

THE
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PENGUIN BOOKS

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The Story of Tomoda and Matsunaga

Translated by Paul Warham

I

Five or six years ago, on 25 August 1920 to be precise, I received a letter from the old province of Yamato, from a woman I had never met by the name of Shigeko. I am able to specify the date here because, even after all these years, I still have the letter in my possession. I don't normally bother to read the many letters that arrive on my doorstep from people I don't know, most of them from bookish young men and women desperate to share their love of literature. When I'm busy I simply bundle them up and leave them to languish unread in a corner of my study, but something about this letter filled me with a strange urge to open it right away. It had been addressed not in pen but with an ink brush, and the sender's name and address were in a hand that had about it an unmistakable air of old-fashioned elegance and grace: *Mrs Matsunaga Gisuke, Yagyū Village, Soekami District, Yamato Province*. One look at the envelope was enough to assure me that it contained something more than yet another letter from a young woman with literary aspirations.

The letter is a long one, but I will not let that prevent me from quoting it here in its entirety. Its contents go to the very heart of the story I have to tell.

Dear Sir,

I hope this finds you in good health despite the oppressive heat. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the wife of Matsunaga Gisuke, a resident of the village of Yagyū in the province of Yamato. I have never had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, and I realize that it must seem the height of bad manners for me to be troubling you with an unsolicited letter in

this way. I hope you will be kind enough to bear with me as I attempt to describe the curious sequence of events that has led me to write to you now.

I married into the Matsunaga family in 1905, when my husband was twenty-five and I was eighteen. As the eldest son, my husband had been away in Tokyo for several years before we were married, and had recently graduated from Waseda University. His family has farmed the land in this village for many generations, and even after our marriage he did not have any particular work to occupy him. For the first six months or so we lived a happy and peaceful life together. In the winter of that year, however, my husband's elderly mother passed away, and his behaviour began to change in a quite distressing manner. He took to bemoaning the fate that had left him to grow old here in the countryside. He left home whenever he could, travelling to Kyoto and Osaka at every opportunity in an attempt to lift himself out of his depression. Things continued in this way until the summer of 1906, when I was expecting our first child. Quite suddenly, he announced with an air of unshakeable resolve that he was leaving to go abroad, and that he planned to spend a year or two travelling in the West. Of course, I was appalled; the whole family was. We did everything we could to remonstrate with him, and opposed his idea in the strongest terms. But alas, our efforts were in vain. Nothing we said had the slightest effect on his determination to leave.

I heard from my husband not once in all the time he was away. None of us heard from him for more than three years. I was struggling to bring up our daughter on my own, wondering what on earth had become of him, when he returned in the autumn of 1909 just as suddenly as he had left. Although he has never been seriously ill, my husband has always been of a somewhat weak constitution. His appearance now suggested that his time overseas had seriously impaired his health. He was pale and sickly, and suffered a severe nervous breakdown not long after he came home. For the next few years, until the end of spring in 1912, he lived a quiet life here with us in the country. He showed great tenderness to me and doted on Taeko, our daughter. Little by little, his health began to mend and his nervous condition improved. But then it happened again, in the summer of 1912. Once again, he gave no explanation as to why he had to leave, and refused to tell me where he was going. All he would say was that he would be back again in two or three years and that there was no need to

worry about him while he was gone. Whatever happened, he said, I should make no attempt to trace him. Even if I did, he said, I would never find him. And so he left again, asking me to look after the house in his absence and to take care of our daughter while he was away. I could do nothing but follow his instructions and wait for his return.

As on the previous occasion, he came home during the fourth year¹ after his departure, in the autumn of 1915. Once again, he came back looking ashen and drawn, and exhibiting the symptoms of a serious nervous condition. He apologized for having stayed away so long and for all the pain and worry he had caused me. He became emotional and prone to tears, and displayed an uncommon devotion to his wife and child. Gentleness and compassion marked everything he did, and he began to show signs of a new interest in religious matters. In the spring of 1917, the three of us — myself, my husband and Taeko, by this time twelve years old — made a pilgrimage to the thirty-three Kannon temples.² Perhaps as a consequence of his newfound piety, my husband seemed to regain much of his strength soon after.

He settled back into his quiet life in the country, and seemed much more at ease. I began to allow myself to contemplate our future with happiness, and to hope that everything might work out for us after all. But when the summer of 1918 arrived, he left again, setting off for parts unknown and giving no explanation beyond the same few words with which he had left us before. It was nearly four years since he had returned in the autumn of 1915. Another three years have passed since then. Next year will be the fourth since he left home, and I am consoled by the expectation that we shall see him home again before the year is out. All I can do is wait and hope. I have no way of knowing where he is or what he is doing.

I consider myself blessed to have married my husband, undeserving as I am. Together with our two daughters (our second child turns two this year), I continue to wait patiently. I certainly would not wish to suggest that he leaves home because he has grown tired of his wife. He has his reasons, I am sure: commitments and circumstances of which I know nothing. When he is at home he is always gentle and considerate. Even when he has had to leave home, he has always done so with tears in his eyes, begging me to wait for his return. I do not want to give the impression that I resent my husband's behaviour. In normal circumstances, I should be content to live with things as they are for as long as necessary.

Unfortunately, however, our elder daughter, Taeko, has been suffering from pleurisy since the winter of last year. Recently, her condition has become serious, and I cannot escape the thought that each day might be her last. It breaks my heart to hear her feverish little voice begging day after day for a glimpse of her father. I am at my wits' end.

The family attempted to trace my husband the last time he left home, but to no avail. We have been no more successful this time. Suspecting as before that he might have gone abroad, we made enquiries overseas as well as throughout Japan, but we found no clue to his whereabouts, and heard nothing to suggest that anyone matching his description had been seen in Tokyo, Kyoto or Osaka. When I remember what my husband said before he left – that we would never find him, no matter how hard we tried – I must confess that the whole affair strikes me as somewhat strange.

My husband was carrying very little luggage the last time he came home. Apart from his clothes, he had just one small travel bag with him. He took the same bag with him when he set out again nearly four years later. He guarded it zealously, of course, while he was with us in the country, and was adamant that no one else should touch it. I had no intention of prying into my husband's private affairs, but his inexplicable conduct had stirred a curiosity in me that I was powerless to resist. I knew even as I did it that I was committing an unforgivable breach of trust, but I could not help myself, and I did allow myself, just once, to take a peek inside. I found a gold signet ring with an amethyst setting, a seal inscribed with the name Tomoda, and a postcard, along with several dozen really rather lewd photographs of foreign women in a variety of poses. These I assume he must have collected as a souvenir of his travels in the West. The postcard was addressed to a Mr Tomoda Ginzō, care of the Café Liberté, Ginza Owari 3-chome, Kyōbashi, Tokyo. The only other name on the postcard was yours, in the space set aside for 'sender's name'. I remember that the card was written in pen, in a flowing hand, and was dated 7 May 1913. It read along the following lines: 'Sorry about the other night. How did things turn out regarding the matter we discussed? Looking forward to your reply.' Your name is familiar to me, of course, from magazines and newspapers, but Tomoda Ginzō was a name I had never seen or heard before. I have no idea why my husband should have had Mr Tomoda's postcard and seal in his possession, or why he was carrying with him a ring that must surely

have belonged to someone else, as it was clearly much too large for his own finger. The more I consider the facts, the stranger they seem.

Please forgive me for having written at such length. Is it possible that you might be acquainted with my husband, Matsunaga Gisuke? The postcard I found in his possession made me wonder if Tomoda Ginzō might be an alias he was using for some reason. Such are the circumstances that have prompted me to write to you now. I hope you will make allowances for my confused state of mind. As I have said, I am not interested in hunting my husband down. If you do happen to know him, however, please let him know that I have been in touch and inform him of our daughter's illness. I am sure he would prefer to hear the news this way rather than directly from me. If you are not acquainted with anybody by the name of Matsunaga Gisuke, perhaps you do know a Mr Tomoda? If so, perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me what you know about him and how I might get in touch with him. I hope you will forgive me for making such selfish demands on your time with regard to a matter which is surely no concern of yours. I am afraid I can think of no alternative but to rely upon your kindness and beg you to take sympathy on my predicament.

I am enclosing a photograph of my husband, in case you might recognize him. It is a picture of the three of us, taken during our pilgrimage to the thirty-three Kannon. My husband normally hates to be photographed, but on this occasion he agreed to have a picture made as a souvenir of our trip. He was thirty-seven at the time, and turns forty this year.

I should be grateful if you were able keep the contents of this letter to yourself, but I understand that circumstances might make that difficult. Please feel free to proceed however you see fit. I do hope you will let me know if you have any information at all that might help.

Respectfully yours,
Matsunaga Shigeko

The letter had been posted on 23 August and reached Tokyo two days later, when it was delivered to my house in Aoyama on the morning of the twenty-fifth.

I tend to sleep late and I was still in bed when the post arrived. The letter unfurled across my pillows as I read. I need hardly say that its contents piqued my curiosity. But I was struck by Shigeko too. Here, I felt,

was a woman who possessed a refinement that is all too rare these days. As I have said, her letter was written in an elegant and feminine hand, inscribed neatly on to a scroll of paper that was several feet long when unrolled to its full length. Her husband's family, she wrote, had been farmers for generations, but this was clearly a well-established country family of some pedigree, and Shigeko herself obviously came from quite a cultivated background as well. She couldn't have written an elegant letter like this otherwise. I rewound the scroll and sat back to read the letter for a second – and then a third – time.

And then there was the photograph she had enclosed, of the two parents and their young child. I picked it up and took a closer look. It was a postcard-sized picture, a full-length shot that showed them dressed for pilgrimage, sedge hats in hand, the daughter between her parents. Their faces had come out looking very small, and it was hard to get more than a vague impression of their appearance, but Matsunaga Gisuke – Shigeko's husband – looked much older than the letter had led me to expect. 'He was thirty-seven at the time,' she had written, but he looked to be in his early forties at least. He was a thin, gangly man with angular features and sunken, unhealthy-looking cheeks. It was not a pleasant face to look at. There was a glimmer of sharpness in his eyes, perhaps, but nothing to give the impression that this was an educated man who had been to university and then spent time in the West. To look at him, you would never have imagined he was anything but an ordinary country bumpkin. I didn't need to dredge up old memories. One look was enough to assure me that I had never met the man.

