the shop, commenting to one of the female entertainers.

"So this is the little girl you had with you before. She's turned out to be such a nice girl. That's good for you. How pretty she's become. Girls grow up so fast."

About an hour later, I heard the entertainers preparing to leave. I had not settled in to stay either, but I was so anxious that I did not have the courage to stand up. Although they were seasoned travelers, they would be walking at a woman's pace, so I was certain I could catch up even if I left a mile or so behind them. Still, I grew impatient sitting by the hearth. Once the entertainers had left, my daydreams began a vivid, reckless dance. The old woman returned from seeing the entertainers off.

"Where are they staying tonight?" I asked.

"There's no way to tell where people like that are going to stay, is there, young man? Wherever they can attract an audience, that's where they stay. It doesn't matter where it might be. I don't think the likes of them would have a place already planned."

The scorn that lurked in the woman's words so stirred me, I thought to myself: If that is true, then I'll have the dancing girl stay in my room tonight.

The rain abated and the mountain peak cleared. The old woman tried to detain me longer, telling me the sky would be completely cloudless if only I would wait ten more minutes. But I just could not remain sitting there.

"Please take care of yourself," I said to the old man. "It's going to get colder." I spoke from my heart as I stood up. His yellow eyes lolled in his head, and he gave a slight nod.

"Sir! Sir!" The old woman followed me outside. "This is far too much money. I just can't accept it." She picked up my bag in both hands and refused to give it to me. She would not listen, no matter how much I tried to dissuade her. The old woman told me she would accompany me up the road a bit. She repeated the same words as she tottered along behind me for a hundred yards.

"This is much too generous. I'm sorry we didn't serve you better. I'll make certain to remember your face. When you pass this way again, we'll do something special for you. Be sure to stop by next time. I won't forget you."

She seemed so overwhelmed, as if she were on the verge of tears, just because I had left a fifty-sen coin. But I was eager to catch up with the dancers, and the old woman's doddering pace hindered me. At last we reached the tunnel at the pass.

"Thank you very much," I said. "You'd better go back now. Your husband is there all alone." The old woman finally released my bag.

Cold drops of water plopped inside the dark tunnel. Up ahead, the tiny portal to southern Izu grew brighter.

The mountain road, stitched on one side with white-washed pickets, coursed down from the mouth of the tunnel like a jagged lightning bolt. The scene resembled a landscape in miniature. I could make out the itinerant entertainers down at the bottom. Before I had walked half a mile, I overtook them. It would be too obvious were I to slacken my pace too abruptly, so I nonchalantly passed the women. When the man, who was walking about twenty yards ahead of the others, noticed me, he paused.

"You walk fast. . . . We're lucky the weather cleared up," he said.

Relieved, I fell into step with the man. He asked me all kinds of questions. Seeing the two of us talking, the women scurried to join us.

The man was carrying a large wicker trunk on his back. The woman in her forties was holding a puppy. The oldest girl was toting a cloth bundle. The middle girl also had a wicker trunk. Everyone carried something. The dancing girl had a drum and frame on her back. Little by little, the woman, who seemed to be in her forties, began to talk to me.

"He's an upper-school student," the oldest girl whispered to the dancing girl. When I looked around she smiled. "That's right, isn't it? I know that much. Students are always coming down to the island."

They were from the harbor town of Habu on Oshima, the largest island off the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula. They had been on the road since leaving the island in the spring, but it was turning cold and they had not yet made preparations for winter. They said they were planning to stay in Shimoda for just ten days, then

cross over to the island from Ito Hot Springs. At the mention of Oshima, I felt even more the poetry of the situation. Again I glanced at the dancing girl's lovely hair. I asked questions about Oshima.

"A lot of students come to the island to swim, don't they?" the dancing girl said to the girl with her.

I turned back toward them. "In the summer, right?"

The dancing girl was flustered. "In the winter, too," I thought I heard her answer softly.

"In the winter, too?" I asked.

The dancing girl simply looked at her companion and giggled.

"You can swim in the winter, too?" I asked again. The dancing girl blushed. She nodded, with a serious look.

"This girl is such a silly one," the older woman laughed.

The road to Yugano ran about eight miles down through the valley of the Kawazu River. On this side of the pass, even the mountains and the color of the sky began to look more southern. As the man and I continued our conversation, we took a liking to each other. We passed tiny villages with names like Oginori and Nashimoto. About the time the thatched roofs of Yugano came into view at the foot of the mountain, I ventured to tell the man that I wanted to travel with them to Shimoda. He seemed delighted.