The name meant nothing to me either. I did know a Tomoda Ginzō; that much was true. But the Tomoda I knew looked nothing like the man in the photograph. It was inconceivable that they were the same person.

Standing next to her husband was Shigeko herself, with a serene expression on her face and a quiet air of grace and dignity about her. Her photograph did nothing to spoil the impression I had formed of her from her letter – even if she was not exactly what you'd call a beauty. The picture was the work of a provincial photographer, and the old-fashioned way the picture had been touched up made her look somewhat lifeless and doll-like. Still, there was something about her. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I thought I could detect real intelligence in that oval face of hers – in her small, tight-lipped mouth and clear, gentle eyes. The

pilgrim's clothes she was wearing heightened the effect. She looked like the kind of pilgrim you might expect to see on the stage – the picture of feminine elegance and refinement. Taeko, the daughter, seemed a sweet enough little thing, but she really had come out looking like a doll and it was impossible to say which parent she resembled most.

The letter and the photograph in front of me, I considered the details of the case. Naturally it struck me as odd that a man I had never met should be carrying a postcard from me inside his travel bag. But that was not all. Shigeko had no way of knowing this, but the truth was that the postcard wasn't the only thing in the bag I had seen before. I was also familiar with the amethyst ring and the pictures of European women. In fact, unless I was much mistaken, everything in the bag – the ring, the photographs of the women in 'lewd' poses, and the seal – all of it belonged to the man I knew as Tomoda Ginzō. Tomoda had been wearing an amethyst ring for as long as I had known him – more than ten years now. Indeed, I had seen him just a few days earlier, and I felt sure I had seen the ring then too, its stone glinting away as always on the ring finger of his left hand. And his fondness for taking photographs of foreign women was well known. He had a huge collection of them, which I had seen myself several times.

All the evidence suggested that even if I had no personal connection with Matsunaga myself, a connection of one kind or another must exist between him and Tomoda. I decided to ask him about it the next time we met. No doubt he could help clear things up.

Now that I came to think about it, it occurred to me that I knew remarkably little about Tomoda. We had been friends for years, but I didn't know what line of business he was in or even where he lived. When we met, it was often by chance. I couldn't recall that either of us had ever visited the other at home. I couldn't even say for certain whether he was married or single. I suppose it may seem strange for two men to be friends for more than ten years and still know so little about each other, but in fact the phenomenon is far from uncommon among drinking companions who hardly meet at all except to go carousing together. My relationship with Tomoda existed on precisely this level.

I couldn't think that I had ever had occasion to write to him about anything of substance, but I was prepared to believe that we had exchanged brief messages by postcard from time to time. The card Shigeko had found inside

her husband's bag must have been from me. It was a long time ago now and I couldn't be absolutely certain of the details, but I seemed to remember that the Café Liberté had been a favourite haunt of ours around that time. It was rare for more than a couple of days to pass without my seeing Tomoda there at least once. It made sense that I should have sent messages there when I needed to get in touch with him; after all, I didn't know where he lived.

As for the 'other night' I had mentioned in the postcard – it was impossible for me to say for sure after so much time what this was an allusion to, but it was probably something pretty unsavoury. Most likely I had been referring to arrangements we had made to go out womanizing together or something along those lines. In those days Tomoda knew a place up in the Yamate district of the Yokohama Bluff called Number 10, where white girls were available, and from time to time a select number of Tomoda's drinking companions – me included – were allowed to accompany him there.

The establishment operated inside a somewhat forbidding-looking European-style building that bore a certain resemblance to a nobleman's mansion, and it was not easy for Japanese customers to get inside. But Tomoda was a regular, and with him there to vouch for us the doors to this wonderland were opened wide. Naturally this filled the rest of us with admiration – among the pleasure-seeking crowd who gathered at the Café Liberté, Tomoda was considered an extremely useful person to know. He would send word to tip us off whenever an interesting new girl arrived. I must just have received one of these messages when I sent this postcard. I must have arranged to accompany him to Number 10 and was writing to make sure he was still free to go as planned. It is hard to think that I would have written to him about anything else.

I was soon on intimate terms with the girls at Number 10, and before long I took to going there alone. Even so, I was almost certain to find Tomoda there whenever I went. The establishment was run on an impressive scale, inside a spacious European-style residence with a huge number of rooms.

The girls came and went, but seven or eight of them were generally there at any given time. The house was run along the same lines as most other bordellos staffed by white girls: a dance floor and bar on the ground floor, and the girls' rooms upstairs. Customers would typically spend some time dancing with a girl or getting to know her over a drink downstairs

first. Often when I was sitting with a drink Tomoda's voice would boom out behind me. 'Well, well, well! Look who's here,' I'd hear him say, chortling as he came up behind me and slapped me on the back.

Occasionally, I arrived to find no sign of him. 'Is Mr Tomoda not here this evening?' I'd ask.

'He could be upstairs,' someone would reply, and then – right on cue – in he would waddle like some sumo wrestler, his flabby bulk swaggering down the staircase.

Tomoda was enormously popular with the girls, which may have had something to do with the way he liked to throw his money around. He was stout, almost corpulent, and must have weighed at least 165 pounds. He spoke fluent English and French, and was blessed with natural wit and charm. His every movement and expression showed him to be a sophisticated man of the world. In those days he was the only Japanese customer who could outdo the foreign clients of the establishment. I never heard any of the girls address him as 'Mr Tomoda' – at Number 10, he was just plain 'Tom'.

'You act as if you own the place,' I ribbed him once.

'Well, maybe I do,' he replied matter-of-factly, raising his champagne glass and surveying the clutch of women around him with a glow of self-satisfaction.

I said earlier that I didn't know what Tomoda did for a living, but I remember now an odd rumour that began to circulate around this time, prompted by the remarkable amount of time that Tomoda spent at Number 10 and the air of confidence he exuded whenever he was there. The story was that Tomoda, despite pretending that he was just another customer, might in fact be the owner – that he had secretly put up the capital for the place and was now running the whole operation. I don't remember who started the rumour, but once the suggestion had been made, I couldn't help thinking that it sounded plausible enough.

As far as I knew, there was nothing to prove the rumours wrong. On the contrary – there was plenty of evidence to support them. What about all those photographs, for example? All of them featured girls who worked at Number 10, or who had worked there in the past. How had he managed to collect so many of them? Tomoda's explanation was that he took each girl aside as soon as she arrived and talked her into it in the privacy of

one of the rooms upstairs. But it was hard to believe that he would have been able to get away with this game of his – if, indeed, a game is all it was – without some special connection to the place, no matter how much money he spent and how much the girls seemed to like him. Maybe he really was the owner – perhaps he was admitting as much by showing me his photographs. Perhaps with me at least he was making no attempt to keep it a secret. Hadn't he told me once: 'You know, the next time you need to get in touch, you'd be better sending a card to Number 10. It'll reach me quicker that way.' And so at some stage I had started to think of him as Number 10's owner, or at least its main investor.

But perhaps at this point I ought to go back over the chronology. The postcard Shigeko had found in her husband's bag, addressed to Tomoda care of the Café Liberté, was postmarked 7 May 1913. This dated it to a time during the first few years of the Taishō era when Tomoda's favourite haunts were the Café Liberté in Tokyo and Number 10 in Yokohama. By the time Shigeko's letter to me arrived in August 1920, however, both the Café Liberté and Number 10 had long since shut down.

Not that I had lost track of Tomoda; he was merely operating from a different set of headquarters. In Tokyo: the Café Plaisantin, in the Ginza; in Yokohama: Yamate Number 27, on the Bluff. It probably goes without saying that the Plaisantin was a café much like the Liberté, and that Number 27 was a brothel very similar to Number 10, staffed once again by white girls.

The whole of the Yokohama Bluff was reduced to rubble in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, and not a trace of the house remains today. In those days it was seven or eight blocks up from the Gaiety Theatre, a few streets in on the right as you walked in the direction of Honmoku. The foreign settlement was an area of lush greenery, quiet even during the daytime; the whole district had a foreign and exotic air about it. Number 27 lay on an especially secluded street, hidden behind almost wild, overgrown trees that shielded it from the prying eyes of passers-by. The house had been built around the time the port of Yokohama was opened to foreign trade in the 1860s. Before it became a house of assignation it had no doubt served as the home of some prominent foreigner.

In layout and scale, it was very similar to Number 10. It was quite luxuriously decorated inside, but from the outside the size and age of the

building combined with its desolate surroundings to give the place an eerie air. In fact, it looked a little haunted. The girls were all fresh-faced new arrivals – there were no survivors from Number 10. Almost the only constant from those days, in fact, was Tomoda himself. To my eyes at least, he showed every sign of having a special connection to the place. Once again, he had amassed a collection of photographs, this time featuring the girls from Number 27.

But something struck me as strange now that I thought about it. When had he moved from one place to the other? Suddenly, the link between the two eras was no longer clear in my mind. I could have sworn that I had been seeing Tomoda more or less regularly the whole time, but now that I tried to trace my memories back, I realized there was a period when we had lost touch for two or three years; perhaps three or four. Number 10 had closed down in 1915 or 1916 – of that much I was fairly certain. But by then Tomoda had already been missing for some time. It must have been around October 1915 that I heard the girls asking after him. 'What's happened to Tom? He never comes to see us any more.' He stopped coming to the Liberté around then. Time passed, and the Café Liberté shut down too. A year or so later the Café Plaisantin opened a few blocks over towards Shinbashi.

It was there that I bumped into Tomoda again one night at the end of 1918 or in January 1919. Some time that winter, anyway. I remember an icy wind whistling through the bare branches of the trees. And then – the more I think about it, the more the memories come back – I remember making some remark to him that night at the Plaisantin about how dull things had been in Yokohama since Number 10 closed down.

Tomoda grinned. 'I thought you novelists were supposed to be observant,' he said. 'There's a new place open in Yokohama now. Just like the old Number 10.' And that very same night – or was it a little later? – he took me to Number 27 for the first time.

But the reader has perhaps already been struck by the same suspicions that began to occur to me once I had thought things through this far. Namely, that the relationship between Tomoda and Matsunaga went far deeper than I had at first assumed.

According to the letter, Shigeko's husband had returned home for the second time in the autumn of 1915. He had remained in the country till the summer of 1918, when he left home again. And for precisely this

period – between the autumn of 1915 and the summer of 1918 – I had no recollection of having seen Tomoda once. The whole thing started to seem very strange indeed.

I tried to think back to the first time I met him. It must have been around 1908 or 1909. I forget now who it was that introduced us. Perhaps we weren't introduced at all, and just fell into conversation one night when we were both drunk. The details escape me, but I'm pretty sure that our first meeting took place at the Café Kōnosu, which in those days was located in Koamichō in Nihonbashi. Again, though, it was no longer clear to me when we had moved from the Kōnosu to the Café Liberté. As I remember it, Tomoda had simply stopped coming to the Kōnosu at some stage, only to reappear just as suddenly at the Café Liberté a few years later. After so many years, I couldn't say for sure exactly how long Tomoda had been missing. But Shigeko's husband had returned home in the autumn of 1909 and left again at the beginning of the summer of 1912. The chronology was remarkably similar. A table of the two men's movements would look something like this:

<i>Period One</i>	<i>Summer 1906–Autumn 1909</i>
	Matsunaga Gisuke travelling in the West
	Tomoda Ginzō appears for the first time in the Café Kōnosu towards the end of this period
<i>Period Two</i>	<i>Autumn 1909–Spring 1912</i>
	Matsunaga Gisuke at home in the country
	Tomoda Ginzō whereabouts unknown
<i>Period Three</i>	<i>Summer 1912–Autumn 1915</i>
	Matsunaga Gisuke whereabouts unknown
	Tomoda Ginzō active at the Café Liberté and Number 10
<i>Period Four</i>	<i>Autumn 1915–Summer 1918</i>
	Matsunaga Gisuke at home in the country
	Tomoda Ginzō whereabouts unknown
<i>Period Five</i>	<i>Summer 1918–Present (1920)</i>
	Matsunaga Gisuke whereabouts unknown
	Tomoda Ginzō active at the Café Plaisantin and Number 27

For Periods One and Two, my memories of Tomoda Ginzō's movements were far from clear. But unless I was seriously mistaken, it seemed safe to assume that the same four-year cycle had been in operation all the way from 1909 to the present. Whenever Matsunaga was at home in the country, Tomoda's whereabouts were unknown. And during the periods when Tomoda was active in the Tokyo-Yokohama area, Matsunaga was nowhere to be found.

I lay in bed pondering the strange details of the case. I felt compelled to consider matters further. I drew up a mental chronology similar to the one I have just sketched out above and went over it carefully. I picked up Shigeko's letter and read it over again several times. Everything seemed to point to the same conclusion. I could no longer be sure that Tomoda and Matsunaga were not the same person. I placed the photograph of the family in pilgrims' clothes on my pillow and peered at it again.

'Tomoda Ginzō might be an alias he was using,' she had written. Shigeko herself, then, clearly had her suspicions. But the impression I got from the old-fashioned retouched photograph she had enclosed was that Matsunaga bore no resemblance to Tomoda at all either in face or build.

Of course, it is not true that the camera never lies. People often look quite different in photographs, and pilgrimage clothes in particular might make a person's whole character appear quite different too, I suppose. But there was simply no way that someone as chubby as Tomoda could be made to look as thin as the man in this photograph. Tomoda was practically obese. Matsunaga, according to this photograph, was tall and slim. Tomoda's face was so round he looked as if his cheeks were about to burst. Matsunaga had sunken cheeks and a sharp, triangular face. They were a study in opposites: one of them jovial, the other gloomy. A person might put on weight and lose it again any number of times over the course of a lifetime, but Tomoda's appearance hadn't changed a bit in all the years since I first met him at the Kōnosu. And what about Matsunaga? What was it that Shigeko had said about her husband? 'Although he has never been seriously ill, my husband has always had a weak constitution.' Or the ring that was 'clearly much too large for his own finger'. These remarks made it clear that Matsunaga had been as thin as he was in the photograph for many years. She had also written that the family had made fruitless enquiries overseas as well as throughout Japan both times he had

disappeared, whereas Tomoda lived at the centre of Ginza café society, and was always to be found at the Plaisantin, just as I had found him there the other night. If Tomoda and Matsunaga really *were* the same person, was it conceivable that this fact could have escaped detection for so long? And was this kind of brazen behaviour really what one would expect of someone like Matsunaga, whose last words to his wife before leaving had been to remind her that she had no hope of tracing him, no matter how hard she tried?

These were not questions I could answer on my own, however long I lay in bed pondering them. I would have to confront Tomoda and see how he reacted. I was busy with work that day, but I managed to finish it by the evening and set out that night for the Ginza, hoping to catch Tomoda at the Plaisantin. If he didn't show up there, I would go to Yokohama and look for him at Number 27. I knew from experience that Tomoda Ginzō was not a difficult man to find.

2

The Café Plaisantin was a well-kept little place, a touch above ordinary cafés. The only food they did was steak – but what a steak it was, grilled the English way over hot coals, a real rarity in Tokyo. The wine list was impressive, too. Many of the drinks behind the bar were available nowhere else. Naturally a café of this kind relied on a group of discerning regulars rather than passing trade, and the Plaisantin was normally a somewhat exclusive place, a favourite haunt of connoisseurs. Tonight, though, the café was abuzz with people who had been drawn in to escape the hot summer evening. I arrived at eight and sat for an hour over a steak and three glasses of French vermouth, waiting for Tomoda to appear. But there was no sign of him. At the tables around me, all I could see were strangers' faces.

I decided to give him till ten. I finished my vermouth and ordered a glass of amontillado. The name may be familiar from Poe's story 'The Cask of Amontillado', but I suspect most people in Japan don't know what amontillado really is. In fact, it was only recently that I had tasted this remarkable wine for the first time myself. It was Tomoda who had introduced me to it.

'Try some of this,' he said one night as the waiter brought over a bottle I had never seen before from one of the shelves by the bar. 'Genuine amontillado. Ever tried it?'

'No. I've heard of it, of course.'

'This,' he said, as he poured me a good-sized sample, 'is the real thing, from Spain. Look at the colour. It's a work of art.' He gestured in the direction of the clear, amber liquid in the glass in front of me. 'Regular sherry is much darker than this; cloudier. Look how clear it is. That's the colour sherry is supposed to be. The stuff you've been drinking all your life is an English imitation. They add sugar to sweeten it. But there's no need for tricks like that with this stuff. This is the natural sweetness of the grapes – nothing more, nothing less.'

'It's wonderful! I've never tasted a sherry like it!' I was captivated by the colour. The drink was perfectly balanced, the delicate sweetness of the fruit rounded out by the gentlest hint of bitterness. A warm southern breeze seemed to rise from the glass in my hand.

'But where do they get it from? This stuff can't be easy to find.'

'You're not kidding. I take the credit for this. I found it in Yokohama at a place called the K. Trading Company. They had two dozen bottles of it stashed away in the warehouse. I gave one dozen to the bar and kept the rest for myself. For personal use only.' He was starting to sound rather pleased with himself.

I thought of Tomoda again now as I sipped my drink. My doubts about him were growing all the time. I was too close to have noticed it before, I suppose, but now I was forced to admit that this friend of mine – this man I had always assumed to be living such an uncomplicated life – was shrouded in mystery like no one else I knew. What had he been doing in the years before I knew him? How old was he? Where had he gone to school? I cross-examined myself on my friend's past and couldn't answer a single one of my own questions. Tomoda had always been a bit slippery when it came to subjects like these, giving strangely evasive answers that could be taken either as yes or no. He spoke such good English and French, was so comfortable with Western manners, and was such a connoisseur of European food and drink, that I had always assumed he had spent time in the West. But now I came to think of it, I realized I had never actually heard Tomoda say so himself. He had occasionally

mentioned his adventures in Shanghai, but I had never heard him talk about Paris or London.

'Where did you learn to speak English and French so well?' I asked him once.

'Just picked it up. When you spend as much money on foreign girls as I do, the language side of things pretty much takes care of itself,' he said, as if fluency in two foreign languages was nothing worth making a fuss about.

'You must have spent a lot of time in Europe, I suppose . . .'

He just laughed. 'You don't have to go to Europe to find foreign women, you know. Who needs Paris when you've got Yokohama? Or Kobe? Or Shanghai?'

This time I wasn't going to let him wriggle out of it so easily. 'If he's not here by ten,' I thought, 'I'll go to Yokohama myself. I'll get to the bottom of this somehow.' I ordered a second glass of amontillado.

'On your own tonight, sir?' The waiter took a sherry glass full of the amber liquid from a silver tray and set it down in front of me. He had been working at the Plaisantin for as long as I could remember.

'Afraid so. No takers at all tonight. You seem to be doing all right, though - this place is packed.'

'It's this summer weather, brings in all kinds of people. More trouble than they're worth, some of them.'

'I don't think I know a single person in here tonight. To tell the truth, I was hoping I might bump into Tomoda. But I've been waiting for nearly two hours now and there's still no sign of him.'

'Maybe he's up at Number 27, sir?' The waiter grinned and turned to look at the clock over the bar. 'It's only half past nine. Still a bit early for Mr Tomoda.'

'I wonder. Maybe he's not coming in tonight at all. In that case, I'll have to go on the attack and head out to Yokohama myself.'

'What is it, sir? Another interesting new arrival?'

'That's exactly what I want to ask him myself. I don't know - I've been getting a bit tired of Tokyo recently.'

'Why not give him a bit longer? He hasn't been in for a couple of days. I think we're about due for a visit.'

No sooner had the boy spoken than the front door swung open.

'The man himself!' I shouted as Tomoda came in. His magnificent bulk

made its way across the room toward us, resplendent in a linen suit and an English-made straw hat. He was dressed in white from head to toe. The only thing that stood out was his red drinker's face.

'Hey!' he shouted, raising a hand in our direction and clicking his fingers the way I'd seen foreigners do. He pushed his way through the crowd, his shirt flapping over his protruding belly, and eventually plopped himself down in the chair opposite mine.

'Good evening, Mr Tomoda. We were hoping you might drop in,' the waiter said.

'What do you mean? Who was?'

'Well, I wouldn't say I've been sitting on the edge of my seat, exactly. Just getting a bit bored here on my own, that's all,' I said, as nonchalantly as I could, trying to cover up the waiter's unfortunate remark. My gaze fell naturally on the back of Tomoda's hand as it rested on the table. The amethyst ring was there as usual, glinting at me from the plump ring finger of his left hand.

'Bring me a pink gin, will you?'

'That's a bit of a departure for you, isn't it?' I said.