When we arrived at a cheap lodging house in Yugano, the older woman nodded as if to say good-bye. But the man spoke for me: "This young gentleman has kindly offered to accompany us."

"Well, well. As the old saying goes, 'On the road, a traveling companion; and in the world, kindness.' Even boring people like us will help you pass the time. Come on in and take a rest." She spoke without formality. The

girls all glanced at me at the same time. They stopped talking, their faces seemingly indifferent. Then their gaze turned to embarrassment.

I went upstairs with them and put down my bag. The woven floor mats and sliding panel doors were old and dirty. The dancing girl brought us some tea from downstairs. Kneeling in front of me, she blushed bright red. Her hands were trembling. The teacup almost tumbled off the saucer. She set it down on the mat to keep it from falling but spilled the whole cup of tea. I was amazed at her bashfulness.

"My goodness. She's started thinking about the opposite sex. How disgusting! Look at that!" The older woman furrowed her brow in dismay and threw a hand towel at the girl, who picked it up and wiped the mat, looking ill at ease.

Caught off guard by the woman's words, I reconsidered my feelings. The daydream that the old woman at the pass had sparked in me had been dashed.

"The young student's indigo kimono certainly is nice," the woman remarked, her eyes fixed on me. "The pattern is the same as Tamiji's. Isn't it? Isn't it the same?"

After pressing the girls several times, she spoke to me. "We have another child at home still in school. I was thinking of him. He has the same kind of kimono as yours. These days indigo kimonos are so expensive, I just don't know what to do."

"What kind of school?"

"Elementary school, fifth grade."

"Oh, you have a fifth grader? . . ."

"His school is not on Oshima. It's in Kofu. We've been on Oshima for a long time, but Kofu is our original home."

After we rested for an hour, the man led me to another

hot spring inn. Until then I had assumed I would be staying at the same lodging house with the entertainers. We walked about one hundred yards along a gravel road and down some stone steps, then crossed a bridge near a public bath beside a stream. The garden of the inn was on the other side of the bridge.

I stepped into the bath and the man got in after me. He told me he was twenty-four. His wife had lost two children, one by miscarriage and one that was born prematurely. I assumed he was from Nagaoka, since his jacket bore a Nagaoka Hot Springs emblem. His intellectual manner of speaking and his facial expressions made me wonder if he had been following the entertainers and carrying their luggage simply out of curiosity, or perhaps because he had fallen in love with one of them.

I ate lunch as soon as I got out of the bath. I had left Yugashima at eight o'clock in the morning, but it was not yet three o'clock now.

As the man made his way to the inn gate, he looked up at my window to say good-bye.

"Buy yourself some persimmons or something. I'm sorry. This is such a rude way to give this to you, from the second floor." I tossed down a packet of money. The man refused it and turned to go, but he couldn't leave the money lying in the garden so he returned and picked it up.

"You shouldn't do things like this," he said, tossing the packet back up at me. It landed on the thatched roof. When I threw it down a second time, he took it with him.

Rain started pouring around sunset. The mountains turned colorless and lost their depth. The small stream in front of the inn ran yellow as I watched it. The sound of rushing water grew louder. Thinking that the dancers

would never come looking for customers in this torrent, I could not sit still, so I went to the bath two or three more times. My room was dismal. An electric light hung in a square hole cut in the wall between my room and the next, where it could illuminate both rooms.

"Ton, ton, ton, ton." In the distance beyond the clamor of the rain, the vague reverberations of a drum arose. I shoved open one of the shutters and hung out the window. The drum seemed to be getting closer. The rain and wind lashed my head. Closing my eyes and straining to hear, I tried to determine the path of the drum as it approached. A moment later I heard the sound of a samisen. I heard a woman's long scream. I heard boisterous laughter. I surmised that the entertainers had been called to the banquet room at the inn across from their own. I could distinguish two or three women's voices and three or four men's. I expected them to travel in my direction once the party broke up, but it seemed the party would pass the point of merry drinking and dissolve into riotous nonsense. Occasionally a woman's high, piercing voice rent the night like a thunderbolt. My nerves were on edge. I left the shutter open and just sat by the window. I felt some consolation every time I heard the drum.

"Oh, the dancing girl is still at the party. She's sitting, playing the drum."

I could not bear the silences when the drum stopped. I sank down into the depths of the sound of the rain.

At length I could hear the noise of confused footsteps—were they playing tag or dancing in circles? Then all fell silent. I opened my eyes wide, trying to peer through the darkness. What was this stillness? I was tormented, wondering if the dancing girl's night might be sullied.