Tomoda hardly ever touched gin or whisky. Normally, he drank wine - claret, champagne, hock, sherry and cognac. He had nothing but disdain for British and American drinks. 'A cocktail is not what I call a drink,' he liked to say. 'A real drink should never be mixed. You want to taste the flavour of the drink itself, not some artificial concoction. The Americans know nothing about these things.'

'What, gin? No, I can't stand the stuff really. But there's nothing like gin and bitters when it's so absurdly hot. One glass is enough to cool you right down.'

'In that case, I think I'll have one myself.'

'But it has to be Old Tom. Dry gin's no good at all. Just a quick dash of bitters in a glass of Old Tom. Does the trick like nothing else.'

He took a handkerchief from his pocket as he spoke and used it to dab at the beads of perspiration on his face. Like most fat men, Tomoda sweated profusely. As always, he was wearing a stiff single collar, which was starting to wilt.

'Goodness, it's hot. You can't function in this weather. Yokohama's a bit better than this, at least.'

'Speaking of Yokohama, what's the news from Number 27? Any new arrivals?'

'As a matter of fact, something rather special came in from Shanghai just a few days ago.'

'Russian?'

'Portuguese, I think.'

'But they're not so different from Japanese girls, surely?'

'Watch what you're saying! They might have dark eyes and black hair like us but that's where the similarity ends. Everything else about them is completely Western. A Portuguese girl combines the best of both worlds. She's got the face of a Japanese woman – a really attractive Japanese woman, I mean – and the body of a European. Trust me, they don't come much better than that.'

'Hmm, I wonder. You've been known to get a bit carried away about these things.'

It wouldn't be the first time Tomoda had been guilty of exaggeration. He was always singing the praises of whichever girl happened to be his favourite. 'You've *got* to see this one,' he would say, 'she's fantastic.' Often, she turned out to be nothing like as remarkable as he had led me to expect.

'Nonsense! They've never had anything like this before.'

'Well, there's only one way to find out.'

'That can be arranged.'

'Shall we head over there now?'

Tomoda hesitated for a moment, looking about the room and putting his hand to the inside pocket of his jacket. 'I have a photograph,' he said.

'What, already?'

'You know me; I like to move quickly. I got her as soon as she arrived. Here – have a look.' He took the photograph from his wallet and cupped it in his hands for me to see.

'Now, then. Get a load of that body!'

'She's . . . still quite young, isn't she?'

'Eighteen – or so she says. Probably closer to twenty. Like what you see?'

'On this evidence, I like it very much. I should go and see for myself.'

Tomoda's chair swayed as he laughed. 'Funny. I thought you might say that.'

'Oh, by the way, that reminds me. I have something to show you, too.'

I decided to make my move while he was in a good mood. I reached into my jacket pocket just as he had done.

'Something to show me? And what could that be?'

'This.' I took out the picture of the Matsunaga family and set it on the table in front of us.

'What's this? Someone's pilgrimage snaps?'

I have never forgotten the expression that crossed his face at that moment. The instant he saw the picture he turned pale. He looked as though every hair on his body was standing on end. He didn't even pick up the photograph to get a closer look. His dull, drink-heavy eyes were suddenly wrenched open wide. I watched them flash as he fought to control his emotions. Waves of terror and anguish and loss washed over him. I didn't know what to say. At last, I heard a clink as Tomoda lunged for his glass and downed what was left of his gin in a single gulp.

'What's so special about it, then?' he finally said. His voice shook with an indignation he was struggling in vain to control.

'You don't recognize the people in the photograph?'

'No. Should I? Not really my crowd, you know.'

'Not ringing any bells at all?'

'Absolutely not. Why?'

Perhaps I was going about it the wrong way. I began to worry that I had taken him too much by surprise. I would never get to the bottom of the mystery if I made him angry. I decided to change tack, and continued more gently.

'Well, if you don't know anything about it, that just makes things more mysterious. The man in the photograph is from a village called Yagyū in Yamato. His name is Matsunaga Gisuke.'

'And what's so mysterious about that, exactly?'

'He went missing two or three years ago.'

'And? Are you a friend of his or something?' Tomoda growled.

'I've never met him – I thought *you* might know him.'

I remembered that Shigeko had asked me to keep the contents of her letter to myself. But I couldn't keep the truth from him now. Maybe I should suggest going for a stroll and talk things over with him outside. But the café was so crowded tonight. Next to our table a fan rattled and whirred. There was little risk that anyone would overhear what I had to

say. And it would be easier to follow his reactions in a well-lit place like this. Quietly, I continued my account.

My lowered voice seemed to help Tomoda regain his composure a little. But as I spoke, he suddenly called the waiter over and asked him to bring some absinthe. He raised the drink repeatedly to his lips, nodding and grunting from time to time as I spoke. I have mentioned already that it was rare for Tomoda to drink anything as strong as gin – let alone absinthe. He was evidently looking to escape into an even more intoxicated state than he was in already. But his mumbled interjections grew more frequent and more involved as I continued my story, and I occasionally caught glimpses of genuine curiosity in his eyes.

'What a story!' he said when he had heard me out. 'You ought to write it up. It has the makings of a classic detective story!' He was more his usual self again now, banging his fist on the table and roaring his appreciation.

'What do you mean? You do know him after all?'

'No, I don't know the man. But I know the stuff in that bag of his. It was mine. All of it: the seal, the ring, the photographs, everything ...'

'So how did he get his hands on them?'

'I had my bag stolen once. Let me see, when would it have been? If I had that postcard with me, it must have been around then, I suppose. My bag was taken while I was staying at the XX Hotel in Hakone. Probably the bag she found was mine too.'

'Shigeko said it was some kind of small carrying case.'

'That's right – one of those little box-like things. I don't remember the postcard from you, but the rest of it was definitely there. Money, too: two or three hundred yen. I lost it all.'

'Did they ever catch the thief?'

'I never reported it. I prefer not to deal with the police if I can help it. There wasn't that much money involved anyway. And those photos! How would it look if the police found those?'

'What about the ring you're wearing now?'

'This? A replacement. I had it made after the other one was stolen.'

He thought for a moment, then continued. 'It sounds funny, I suppose, having a ring stolen. The thing is, I hate thunder. It terrifies me. Whenever I hear thunder, I take off everything I'm wearing that's made of metal – watches, rings, anything. I remember there was a terrific thunderstorm

that night in Hakone. I took off my ring and put it in my bag. Then I fell asleep and forgot all about it. Someone must have come in and swiped it while I was asleep.'

'You think this Matsunaga's a thief, then? It doesn't seem right, somehow. Shigeko's letter sounded so cultured. I don't know – I was imagining him as the head of a respectable family.'

'What about this leaving home every three or four years, though? A bit suspicious, don't you think? I can see how my photographs might appeal to an eccentric like that. And what about your postcard? That might have some value for a fan of yours, don't you think? ... After it was stolen, it probably passed from hand to hand until it ended up with him. I don't know about the seal and the ring, though. That *is* odd.'

'Maybe he spent the money and kept everything else in the bag where he found it. He was probably worried the other things could be traced.'

'That's it! That must be the explanation.'

'Still ... it's strange that he should have kept my postcard. He could have burnt it or torn it up or something.'

'I know!' Tomoda said with a laugh. 'The thief must be a fan of yours!'

'Oh, great!'

'You never know. Not all thieves are illiterate. Someone with a bit of education could probably make his way through one of your novels.'

'Marvellous. And is that what I'm supposed to tell Shigeko – that her husband is a thief? How's that going to make her feel? As if she doesn't have problems enough already. And besides, we don't have any proof.'

'Why not just say you don't know anything? It's not as though I'm desperate to get my property back.'

'But I'd have to tell her *something* about you.'

'Why?'

'Listen to what she says: "If you are not acquainted with anybody by the name of Matsunaga Gisuke, perhaps you do know Mr Tomoda? If so, perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me what you know about him and how I might get in touch with him."'

'Absolutely not! Out of the question! I want nothing to do with it.' Suddenly, Tomoda was shouting. The colour drained from his face again.

'But I can't tell her I don't know anyone called Tomoda Ginzō – what about the postcard?'

'All right. So tell her you do know someone called Tomoda Ginzō. You asked him about this Matsunaga person, and he knows nothing about him. And nothing about the articles in the bag either. The postcard may indeed have belonged to him once, but Mr Tomoda has no recollection of any of the other items. As far as he can remember he has never lost a seal and it is a matter of great mystery to Mr Tomoda how the seal and the postcard came to be in the possession of Mr Matsunaga. Yours sincerely, etc., etc. That's all you have to do. There's no need to go giving out people's personal details . . .'

'I'll have to do better than that. She won't be satisfied with such a vague reply. I can see how it might make things a bit awkward for you, but she's obviously managed to persuade herself that you and this Matsunaga are one and the same person. As far as she's concerned, Tomoda Ginzō is just an alias.'

'But look at us. It's not exactly a striking resemblance, is it?'

I gave the most good-humoured laugh I could manage. 'But she doesn't know that. She's never set eyes on you.'

'Here, let me see that photograph again.'

Tomoda held up the picture and looked at it closely. I saw fear flicker in his eyes again. Not as obvious this time, perhaps – but it was the same strange terror I had noticed before.

'So this is Matsunaga, is it? Look at the old fogey! I'm way younger than he is.'

'He was thirty-seven when that was taken. Turns forty this year, she says.'

'Four years older than me, then.' This was the first time he had ever volunteered such a straightforward piece of information about himself.

'You're thirty-six?'

'Born in 1885, the year of the rooster. Why? Don't I look it?'

'I don't know. I suppose your face does look around thirty-six. You're starting to go a bit thin on top, though.'

'It's the booze. Curse of the drinking man, I'm afraid,' he said, grabbing a handful of hair at the crown of his head. 'At the rate I'm going, I'll be totally bald before you know it. It's starting to get me down, to tell you the truth.'

'Even so, you still look a good four or five years younger than him. That much I can vouch for.'

'But it's not just our ages. Everything about us is different.'

'I know. You look nothing like him. That's the problem.'

'What do you mean, that's the problem?'

'If I could prove that you were the same person, maybe I'd be able to make some sense of this whole thing. As it is, I'm stumped.' I laughed again. But it was no laughing matter. For the more closely I studied the photograph of Matsunaga and his family and compared it with the man sitting in front of me, the more profoundly I was struck by the total lack of any resemblance between them whatsoever.

'Here's what we'll do,' Tomoda said, leaning across the table. 'We'll send her a picture. A photograph of me. To prove that her husband and I are two completely unrelated people who don't even look alike. What can she say to that?'