I closed the shutters and crawled into bed, but my chest felt heavy. I went down again for a bath. I thrashed the water. The rain stopped and the moon came out. The autumn night was bright, washed clean by the rain. I slipped out of the bathhouse barefoot, but I could not do anything. It was past two o'clock.

3

After nine o'clock the next morning, the man from the troupe called on me at my inn. I had just awakened, so I invited him along to the bath. It was a cloudless, almost springlike day in southern Izu. The water had risen in the stream beside the inn and reflected the warm sun. My previous night's anguish seemed like a dream. Still, I broached the subject with the man.

"You were having quite a time last night. The drum was going until late."

"What? You could hear it?"

"Yes, I could."

"It was for some local folks. They make such a racket. It's not much fun."

He appeared unconcerned, so I said no more.

"Look. They're over at the other bath. I think they've noticed us. They're laughing."

He pointed across the stream toward the public bath on the other side. I could distinguish seven or eight bodies through the steam.

Suddenly a naked woman ran out from the rear of the dark bathhouse. She stood at the edge of the changing area as if she might come flying down the bank. She was shouting with her arms outstretched. She was stark

naked, without even a towel. It was the dancing girl. When I gazed at her white body, legs stretched, standing like a young paulownia tree, I felt pure water flowing through my heart. I breathed a sigh of relief and laughed out loud. She's a child—a child who can run out naked in broad daylight, overcome with joy at finding me, and stand tall on her tiptoes. I kept laughing with delight. My head was clear as though wiped clean. I could not stop smiling.

The dancing girl's hair had been arranged too elaborately for her age. She had looked seventeen or eighteen. What's more, she had been dressed like a young woman in her prime. I had made a ridiculous mistake.

After I returned to my room with the man, the oldest girl came to the garden at my inn and stood looking at the chrysanthemum bed. The dancing girl had stopped halfway across the bridge. The older woman came out of the public bath and glanced over at the two of them. The dancing girl smiled and shrugged her shoulders at me as if to indicate that she would be scolded if she didn't go back. She hurried away.

The older woman walked out as far as the bridge and called to me. "Please come visit us."

"Please come visit us," the oldest girl repeated. Then they left. However, the man stayed until late afternoon.

That evening I was playing go with a traveling paper wholesaler when I heard a drum in the garden. I started to get up. "Some entertainers have come looking for customers."

"What? Them? They're nothing. Well, then, it's your turn. I put my stone here." The paper seller pointed at the board, intent on the game. But now I was restless. It sounded as though the entertainers were leaving. The man called from the garden.

"Good night."

I went out to the window in the hall and motioned for them to come up. The entertainers whispered among themselves in the garden, then walked around to the entrance.

"Good evening." After the man, the three girls each bowed to the two of us, kneeling on the floor like geisha. It suddenly became apparent that I had lost the go game.

"There doesn't appear to be any way out. I give up."

"You think so? I think I'm the one who's on the short side. Either way, it's close."

The paper dealer kept playing, studying the board and counting points without even a glance at the entertainers. The girls placed their drums and samisen in the corner of the room, then started playing a game of "five-in-a-row" on a Chinese chess board. Meanwhile, I indeed lost the go game that I had previously been winning.

"How about it? One more round, just one more round," the paper dealer pleaded. He was persistent, but I just smiled vacantly. He gave up and left the room.

The girls came over to the go board.

"Are you making the rounds again this evening?" I asked.

"Yes, we are, but . . ." The man looked toward the girls. "What do you think? Shall we just forget about it and have a good time instead?"

"That would be wonderful."

"Won't you get in trouble?"

"What do you mean? We wouldn't find any customers anyway, even if we did make the rounds."

We played "five-in-a-row" and enjoyed ourselves until past midnight.

After the entertainers left, I could not get to sleep.

My mind was so keen. I stepped into the hall and called out, "Hey, Mr. Paper Dealer!"

The man, who was about sixty, sprang out of his room, elated. "It's all night tonight! We're going to play until morning."

Now I, too, felt ready for a good battle.

4

We had agreed to leave Yugano at eight o'clock the next morning. Wearing a hunting cap I had bought at a shop beside the public bath, I stuffed my school cap into the bottom of my bag and walked over to the cheap lodging house on the roadside. The sliding doors were all open on the second floor, so I casually went upstairs. The entertainers were still in bed. I stood in the hall, confused.

Lying at my feet, the dancing girl blushed and quickly covered her face with her hands. She was sharing a futon with the middle girl. She still had on her heavy makeup from the night before. The rouge on her lips and the corners of her eyes was slightly smudged. Her emotional appearance as she lay there touched my heart. She turned away as if to avoid the light. Hiding her face with her hands, she slid out of the covers and knelt in the hall.