'You're right. That's the easiest way.'

'I'll put two or three good clear photographs in the post first thing tomorrow morning. You can send them to her, and say, "Here is what Tomoda Ginzō looks like. I am sure that one glimpse of these photographs will dispel any suspicions you may have. In light of this, I don't believe it is necessary to divulge any further information regarding Mr Tomoda's whereabouts or background." And that will be that.'

I had no choice but to follow this reasonable suggestion. We sat and continued to talk over still more drinks. From time to time I caught him stealing a glance at the photograph of the Matsunaga family, which I had deliberately left out on the table.

'What about it, then? Do you feel like heading over to Yokohama?' Tomoda said as he stood up. It was nearly eleven.

'I'd better not. I've got a lot on at the moment.'

'Come on – I'll show you the Portuguese girl.'

'I'd love to, but really. Another time, once I've cleared some of this work. You won't forget to send me those pictures, will you?'

'Don't worry. I won't forget – just don't go telling her anything I wouldn't. Agreed?'

We left the Plaisantin and walked together down the Ginza towards Shibaguchi. We both fell strangely silent as we left the café. Tomoda no doubt had things of his own to be thinking about. As for me – I had had far too much to drink that evening, and I was more intoxicated than I

normally allow myself to become. My head spun as I went over our conversation, obsessively trying to make sense of it all. Who was he really, this man I knew as Tomoda Ginzō, stumbling down the street by my side at this very moment? His bag had been stolen, he said. Fair enough – that would explain everything. But what about the look of fear I had seen in his eyes when I showed him the photograph? Why had he felt the need to get so drunk, or at least act as though he were? And why was he so particular about keeping his identity and whereabouts a secret even though he knew he was under suspicion? The more I thought about it, the thicker became the cloud of mystery that enveloped him. Tomoda had said how suspicious it was that Matsunaga kept disappearing without a trace every three or four years. But if that counted as suspicious behaviour, then what about Tomoda himself? 'If I could prove that you were the same person, maybe I'd be able to make some sense of this whole thing,' I had joked. But of course, I hadn't really been joking at all. Even if they weren't the same person, it was still possible that they were somehow in cahoots. Perhaps Tomoda had met Matsunaga overseas. Perhaps they had been meeting in Tokyo at four-year intervals ever since, working together like shadows to carry out their nefarious schemes . . .

'Good night, then,' Tomoda said suddenly when we reached the tram stop at Shibaguchi. His tone was unusually brusque. He turned a corner and was gone, vanishing in the direction of Shinbashi Station.

Despite his assurances, I had my doubts whether he would really send me the photographs he had promised. Perhaps he had just been looking for a way out of our argument, I thought. But, in fact, they were delivered to my door by the afternoon post two days later. 'Identification photographs enclosed as promised,' his note read. 'I had thought that any recent photograph would do, but I couldn't find any suitable, so I had three new portraits taken specially. I am enclosing one full-length photo, one from the waist up and one of the face only. Together, they should be more than sufficient for our purposes. Please send all three photographs to Mrs Matsunaga without too much elaboration. I will thank you not to mention anything about my whereabouts or other personal details. I am not in the habit of giving out my address unless it is absolutely necessary. As I think I made clear the other evening, no purpose would be served by letting

Mrs Matsunaga know where I live. I see no reason why I should be inconvenienced any further for the sake of Mrs Matsunaga and her disappearing husband.'

The three photographs he had sent certainly served their purpose as identifying shots. Taken together, they told you everything you could want to know about his appearance, from his general build and character to the outline of his face and the shape of his skull. Every distinguishing mark was there in full view. But I couldn't help noticing that one thing was missing. Neither in the full-body picture nor in the upper-body shot was there any sign of the ring he always wore, although you could see his hands quite clearly in both. He must have made a point of taking it off. He had asked me specifically not to mention the ring in my reply to Shigeko. Surely this was the true reason why he had gone to the effort of having new pictures taken.

I put the 'identity photos' in an envelope together with my reply. As it happened, I was not able to follow Tomoda's instructions as closely as he would have liked. The sympathy I felt for Shigeko outweighed my feelings of friendship for him. I had my own doubts and suspicions, and although I knew that I might come to regret my actions later on, I decided that I couldn't simply push these thoughts to one side and lie to Shigeko now. My reply was even longer than her original letter to me. In it, I set down everything I knew that might help her get to the bottom of the mystery. I sent her all the evidence at my disposal: the chronological table showing how Tomoda and Matsunaga seemed to go missing in alternating intervals of four years, as well as a detailed report of our conversation at the Plaisantin. I also wrote: 'I don't know what you will make of the photographs I am enclosing, but I hope you will let me know if the man in these pictures resembles your husband in any way or if they contain any clue that might help you in your search. I will continue to look into things at this end, and will be happy to help in any way I can.'

A few days later, I received another long letter from Shigeko, full of thanks for my help. But in among all the formalities was a line that took me quite by surprise. For it was clear that the photographs I had sent had not been enough to dispel her doubts: 'The details you have been kind enough to provide have only deepened my suspicion that Tomoda Ginzō may be an alias used by my husband, Matsunaga Gisuke.' Her second

letter was written in the same old-fashioned style as her first. This time I will summarize its contents. 'There is no doubt,' she wrote, 'that the pictures you were kind enough to send show a man quite different in appearance from my husband. But there is something about the eyes in that round face of his that reminds me of my husband. Perhaps my mind is playing tricks on me. My husband has always been thin. If, as you say, Mr Tomoda has always been rather stout, then my suspicions would seem to be quite unfounded. I cannot offer any solution to the mystery, but in spite of everything I can't shake the thought that they might somehow be the same person. If my husband were just four or five years younger – if he lost a few years, and gained a few pounds – perhaps this is how he might look. What height is Mr Tomoda, I wonder? My husband is a little over five feet and four inches. Do please let me know if you learn anything more of Mr Tomoda's background: where he comes from, what he does for a living, whether he has a family, his true age and whether there is any truth to the account of how he lost his bag. I realize that I am asking a lot. I hope you will understand my situation. Our daughter's condition shows no sign of improvement and she longs to see her father. I should be very much obliged if you would make Mr Tomoda acquainted with the details of the situation.'

I was stunned. Was her mind playing tricks on her, as she herself had admitted it might be? Or did Tomoda have some way of altering his appearance? Was such a thing even possible? I was more suspicious of him now than ever.

3

It was on the evening of the first or the second of September that I saw Tomoda again for the first time since receiving Shigeko's reply. This time we met not at the Café Plaisantin but at Number 27 in Yokohama.

I knew I was likely to find Tomoda at Number 27. That was my main reason for going there that evening, though I was careful to give the impression that I had just popped out of the house in search of a good time. As usual, I took a taxi from Sakuragichō through Yamashitachō to the front of the French consulate and up Yatozaka hill, arriving around

nine at the front gate of the old house at the end of its dark and lonely back street. I reached up with my walking stick and rang the bell set high on the gatepost. From outside, the house looked deserted. A faint ringing sounded from a room some distance away on the other side of the tightly locked gate. The house itself remained silent. The sound of the far-off bell was eerie and unsettling, like the sound of a stone tossed into a deep ravine or a ghost moving around inside a deserted house. Eventually the establishment's Filipino houseboy came out to the gate and removed the iron latch with a heavy clank. He eased the gate back an inch or two and squinted out into the darkness to where I was standing in the light of the lantern that hung from the eaves.

'Hello? It's me.'

'Oh yes, sir, good evening.' Usually the boy spoke only English but with me he used his still slightly clumsy Japanese. Once he recognized me, he opened the gate just wide enough for me to squeeze through.

'Long time no see, sir.'

'It's been too hot for this kind of thing. But I hear a new girl's just arrived. I've come to have a look.'

'Yes, there is one you don't meet yet.'

'I hear she's a real beauty.'

'Yes, I think you will like.' His teeth flashed in the darkness, as white as the linen jacket he was wearing.

'I see I'm not the only one here.'

The shutters were all closed in spite of the heat, but a single sliver of light escaped from an opening in the dance-hall window.

'Who is it? Not Mr Tom by any chance?'

'Yes, sir. Only Mr Tom here tonight.'

'He might like a bit of company. Can we go in?'

Everything was going perfectly so far. I stepped into the corridor and knocked on the first door on the left, which led into the dance hall.

'Aha! So here you are at last . . .'

I entered the room to find Tomoda wearing a sailor's jacket and relaxing on a divan by the piano. Perched in his lap was a girl called Catherine, in a crimson crêpe de Chine dress that glowed like fire. Actually, it was only later that I realized how bright the dress was. At first glance it looked quite dark, thanks to the unusual lighting system in the room, which

could be set to red, white or blue according to the mood of the moment. When I opened the door, the room was awash in warm red light. After the darkness outside, the soft light was probably just what my eyes needed, but I had other things on my mind and I flicked the switch to white as I entered.

'Ouch! What do you want to make it so bright for?' Catherine shrieked. She sounded drunk. Catherine was a petite, well-formed girl from England, the youngest of all the girls at Number 27 and a favourite with the clientele. Standing in front of her, in a dress of aqua-blue georgette, was Rosa. A girl I didn't recognize sat at the piano, wearing a citron-coloured organdy dress. This must be the new Portuguese girl. Her face was perhaps not quite as pretty as Catherine's, but her bare shoulders were uncommonly beautiful.

'It's all right. Let him have it as bright as he wants. He's come to see something very special tonight.' Tomoda's gaze darted between me and the Portuguese girl.

'Right on target,' I said in Japanese. 'Is this the girl in the photo you showed me the other day?'

'That's the one. Here, I'll introduce you.' Tomoda turned to the girl and switched to English. 'This gentleman here,' he said, 'is the famous writer Mr F. K. And this is Edna - a beautiful Portuguese young lady who's just come to us from Shanghai.'

'Are you really a writer?' Edna got up and came over to where we were standing.

'One of the most famous novelists in the country,' Tomoda said. 'If you're lucky, he might put you in one of his books. How would you like that?'

'Where were you in Shanghai?' I asked.

'The French Concession.'

'Working in one of the cafés?'

'Goodness, no. I was a nice girl in Shanghai.'

'So it's only since you came to Japan that you've turned naughty, is that right?'

'Really! Come on - let's have some champagne. A toast to new friends.'