"Thank you for last night." She gave a pretty bow. I felt awkward standing over her.

The man was sleeping with the oldest girl. Until then I had had no idea they were a couple.

"Oh, I'm sorry." The older woman spoke, sitting up halfway. "I know we had planned to leave today, but we were told there's to be a big party this evening where we

can perform, so we decided to stay one more night. If you have to move on today, we could meet in Shimoda. We've already decided to stay at an inn there called Koshuya. It's easy to find." I felt as though I had been dismissed.

"Why don't you wait and leave tomorrow?" the man spoke up. "As she said, we're staying an extra day. I'm sorry. We'd like to keep you on as a traveling companion. Why don't you go with us tomorrow?"

"Yes. Let's do that," the woman added. "After all, you've come with us this far. I'm sorry we're being so selfish. We'll leave tomorrow, even if it's raining spears outside. The day after tomorrow is the forty-ninth day since the baby died. Since it died while we were on the road, we've been planning all along that we should commemorate the forty-ninth day in Shimoda. We've been hurrying to get there by tomorrow. It's probably not proper for me to tell you so much, but it's like we have some kind of connection to you from a previous life. Would you offer devotions with us the day after tomorrow?"

I decided to delay my departure. I went downstairs and talked with the clerk in the dirty office of the lodging house while I waited for the entertainers. The man came down and invited me to go for a walk with him. Along the road to the south was a beautiful bridge. Leaning against the railing, the man began to tell me more about himself. He had acted in a new-style Kabuki troupe in Tokyo for a time and said he still performed occasionally at the port on Oshima. That explained the sword sheath that stuck out of their luggage like an appendage. He told me he also performed when they entertained at gatherings. The wicker trunk held the costumes they used, as well as pots, dishes, and other household effects.

"It's wretched, the mess I've made of my life. But my older brother in Kofu is doing fine as family heir, keeping up the reputation of the family. So, I would be of no use anyway."

"All along I thought you were from Nagaoka Hot Springs."

"Did you? The oldest girl there with us, she's my wife. She's a year younger than you—nineteen. Our second baby was born prematurely, on the road. It lived just a week. My wife still hasn't recovered her full health. The older woman is her mother. The dancing girl is my own little sister."

"So the fourteen-year-old sister you told me about is? . . ."

"She's the one. Actually, it bothers me; I didn't want my sister to have to live like this, but it's a long story."

Then he told me his name was Eikichi, his wife's was Chiyoko, and his sister's was Kaoru. The other girl, Yuriko, seventeen years old, was the only native of Oshima. She was employed by them. Eikichi stared down at the river shallows. He became sentimental and appeared to be on the brink of tears.

As we walked back, we found the dancing girl, her face washed clean of the white makeup, crouching by the road, petting the puppy on the head. I spoke to her as I started back to my room alone.

"Come on over," I said.

"But, by myself, I . . ."

"So, come with your brother."

"We'll be right there."

Before long Eikichi came to my room.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

"The old lady is so strict with the girls."

However, we had been playing "five-in-a-row" only a

short while when the girls came across the bridge and upstairs. They bowed politely as always and hesitated, kneeling in the hallway. First, Chiyoko, the oldest, stood up.

"This is my room. Don't be so formal. Come on in," I said.

The entertainers stayed about an hour, then went down to the inn bath. They begged me to come along, but I put them off. I said I would go later since there would be three girls in the bath. Shortly, the dancing girl came back upstairs alone to relay a message from Chiyoko.

"She said to come on down. She'll rinse your shoulders for you."

I did not go. Instead I played "five-in-a-row" with the dancing girl. She was surprisingly good. Earlier, when she had played "winner-stays" against Eikichi and the other girls, she had defeated them all handily. I usually win at "five-in-a-row," but I needed all my skill with her. It was refreshing not to have to make easy moves for her. With just the two of us there, the dancing girl initially sat back, playing her stones from a distance with her arm outstretched. But gradually she forgot herself and hunched over the board, absorbed in the game. Her unnaturally beautiful black hair almost touched my chest. Without warning, she blushed. "Please forgive me. I'll get in trouble." Tossing down her stones, she fled the room. The older woman was standing outside the public bath. Chiyoko and Yuriko rushed out of the bath at my inn and hurried back to their lodging house without coming upstairs.

Again Eikichi stayed at the inn with me from morning until late afternoon. The proprietress, a simple, honest woman, warned me against keeping his company,

saying it was a waste to feed a fellow like him.