This was Rosa's idea. Rosa was a thick-set and rather greasy-complexioned older woman whose best years were long behind her. Her arms were as big as my legs. She spoke fluent French and German, but unless I'm mistaken

she was actually a Russian Jew. She was never going to be a popular choice with customers heading to the rooms upstairs, but she made up for this by the skill with which she squeezed drinks out of the guests as she made her way around the dance-floor bar.

'Good evening!'

I turned to find another young woman in white coming down the stairs.

'Hello, Flora! I didn't know you were here.'

'Things were so boring, I went upstairs for a nap. Boy - bring another champagne glass. Maria's gone off to Hakone with some American gentleman. He's taken her to stay at the Fujiya.'

'What about Emmy?'

'She's gone away somewhere too to get away from the heat. There's only the four of us left.'

'What is this anyway - some kind of police investigation?' Catherine swung her legs under her chair like a little girl, her champagne glass held high.

'Of course it is,' Tomoda said. 'Detectives and writers are one and the same.'

'What do you mean by that?' I said.

'You know - always asking questions, sticking their noses into people's affairs.' Was he being ironic? He was practically rolling in his chair with laughter.

'You know I didn't mean it like that. It's just - things are a bit quiet tonight, aren't they? Are you the only customer?'

'It's the summer. This business is dead when it's so hot.'

'It doesn't seem to stop you from coming every night.'

'I'm different. Most people like to get out of town, away from the heat. I'm happier here with the girls. And besides, I like having the place to myself. It's my own private paradise. Everyone else is in the doldrums and I'm just hitting my peak. I can do whatever I like, and there's no one to stop me.'

'Tom, Tom! We've finished the champagne. Why don't you buy us another bottle?' Rosa was up to her usual tricks.

'All right! And music! Come on, play us something!' Suddenly Tomoda lurched out of his chair. He took Catherine in his arms and lifted her into the air. She was still clutching her champagne glass, holding it out of harm's way in one hand as Tomoda stumbled on his heels and began to

spin Catherine's crimson-clad body like a waterwheel, champagne glass and all.

'Wait, Tom! Stop it! Let me have my drink!' she squealed, pronouncing her words with a sharp edge that no Japanese woman could have produced.

Flora sat down at the piano and began to play. 'Come on, Tom – why don't you and Catherine dance a tango for us?'

'Your wish is my command. I say, K, have you ever seen me dance a tango?'

'I'm not sure I have.'

'Watch and learn. It goes like this.'

Still holding Catherine aloft, Tomoda gave her body one long swing and dropped her to the floor. No sooner had her feet hit the ground than she was up and dancing the tango hand in hand with Tomoda. I had seen Tomoda dance several times before, and I knew that he danced well. But this was the first time I had seen him dance a tango. Apart from in films, in fact, I don't think I had ever seen anyone dance a tango – not even foreigners. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed that any Japanese – not even Tomoda – could dance with such grace and skill.

He held the woman's slender body close, one hand clamped tight against her back. His left hand gripped her right and they lunged forward together, their arms entwined, hips swinging. At times their movements were slow, at other times fast. But no matter how frantic the tempo, her body never left his. They were fastened together, inseparable. She followed his every step, fell in with his every move. If he turned and swirled, she turned and swirled too. They were like two pieces of fabric sewn together to make a single piece of clothing – he the white outer layer, she the red inner lining. It was clearly not the first time they had danced together like this. Tomoda seemed to shake off his usual heaviness; his body seemed to lift off the ground as his spirits soared. As they twisted and twirled in time to the music, Catherine's feet hardly touched the floor. She had evidently shaken off all sense of time or place – had forgotten, even, that she was dancing at all – as she spun and swirled, clinging to Tomoda's breast, lost in a daze of intoxication. Their dancing grew wilder and more impulsive. They veered away from each other, one to the left, the other to the right, then came together again. He flung her away from

him, caught her at an angle, then brought her upright with the tip of one finger, raising his arm like a man showing off a big fish he has just pulled from the water. She pirouetted five or six times on the spot, then fell back again, her face towards the ceiling. Her bobbed chestnut hair hung loose and shone in the light. Her champagne-flushed face turned crimson as the blood rushed to her head. Tomoda performed one dance after another, pausing only to gulp down a succession of different drinks between each dance. He was obviously quite intoxicated. He looked nervous and desperate to get drunk as quickly as possible, just as he had that night at the Plaisantin.

'No more! I'm finished!' He heaved a sigh and collapsed in a chair, pulling Flora down on to his knee. He held her close.

'What are you drinking, Tom?'

'Benedictine.'

'Here, let me try some.' Flora held her face under his glass and opened her mouth. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and thrust it between Tomoda's lips.

'Ugh! What kind of cigarette is this? It's so bitter!'

'If you don't like it, don't smoke it. I'll smoke it myself.'

'No, it's all right. Give it back, please,' Tomoda said, shaking his head and putting on his sweetest, most imploring tone of voice. And then he turned his glassy eyes to look at me. 'So what did you think of my tango?'

'It was quite something.'

'Quite something? What's that supposed to mean? Good or bad?'

'Good. Very good. Astonishing.'

'Astonishing! That's more like it. You'd better have a drink.'

'I don't know, I've had quite a bit already.'

'Quite a bit? Quite something? It's turning out to be *quite* a night for you, isn't it?' He laughed hilariously at his own joke.

'Where did you learn to dance like that, anyway?'

'It wasn't easy, let me tell you. It's not really something you can *study*, exactly – it's a question of application and practice. I served my time in every café, bar and cabaret I could find.'

'When was that?'

'Oh, a long time ago.'

'During your time in the West?'

'There you go again. I've told you before – unfortunately, I've never been to Europe.'

'But you didn't learn that in Japan, surely. It must have been while you were in Shanghai or somewhere like that.'

'Look out, here comes Inspector K again.'

I had been waiting for an opportunity to steer conversation to the topic that interested me, but with Tomoda apparently determined to play the fool, it wasn't easy. Rosa squeezed in next to him and Catherine stood behind them, draping her arms over the back of the chair and holding hands with Flora. Tomoda sat contentedly in the middle of this bouquet, occasionally leaning over to pass a drink to one of the girls. But I could tell he was still on his guard. Whenever he saw that I was about to speak, he leaped out of the chair before I could ask any awkward questions. 'Come on, Flora – the Apache!' Arms stretched wide, he lurched around the room in time to the music.

I should probably explain here that this peculiar behaviour was not unusual for him. Tonight was not the first time I had found him clowning around like this. In fact, he seemed to be in the middle of some game or other whenever I came. The girls were partly to blame, for the way they indulged his every whim – but the truth was that Tomoda seemed to enjoy horsing around like this more than anything else. He loved to be in a crowd, surrounded by noise, with the drinks flowing freely. As far as I knew, he had no regular relationship with any of the girls. He almost gave the impression that he wasn't interested in women at all. It was as though he had come just to pass the time. For a while, I suspected there might be something between him and Catherine but I never found any proof. When I asked the Filipino boy about it, he just shrugged. 'Mr Tom is a bit strange. He never has a woman. He likes taking all kinds of photographs and playing games, but that's all. Some people are funny that way.' I had witnessed this self-centred and unseemly wild behaviour of his too often in the past to be especially shocked by it now, but there was something almost abnormal about the way he was carrying on tonight. There was more to it than mere exuberance and the fact that no one was there to hold him back. He seemed anxious and pursued, as though he feared he might be caught at any moment.

Was this the explanation for his volatile behaviour – his drinking, his

raucousness and his tendency to jump about the room at every opportunity? Was he trying to escape from something? Now that I thought about it, I realized that his antics had started when he saw my face. When I arrived, he had been sitting quietly, talking to the girls. Something about me terrified him. I seemed to cast a fearful shadow over him whenever I appeared.

'Tom! What *are* you doing?'

'Oh dear! Tom's drunk again!'

Flora had given him a shove and he had landed on his backside on the floorboards. He was slumped like a pot-bellied Billiken doll, his legs sprawled uselessly in front of him. The girls took him by the hands and tried to pull him up, but his belly was too much for them and he kept slithering back to the floor. Catherine brought a hat from somewhere and put it on his head. Rosa removed her bead necklace and hung it around his neck. He suddenly crossed his legs and began to pose like the Great Buddha. At length he managed to get to his feet, clutching at Flora for support and swaying from side to side, still mumbling incoherently about the 'Apache dance'.

But if Tomoda's tango had been quite impressive, his interpretation of the Apache was just outrageous. There was a blurred flurry of movement. He seemed to be trying to fling his poor partner in every direction at once, hoisting her aloft and tipping her back like a man practising his judo moves. Flora's bright red hair blazed across her forehead. Her dress had come undone at the seams, and I caught an occasional flash of bare flesh around her shoulders as she spun. But both the man and the women around him were too drunk to care how indecent they looked. The sight of them jabbering away in English and French made me feel as though I were somewhere else. In a bar in Paris, perhaps: anywhere but Yokohama, Japan. I was marvelling at the strangeness of it all when I became aware of Tomoda calling my name. He came up behind me and grabbed my arm.

'I'm drunk, K. Even more than usual. There's no holding me back tonight. Come on, get up and dance,' he slurred. He was speaking English even with me now. A strange hint of aggression lurked in his voice, beneath the cover of his intoxication.

'Too energetic for me. I'll leave that kind of thing to you.'

'I know what's on your mind.' There was a glimmer in his eye. He jerked his chin towards Edna. 'What do you think, then?'

'Not bad.'

'Amazing, isn't she? I told you so. Anyway, if you're interested, don't let me stop you.'

Edna sat slightly apart from the group in a corner of the room. She had been toying with a guitar but she had given up trying to compete with the noise and put the instrument down. She sat with her hands folded gracefully in her lap. As a new arrival, she probably wasn't used to the place yet. I watched her lean back in her chair, lost in thought, her dark eyes fixed on a point in space. In spite of her European clothes she had a certain seductive quality about her that reminded me of a Japanese geisha. I looked again at the swell of her round shoulders. The hands in her lap were of the same ivory white as her shoulders. The pink of her fingernails stood out against her pale skin.

'She has a certain serenity about her that I like.'

'Well if you like her, why don't you take her upstairs?' said Tomoda. 'I assume you'll be staying the night?'

'I don't know - what time is it? About eleven?' I glanced at my pocket watch.

'Oh, come on. It's not like you've got anything to hurry home to.'

'All right. I don't mind. But that's not really what I came for.'

'Ha! Why, what's the big deal?'

'Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about. I had a reply from Mrs Matsunaga.' I pressed straight ahead before he could change the subject.

'No doubt about it, she says. You're her husband. Despite the photographs, she's still convinced that you and Matsunaga are one and the same person. Must be woman's intuition or something.'

'Wait a minute! You'll give me a heart attack. Is this some kind of joke? The whites of his eyes bulged as if he were struggling to swallow something stuck in his throat.'

'I'm not making it up. That's what she said. And that's not all. She wants me to tell her everything about you. Where you're from, what kind of person you are. She wants details.'

'What the hell's her problem? Can't she see we look nothing like each other? And still she's suspicious? It's insulting to you, too.'

'Getting angry won't make any difference. Her husband vanished into

thin air. The poor woman's at the end of her tether. Someone like that is going to imagine all kinds of things.'

'Oh, you're no use. No wonder you're a writer - show you a damsel in distress and you start gushing sympathy.'

'I do feel sympathy for her, as it happens. Something in her letter appealed to me. The way it was written - so modest and refined, not like the modern style at all. If I were her husband and I read a letter like that, I'd be back home in no time.'

'What's stopping you? I'm sure she wouldn't know the difference.'

'Why don't you write to her yourself instead of making jokes about it? You could give her a few details about yourself, make it clear once and for all that you have no connection to the Matsunaga family. You could send her a copy of your family register.'

'Completely unnecessary.'

'Maybe for you. But what about her? Don't you feel even a little bit sorry for her?'

'I have no sympathy for that woman at all.'

'But if you leave things as they are, she'll become even more suspicious. Doesn't that bother you?'

'She can go to hell. I sent her the photographs and that's the end of it. I want nothing more to do with her. Let's talk about something else.'

'So what am I supposed to do? I don't want to let her down. She's relying on me. Not that there's much I *could* tell her even if I wanted to. I don't know anything about you either.'

Tomoda was glaring at me as if I had just threatened to kill him. 'What do you mean? You'd tell her more if you could?'

'I would. I've already told her everything I know.'

'Like what?'

'Like I said - everything I know. What we talked about the other night. How long I've known you, the ring . . . everything.'

At the mention of the word 'ring', his eyes flashed with rage. He raised his hand as if to strike me, and if we had been alone, I think he really would have. Instead, he started stomping about the room furiously, cursing under his breath.

'How could you? I should have known. Never trust the Japanese! Drinking buddies have a moral code. We don't go blabbing each other's secrets!'

'Hey! What are you talking about in Japanese?' Rosa shouted, her voice thick with drink. This was followed by the voice of one of the other girls. 'Yeah! Shut up! No Japanese allowed!'

'But everything's relative, even morals. I decided it would be more immoral for me to lie to her. And anyway, at the risk of making you even angrier, I'm starting to think she might have her reasons to be suspicious about you.'

'What do you mean?' Tomoda had been pacing up and down the room, but he stopped suddenly now as if a bullet had hit him.

'Think about it. We've known each other for years. But every few years you suddenly disappear and I don't see you at all. And the times that you *are* here match up exactly with when Matsunaga's away. I just didn't notice it until I read her letter. It seemed strange – so I wrote back to her, that's all, just giving her my impressions.'

'You mean to say you . . .' But Tomoda never got to finish whatever it was he was going to say. Somebody was playing with the switch that controlled the room's unusual lighting system. There was a click and the room turned red. Then another, and the room turned blue. Click! Click! Click! Suddenly, the room was plunged into darkness and we heard Catherine's piercing voice: 'If you two don't behave yourselves!'

'Tom! Stop talking in Japanese! It's so boring.'

'Yes, Tom! And why do you have to fight like that? You've had too much to drink.'

'It's all right. Calm down. Nothing's wrong. My writer friend here has been having problems with some crazy woman, that's all. I was just putting him straight on the matter. Isn't that right?'

'Exactly right, I'm afraid.'

Tomoda started to laugh hysterically and the lights began to flash again. But in the dazzle that accompanied every flick of the switch, I could no longer make out the expression on his face.

What became of Tomoda Ginzō after that? I know nothing of what happened next. From that night on, Tomoda stopped coming to Number 27 and the house itself closed down soon after.

The same thing had happened in 1915, the last time he disappeared. His lair back then had been Number 10, and this too was abandoned not long after he went missing. It could mean only one thing: Tomoda had entered his third period of obscurity. It remained to be seen whether his disappearance had anything to do with Matsunaga Gisuke. Nothing of note happened for nearly a year.

In October 1921, I received word from Shigeko informing me that her husband had returned to the family home in Yagyū. As on the previous occasions, he had been away a little over four years.

The joy the family felt to see him home again, the happy reunion of parent and child, husband and wife – all this and more was described at length in Shigeko's letter. I will leave the details to the reader's imagination. One thing I ought to mention concerns the daughter, Taeko, who had been so desperate to see her father. According to the letter, she had begun to shake off her illness soon after he came home and was now well on her way to a full recovery. One happy event followed another for the Matsunaga family.

Shigeko continued to write from time to time to inform me of Matsunaga's progress. I was the only person in whom she could confide about her husband's puzzling behaviour. Her letters gave me a glimpse of the kind of life he was living back in the country. It was clear that he had returned in much the same fashion as before. He had appeared without warning late one autumn afternoon dressed in Japanese attire, a single travel bag in his hand, looking exhausted and thin. He said nothing of where he had spent the past four years. He doted on his family and was given to tearful outbursts. Shigeko had promptly confirmed that the familiar items – the postcard, the photographs, the seal and the amethyst ring – were still in their usual place inside the bag. 'For the life of me, I cannot think why he still holds on to these things,' she wrote in one of her letters. 'Perhaps if I sent the photographs and ring to you, you might be able to tell me once and for all whether they are the same items you have seen in Mr Tomoda's possession. You must think it is absurd for me to persist in my suspicions now that my husband has come home. But how can I be sure that he will not leave again in another three or four years? If only I knew one way or the other. I sometimes look at the photographs you were good enough to send. Often the differences are so striking that

it seems ludicrous to suspect they could be the same person. Mr Tomoda is so much younger-looking than my husband, and my husband is so frail and thin. At other times, though, I feel almost convinced that the similarities between them are real, and I become more suspicious than ever.'

It was early in the following year, towards the end of March 1922, that I took a trip to Kyoto and Nara. I had been in my hotel for several days when a letter arrived from Shigeko, who had seen an article in one of the papers that mentioned where I was staying. 'I understand you will be spending some time in Nara, which is only a few miles from us here. I would be so happy if we could meet. Yagyū is on the way to Tsukigase as you come from Kasagi Station on the Kansai Line. You may have heard of the famous plum blossoms at Tsukigase, which are at their best just now. If you came to see the blossoms, you would almost certainly pass through the village on your way. Would you take the time to stop by and give me a chance to thank you in person for all your help over the past two years? Also, I should like very much for you to meet my husband. It is selfish of me, I know, but I can't help wondering whether the mystery that has troubled me for so long might not be solved once and for all if you were to see my husband with your own eyes. He knows that I have written to you, but has never pressed me for details. I told him I wrote to say how much I had enjoyed your books. He seemed happy to hear that I was able to find some solace in your work while he was away.'

My curiosity piqued, I decided to pay her a visit at once – more for the sake of getting a glimpse of Matsunaga Gisuke than because I was interested in the famous blossoms. I left Nara at eight the next morning. Kasagi was the third station on the line. A bus ran from the station to Tsukigase, but it was no weather for sitting cooped up in a bus. Under a clear blue sky I set out on foot along the road that led the two or three miles to the village of Yagyū.

Several motor cars wheezed past as I walked, full of people on their way to see the blossoms. Clouds of dust kicked up by the passing buses sullied the clear air and spoilt the view a little, but I knew as soon as I started out that I had made the right decision. It is difficult to convey a sense of the happiness I felt as I walked through the Yamato countryside that spring day, but anyone who has had a similar experience will understand what I felt – the sense of wellbeing that was mine as I wound my

way slowly along the path. The road I walked along must have been the prefectural road that passes through Tsukigase to Iga no Ueno. Yoshino aside, Yamato is flat country, with almost no real mountains or deep, secluded valleys. Bright, almost white roads criss-cross the terrain, linking scattered villages, crossing streams and skirting sloping hillsides. At first glance, it is some of the most ordinary-looking scenery in the world. But those peaceful, unpretentious fields were just made to be looked at on a spring day like this. There was beauty in everything, even in the most commonplace things: in the walls of the earthen storehouses off in the distance, in the thatched roofs, in the trees that lined the roads, in the paddy fields and bamboo groves. Everything danced before my eyes in the sunlight. My spirits soared.

I had on a thick winter coat and sweat soaked the back of my shirt as I walked. From time to time I stopped to admire the view. Somewhere in the distance a reddish mist floated across the foothills; birds twittered ceaselessly as they flitted by overhead. I had wandered into a painting of 'The Idyllic Village'. The legends of *The Peach Blossom Spring* must have been inspired by scenery like this, I thought. Sloping fields planted with tea stretched all around. The hillsides swelled, rising and falling in gentle feminine curves, the rows of tea plants glowing like velvet jewels in the sunlight. How magical it all looked! I quite forgot the purpose that had brought me here. I felt I could walk these hillsides all day without a hint of tiredness.

Yagyū turned out to be bigger than I had expected and I still had a fair distance to cover after I entered the village. But I knew the Matsunaga house was an old one and I recognized it as soon as I saw it.

Before I had even sent in my card, Shigeko herself was at the gate to meet me. She had been standing in the garden waiting. A girl of three or four toddled behind her. This was the second daughter, Fumiko, who had been born in August 1919.

'It's such a nice day, I just had a feeling you might stop by. What glorious weather!' She looked much like her photograph, with her long hair done up in an old-fashioned chignon, but with her cheeks blushing in the sunlight she looked at least a couple of years younger than thirty-five. As I had expected, she was well spoken and wore a simple silk kimono that suited her well.