That evening, when I went to the entertainers' lodging house, I found the dancing girl receiving a samisen lesson from the older woman. She stopped playing when she saw me but resumed after the woman said something to her. Whenever the girl's voice rose as she was singing, the woman reprimanded her. "I told you not so loud."

Eikichi had been called over to the banquet room of the inn on the other side of the road. I could see him across the way. From where I watched, it looked as though he were groaning.

"What's he doing?"

"That? . . . It's chanting from a Noh drama."

"Noh drama? It sounds strange."

"He's a jack-of-all-trades. You never know what he'll do."

A man of about forty who said he was a poulterer was also staying at the lodging house. He opened the partition between the rooms and invited the girls to have dinner with him. The dancing girl took her chopsticks and went over with Yuriko. They picked through the chicken stew that remained after the man had ravaged the pot. As the girls were returning to their own room, the man patted the dancing girl's shoulder. The woman glared at him.

"Hey, don't touch her. She's an innocent virgin."

The dancing girl addressed the man as "uncle" and asked him to read "The Story of the Lord of Mito" to her, but he left immediately. She did not want to ask me directly, so she told the woman that she would like me to read the rest of "The Story of the Lord of Mito" for her. I picked up the book, with a certain expectation in my heart. Just as I hoped, the dancing girl scooted over beside me. Once I began reading, she brought her face

close enough to touch my shoulder, her expression serious. Her eyes sparkled as she gazed at my forehead without blinking. It seemed to be her habit when she was being read to. Earlier, I had noticed that she had held her face right beside the poulterer. The dancing girl's most beautiful feature was her sparkling big dark eyes. The curve of her double eyelids was unspeakably lovely. Next was her flowerlike smile. In her case, the word "flowerlike" was absolutely accurate.

A moment later, the maid from the inn came to call for the dancing girl. She put on her costume.

"I'll be back soon, so please wait. And read the rest to me."

Out in the hallway she bowed low.

"I'll return soon."

"Don't sing," the woman said. The dancing girl picked up her drum and nodded slightly. The woman turned back to me. "Her voice is changing now."

The dancing girl knelt properly in the second floor of the restaurant, beating the drum. I could watch her back from the window as though she were in the next room. The sound of the drum set my heart dancing.

"When the drum enters, the party certainly does liven up." The woman was also looking across the way.

Chiyoko and Yuriko went to the same gathering.

About an hour later all four returned.

"This is all we got." The dancing girl dropped some fifty-sen coins from her fist into the older woman's palm. I read "The Story of the Lord of Mito" out loud for a while. Then they talked about the baby that had died while they were on the road. They said the baby was almost as transparent as water at birth and did not even have the strength to cry. Nevertheless, it lived for a week.

My common goodwill—which neither was mere

curiosity nor bore any trace of contempt for their status as itinerant entertainers—seemed to have touched their hearts. Before I knew it, they had decided that I should accompany them to their place on Oshima.

"The house where Grandpa lives would be good. It's big, and it would be quiet if we chased Grandpa out. You could stay as long as you wanted. And you could study." They made this announcement to me after conferring among themselves.

"We have two small houses. The one in the mountains is usually empty."

Moreover, I was to help out during new year holidays when they performed at the port in Habu.

I realized that their sense of the road was not so hardened as I had first supposed. Rather, it was more of a lighthearted attitude that had not lost the scent of the fields. They were bound together by the familial affection you would expect between parent and child or brother and sister. The hired girl, Yuriko, was the only one who was sullen around me. Perhaps she was at the age when a girl is most bashful.

I left their lodging house halfway through the night. The girls came downstairs to see me off. The dancing girl placed my clogs at the door so I could step into them easily. She stuck her head out the gate and looked up at the bright sky.

"Oh, the moon! We'll be in Shimoda tomorrow. How wonderful. We'll have the baby's forty-ninth-day services. Mother will buy me a comb. We'll do all kinds of things! Would you take me to see a movie?"

The port of Shimoda—it had the air of a hometown that the itinerant entertainers who traveled around the hot springs in Izu and Sagami longed for when they were on the road.

5

The entertainers were carrying the same luggage they had hauled through Amagi Pass. The puppy rested his paws on the woman's arm, looking like a seasoned traveler. Just outside Yugano we found ourselves again in the mountains. The sun hanging over the sea warmed the slopes. We gazed toward the morning sun. Kawazu Beach spread wide in the sunlight out where the Kawazu River flowed.

"That's Oshima over there, isn't it?" I said.

"Of course it is. See how big it looks. Please do come," the dancing girl said.

Perhaps the autumn sky was too dazzling; the sea near the sun looked misted over as it is in the spring. It was another twelve-mile walk from there to Shimoda. For a while the ocean was blocked from view. Chiyoko began to sing a carefree song.

Along the way I was asked whether I preferred to take the main road, which was easier, or a steep path over the mountains that was well over a mile shorter. Naturally I chose the shortcut.

It was an abrupt climb through the trees. I feared we would slip on the fallen leaves. I got so winded that, half in desperation, I pressed down on my knees with the palms of my hands to pick up my pace. Every time I glanced back, the others had fallen farther behind until I could only hear their voices among the trees, except for the dancing girl, who was holding up her skirts and trudging along behind me. She was trailing me by about two yards, neither trying to close the distance between us nor dropping farther back. When I turned and spoke to her, she paused as if startled, then smiled and replied. When she spoke to me, I waited, to give her a chance to

catch up. But I should have known that she would stop short and refuse to take a step until I did. When the path twisted and grew even steeper, I quickened my pace again and found the dancing girl climbing intently, as always, just a couple of yards behind me. The mountains were still. The rest of the group was so far behind I could no longer hear them talking.

"Where is your house in Tokyo?"

"My home isn't Tokyo. I live in the school dormitory there."

"I know about Tokyo. I went there to dance during the cherry blossom season. . . . I was little then, so I don't remember anything about it." Then she went on. "Do you have a father?" "Have you ever been to Kofu?" She asked all kinds of questions. We talked about going to see a movie when we got to Shimoda, and again about the dead baby.

We emerged at the mountaintop. The dancing girl placed her drum on a bench in the dry grass and wiped the perspiration from her face with a handkerchief. She started to brush the dust from her legs, then suddenly crouched at my feet and began to brush the hem of my *hakama*. I jerked away, and she dropped to her knees with a thud. She brushed the dust all the way around my kimono, then dropped the hem. I stood there breathing deeply.

"Sit down," she said.

A flock of small birds appeared beside the bench. It was so still I could hear the dry leaves on the branches rustle when they alighted.

"Why do you walk so fast?"

She looked flushed. I thumped the drum with my fingers and the birds flew away.

"I'm thirsty," I said.

"I'll go see if I can find some water."

But shortly the girl came back empty-handed through the grove of yellow trees.

"What do you do on Oshima?"

The dancing girl mentioned two or three girl's names and began talking about something I could not follow. She seemed to be describing Kofu, not Oshima. Apparently the names were her friends at the elementary school she had attended until second grade. The dancing girl just rambled on.

We had waited about ten minutes when the three younger people reached the top. The older woman arrived another ten minutes after them.

On the way down, Eikichi and I purposely hung back, talking at leisure. When we had walked about two hundred yards, the dancing girl came back up from below.

"There's a spring further down. They said you should hurry down. They're waiting until you get there to take a drink."

When I heard they had found water, I ran. Fresh water sprang from between some large rocks in the shade of the trees. The girls stood waiting around the spring.

"Please, you go first," the woman said. "The water will get all cloudy if we put our hands in. You'd think it was too dirty after us women."

I scooped up the cold water in my hands and drank. The women lingered. They wrung out some damp hand towels and wiped themselves.

When we rejoined the Shimoda highway at the foot of the mountain, we saw several threads of smoke from charcoal-burning huts. We sat down to rest on some timber stacked by the roadside. The dancing girl crouched on the road, combing the puppy's shaggy fur with her pink comb.

"The teeth will break," the woman warned her.

"It's okay. I'll get a new one in Shimoda."

Ever since our stay in Yugano, I had been hoping to be given the comb she wore in the front of her hair as a memento, so I did not want her using it on the dog, either.

Eikichi and I spotted bundles of thin bamboo piled by the roadside. Remarking that it would be perfect for walking sticks, we reached them ahead of the others. Following on our heels, the dancing girl located a thick piece taller than she was.

"What are you going to do with it?" Eikichi asked.

She seemed puzzled for a moment, then held it out to me. "Here. It's a walking stick. I pulled out the thickest one."

"You can't do that. If someone sees him with the thickest one, they'll know we stole it. We don't want to get caught. Put it back," Eikichi said.

The dancing girl returned the bamboo pole and caught up with us. This time she handed me a piece of bamboo about the size of my middle finger. Then she threw herself flat on her back on the path between the rice paddies beside the road. Breathing heavily, she waited for the other women.

Eikichi and I walked together as before, this time ten or twelve yards ahead.

"It wouldn't be hard to pull them and replace them with gold teeth."

I turned around when I overheard the dancing girl's voice. She was walking with Chiyoko. The older woman and Yuriko were a short distance behind them. The dancing girl did not appear to notice me looking back.

I heard Chiyoko reply. "That's right. Why don't you tell him?"

I gathered they were talking about me. Chiyoko had probably commented that my teeth were crooked, so the dancing girl had suggested gold teeth. They were discussing my looks, yet it did not bother me. I felt so close to them that I did not even care to eavesdrop. They continued their conversation for a time. Then I caught the dancing girl's voice again.

"He's a nice person."

"You're right. He seems like a nice person."

"He really is nice. It's good to have such a nice person around."

This exchange had an echo of simplicity and frankness. Hers was a child's voice expressing her sentiments without censure. I, too, was able to meekly consider myself a nice person. Refreshed, I lifted my eyes and surveyed the brilliant mountains. I felt a vague pain behind my eyelids. Twenty years old, I had embarked on this trip to Izu heavy with resentment that my personality had been permanently warped by my orphan's complex and that I would never be able to overcome a stifling melancholy. So I was inexpressibly grateful to find that I looked like a nice person as the world defines the word. The mountains looked bright because we were by the ocean near Shimoda. I swung my bamboo walking stick back and forth, lopping off the heads of the autumn grasses.

Here and there along the way stood signs as we entered villages: "Beggars and itinerant entertainers—KEEP OUT."

Koshuya, a cheap lodging house, was located just within Shimoda on the north side. I followed the entertainers

into a second-floor room that had all the appearances of an attic. There was no ceiling, and when I sat near the windowsill, facing the road, my head almost touched the roof.

"Do your shoulders hurt?" the woman kept asking the dancing girl. "Do your hands hurt?"

The dancing girl moved her hands in the graceful gestures she used when playing the drum. "No, they don't. I can play. I can."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

I hefted her drum. "Hey, that's heavy."

"It's heavier than you thought, . . . heavier than that bag of yours." The dancing girl laughed.

The entertainers heartily greeted the other people staying at the inn. Naturally, they were all entertainers and carnival people. Shimoda appeared to be a temporary roost for these birds of passage. The dancing girl gave a copper coin to one of the innkeeper's children who came toddling into the room. When I stood up to leave Koshuya, the dancing girl hurried down ahead of me to the entryway and set my clogs out for me.

"Please be sure to take me to a movie," she whispered, as though to herself.

A man who was likely a day laborer guided us halfway to our destination. Eikichi and I went on to an inn where, he said, the former district mayor was the innkeeper. We bathed, then ate a lunch of fresh fish.

"Please use this to buy some flowers for tomorrow's services." I gave Eikichi a small packet of money before he returned to his lodging house. I had to return to Tokyo on the morning boat the next day because I had no more money with which to travel. I told Eikichi that school was about to start, so I could not stay with them any longer.

I ate dinner less than three hours after lunch. Alone, I crossed the bridge to the north of Shimoda and climbed the hill Shimoda Fuji to view the harbor. When I called at Koshuya on my way back, the entertainers were eating a dinner of chicken stew.

"Won't you at least have a bite with us? It's not very appetizing now that we women have put in our chopsticks, but maybe this could be the makings of a funny story." The woman took a bowl and chopsticks out of the wicker basket and asked Yuriko to wash them.

They pleaded with me to delay my departure at least one more day, as tomorrow would be the forty-ninth day since the baby's death. But again I used school as an excuse and declined their invitation.

The woman spoke again. "Well, then, during winter vacation, we'll all come out to meet your boat. Just let us know what day you'll arrive. We'll be waiting. Now don't try staying at an inn or anything. We'll meet you at the boat."

When only Chiyoko and Yuriko were in the room, I invited them to a movie. Chiyoko held her stomach saying, "I don't feel well. I'm too weak to walk that far." She slumped down, her face pale. Yuriko stiffened and hung her head. The dancing girl was playing with the innkeeper's children on the stairs. When she heard me, she clung to the woman, begging for permission to go to a movie with me. She returned crestfallen. She set out my clogs.

"What do you mean? There's no harm in letting him take her by himself," Eikichi interjected. But the woman would not assent. I thought it indeed strange that she would not let us go together. As I went out the door, the dancing girl was stroking the puppy's head. The atmosphere was so restrained that I could not speak a word.

The dancing girl lacked the vitality even to lift her face and look at me.

I went to the movie alone. The woman narrator read the script of the silent movie by the light of a tiny lamp. I left as soon as it ended and returned to my inn. Resting my elbows on the windowsill, I stared out into the night town for a long time. It was a dark town. I thought I might hear a faint drum sounding far away. Inexplicably my tears fell.

7

While I was eating breakfast the next morning, Eikichi called to me from the street. He was wearing a crested black *haori*. Apparently, he had dressed formally to send me off. There was no sign of the women. I felt sad. Eikichi came up to my room.

"Everyone else wanted to come see you off, but they went to bed so late they couldn't get up. They won't be coming. They said they'll be waiting for you this winter, so please do come."

The morning autumn breeze blew chill in the town. Along the way Eikichi bought four packs of Shikishima cigarettes, some persimmons, and a mouthwash called "Kaoru" for me. "Because my sister's name is Kaoru." He smiled faintly. "Mandarin oranges aren't the best thing to eat on a boat, but persimmons are good for seasickness, so you can have these."

"Here. You take this." I pulled off my hunting cap and placed it on Eikichi's head. Then I dug my school cap out of my bag, and we laughed as I smoothed the wrinkles.

As we approached the dock, I was struck by the sight of the dancing girl crouching near the water. She remained motionless until I reached her. Silently, she lowered her head. Her makeup, the same this morning as it was the previous night, made me feel even more sentimental. The rouge at the corners of her eyes bestowed a youthful strength, as though she might even be angry.

"Are the others coming?" Eikichi asked.

She shook her head.

"Are they still asleep?"

She nodded.

Eikichi went to buy my ticket for the boat to Tokyo and our passes for the launch. While he was gone, I tried to make small talk, but the dancing girl said nothing. She just stared down at the water pouring from a drainpipe into the sea. She just kept nodding over and over before I even finished speaking.

"Granny, this fellow looks nice." A man approached who looked like a laborer.

"You're a student, aren't you? Going back to Tokyo? I think I can trust you. Would you accompany this old lady to Tokyo? She's had some hard times. Her son was working at the silver mine at Rendaiji. But he and his wife both died in the flu epidemic. They left three children behind. We couldn't think of anything else to do, so we talked it over, and we're sending them back to their old hometown. That's Mito in Ibaraki Prefecture. But this old woman doesn't understand anything, so when the boat gets to Reiganjima in Tokyo, would you put her on a train to Ueno? I know it's a lot of trouble, but we're begging you. Just look at her. Don't you think it's pitiful?"

The old woman stood there with a blank expression,

an infant strapped to her back. Two girls, about three and five, held her hands. I could see big rice balls and pickled plums in her dirty bundle. Five or six miners were looking after the old woman. I was pleased to accept the task.

"Thank you. We're counting on you."

"Thank you. We really should see her all the way to Mito, but we can't." The miners expressed their gratitude.

The launch rocked violently. The dancing girl kept her mouth shut tight, staring at the same spot. When I grabbed the rope ladder and looked back, she tried to say good-bye but gave up and merely nodded one last time. The launch headed back to the wharf. Again and again Eikichi waved the hunting cap I had just given him. As the launch receded in the distance, the dancing girl began to wave something white.

The steamship left Shimoda. I leaned against the railing and gazed at Oshima in the offing until the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula vanished behind me. It already seemed long ago that I parted from the dancing girl. When I glanced into the cabin to check on the old woman, I saw a group of people gathered around her in a circle, consoling her. I felt relieved. I entered the cabin next door. The waves were choppy on Sagami Bay. I was tossed left and right as I sat. A crewman passed out small metal bowls. I lay down, using my bag as a pillow. My head felt empty, and I had no sense of time. My tears spilled onto my bag. My cheeks were so cold I turned my bag over. There was a boy lying next to me. He was the son of a factory owner in Kawazu and was on his way to Tokyo to prepare to enter school. The sight of me in my First Upper School cap seemed to elicit his goodwill.

After we talked for a while, he asked, "Have you had a death in your family?"

"No, I just left someone."

I spoke meekly. I did not mind that he had seen me crying. I was not thinking about anything. I simply felt as though I were sleeping quietly, soothed and contented.

I was not aware that darkness had settled on the ocean, but now lights glimmered on the shores of Ajiro and Atami. My skin was chilled and my stomach empty. The boy took out some sushi wrapped in bamboo leaves. I ate his food, forgetting it belonged to someone else. Then I nestled inside his school coat. I felt a lovely hollow sensation, as if I could accept any sort of kindness and it would be only right. It was utterly natural that I should accompany the old woman to Ueno Station early the next morning and buy her a ticket to Mito. Everything seemed to melt together into one.

The lamp in the cabin went out. The smell of the tide and the fresh fish loaded in the hold grew stronger. In the darkness, warmed by the boy beside me, I let my tears flow unrestrained. My head had become clear water, dripping away drop by drop. It was a sweet, pleasant feeling, as though nothing would remain.