The Matsunaga residence was a dark old house, more or less unchanged from the way it must have looked in the mid nineteenth century, when it would have been home to a prosperous local farmer. Shigeko led me into the parlour. 'My husband will be down in a few moments,' she said. We chatted comfortably while we waited. I began by asking her about her elegant handwriting, which had made such an impression on me when I received her first letter. Her formal education, she said, had ended after she graduated from a girls' school in Nara, but she had continued to read and practise calligraphy in her spare time after marrying into the Matsunaga family. I learned that her husband was a descendant of Matsunaga Hisahide, a samurai who had risen to prominence during the civil wars of the Middle Ages. The family had lived here for nearly four hundred years. The traditional script and style of her letters owed more to family tradition than her own personal preference, she said. She told me that in their early days together, before his mother died, Matsunaga used to rail against the family's old-fashioned ways. The time-worn customs had continued even after his mother's death, and for a while she wondered whether this was what had driven him away. But over the past decade his tastes had changed. He was much mellower now. Nothing pleased him more than to see his wife studying *waka* poetry³ and reading the classics. Recently he had taken to setting her assignments, handing her verses from the Lotus Sutra to copy as calligraphy practice. He had apparently developed a taste for the Chinese classics himself, and often disappeared into the storehouse to rummage through a collection of texts that dated back to his grandfather's days. 'He's getting better all the time,' she said when I asked about her husband's health. 'But he's still not fully fit. He's been talking about another pilgrimage to the thirty-three Kannon this spring – it did wonders for him the last time we went.'

His weight was down to just ninety pounds. He had a weak stomach and rarely ate more than one meal a day. He almost never drank alcohol, and took great care over his health. In spite of his weak constitution, he had never been seriously ill. She didn't seem too worried about him: indeed, she said, people of his type were often the ones who lived to a ripe old age. And Taeko, thankfully, had made a full recovery since her father's return. She was living with relatives in Nara and studying at a girls' school there.

Shigeko seemed just like any other happy wife and mother as she responded quietly to my questions. She was much more relaxed and forthcoming than I would have expected from her letters. If she could only be assured that her husband was home to stay this time, there was no reason why she shouldn't live a quiet and peaceful life here in this beautiful village, her days as free from clouds as the spring skies outside.

She was less flustered than I had expected when I mentioned the travel bag. 'I wish you could see it, but there's no way I could bring it out while he's here,' she said. Instead, she gave me a detailed description and told me everything she could remember about the shape of the bag and the design of the amethyst ring. It was impossible to be certain without seeing it myself, but everything she said made it sound like a perfect match for the ring I knew so well. As we talked, there came the mournful sound of an invalid's unsteady shuffling in the corridor outside, and the master of the house entered the room at last.

A look of embarrassment crossed his face as our eyes met. He would be forty-two this year, but he looked nearer fifty. Thick wrinkles covered his neck and forehead. His hair was greying, his temples already white. His prominent Adam's apple quivered whenever he spoke. In fact, every bone in his body seemed to shake. He looked like a shrivelled tree draped with a kimono, or a puppet whose strings had become tangled and were in danger of snapping at any moment, sending him crashing to the floor in pieces. Poor Gisuke seemed to share such fears himself. He moved warily, as if his body were a fragile porcelain jar. Even after he sat down, he had to lean a hand on the tatami to support his unsteady torso. Any second now, I thought, he's going to totter over or have a dizzy spell and fall flat on his back. Clearly he was still reeling from the effects of what must have been a severe nervous breakdown.

Even the sharpness in his eyes that I had noticed in his photograph now looked like a symptom of his illness. They were the eyes of a brooding misanthrope or a man haunted by obsessive thoughts. Nothing in his appearance reminded me of Tomoda. The sharp, sallow face with its bristly whiskers, the croaking voice that emerged on the rare occasions when he could be coaxed into speech, the tobacco-stained teeth . . . I didn't have to look at him for long as he struggled to stay upright to know that he was not Tomoda. I got to my feet. I had seen enough.

'He's not always so quiet,' Shigeko said as she showed me to the door. 'He can be quite chatty when the mood takes him. He even asks about you sometimes. I'm afraid he's often like this with people he doesn't know well. I'm sorry. After you've come all this way . . .'

'Please, don't mention it. But I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. Your husband is not Tomoda Ginzō. You must have been mistaken when you said you saw some resemblance. I hope you'll take good care of him. He seems awfully frail.' A look of disappointment crossed her face as we parted. She stood at the gate as I walked away, following me with her eyes.

In the end, seduced by the fine weather, I spent the rest of the day touring the local sights. I continued to Tsukigase and on the way back stopped in at Iga no Ueno, a small but pleasant town where I visited the site of Araki Mataemon's famous vendetta and paid my respects at Bashō's grave. Later, I admired the bonsai plum trees at the Taiseirō inn, where I stayed the night.

5

'You're a writer, K – I'm sure you have all kinds of strange stories locked away inside that head of yours. But the tale I'm about to tell you is so bizarre that I hardly know where to begin, even though it's the story of my own life. By the time I finish, I expect you'll barely be able to believe what you're hearing.'

Tomoda Ginzō paused and downed another glass of cognac. I had run into him earlier that evening at the Café Sans Souci in Kobe. It was June this year, 1925, and this was our first meeting since that night at Number 27.

'I was born in the village of Yagyū, in the Soekami district of Yamato Province. I come from an old family – we're the direct descendants of Matsunaga Hisahide from back in the Middle Ages. My name as it appears on the family register is Matsunaga Gisuke. But I know what you're thinking. Who was the Matsunaga Gisuke you met two years ago? Patience. All will be revealed.

'In 1905, when I was twenty-five, I married a young woman by the name of Shigeko. This was no heart-warming story of young romance, by the way. I was just out of university and getting married was the last thing on my mind. But if you know anything about the way these old families

operate, you'll understand the position I was in. I'd been head of the family since my father died. There was no way they would leave me alone to do as I pleased. Before long, the summons arrived from my mother, ordering me to come home from Tokyo and get ready to welcome Shigeko as my wife. Let's just say the prospect didn't exactly fill me with joy.

'The thought of spending the rest of my days in the middle of nowhere made me despair. I was a young man bursting with energy – how could I enjoy an empty life like that? I'm a born hedonist. And lazy too – there's nothing I hate more than the idea of honest toil. Anyway, for better or worse I didn't exactly have to worry about where my next meal was coming from. I spent most of my time daydreaming about escaping to a life of pleasure.

'I was in love with the city. I never made it as far as Tokyo, but from time to time I did manage to conjure up business that would take me to Kyoto or Osaka. I spent time and money galore in the pleasure quarters of Gion and Shinmachi. But eventually I'd had enough of geishas and teahouses and I started to look for other things to do. In those days, though, there *wasn't* much else. I started to get desperate. But then my mother died.

'It was as though a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. The worst of my troubles were over now, I thought. At last, I'm free. The family could nag and disapprove all they wanted, but I wasn't afraid any more. I itched to get away, free to go wherever I liked! And once I found a foreign country that suited me, I need never come back to Japan again! I decided to fulfil an old dream and set out for Paris.

'You know me today as a Japanese man who lives the life of a Westerner. And you know that wine and women mean everything to me. You could say that I've dedicated my life to these two essential items. One problem: I don't like Japanese drink, and I don't like Japanese women. I worship everything about the West.

'Probably it was my upbringing that was to blame – growing up in that old house in the country. Of course I was going to react against all the suffocating, old-fashioned traditions. A friend during my student days in Tokyo was another bad influence. He took me to Yokohama a couple of times, where I entered a dream world that few Japanese in those days had ever seen. It was my first glimpse into the world of the white man's

pleasures. From that moment, I had nothing but contempt for Oriental tastes and traditions. It was all so gloomy – just like that old house in Yagyū. The idea of elegance and restraint disgusted me. It was the exact opposite of everything that was genuine and honest in life, of everything natural and spontaneous. It's not a culture for healthy young people with the energy and drive to make a life for themselves. Doddering old fogies put up with it because they have no choice. They force themselves to find meaning and pleasure in their tedious lives. But really it's nothing more than a sad and twisted mix of inhibition and self-deceit. Even when he does indulge in pleasure, the Oriental never really lets himself go. It's all so half-hearted.

'Subtle, they call it. Suggestive. Refined. What a lot of nonsense. It's a question of aptitude. Orientals just can't deal with a full dose of excitement. They're not up to it physically. Take singing. Here in the East, no one would dream of really opening up and belting out the loudest voice they can produce. It's more *refined*, you see, to sing in that lonely little whine. And women. When a woman is preparing herself to enter mixed company, does she do whatever she can to make herself attractive? Quite the opposite. She buries whatever charms she might have under several layers of sleeves and sashes. It's supposed to be more *alluring* that way, you see. Poppycock. The truth is that they *don't* because they *can't*.

If they try to hit a high note, all that comes out is a thin falsetto squawk and they can't even hold that for long. And as for the women – the truth is that the Oriental woman doesn't have much to show off even if she wanted to. A muddy complexion and no curves at all. That's what I mean: they're just not up to it physically. But there's nothing they can do about it. They have no choice – and so they pretend that their way is more refined. Well, as soon as I realized what was going on, I started to despise the Orient. The people's yellow faces disgusted me. My problem, of course, was that I was no better – I had the same complexion myself. Every time I looked in the mirror I was reminded of my tragedy. Why had I been born into this land of yellow people? And the longer I stayed here, the yellower my face seemed to become.

I dreamed of leaving this gloomy, lukewarm, spirit-sapping land behind me and escaping to the West. To a land where the voice soars free, singing songs of joy! No more of this stunted culture with its precious

talk of elegance and subtlety and restraint. I wanted to be surrounded by people whose bodies looked more beautiful the less was left to the imagination. To the West! Where a world existed that was the very opposite of this land of subtle hints and things left unsaid – a world of strong colours, poisonous stimulants and alcohol that scalds the tongue. I longed to reach a place of extreme hedonism, where people pushed themselves to their very limits in pursuit of pleasure – a world of insatiable desires and unending intoxication. I set my sights on Paris, the quintessential heart of the sensual West I longed to find.

I set off in the summer of 1906 when Shigeko was pregnant with our first child. Secretly, I'd resolved that I would never come back to Japan alive and I took steps to ensure that the family would be secure after I was gone. I'm sure she suspected the decision I'd made. She must have wept and cursed her luck. She knew now what a heartless man she had married. But she was powerless. She had no choice but to do what I said.

To be honest, I did feel a slight twinge of remorse as the day of departure drew near. But all my doubts disappeared as soon as I boarded the ship. I didn't even have to wait till we got to France. The fun started as soon as we arrived in Shanghai. I fell in love in every port we visited. Forget about Paris, I thought, this is where I want to be! I'll make my home here with these wonderful women by my side. I said the same thing everywhere we stopped. In every city there was a new world waiting for me – stranger and stranger worlds like nothing I'd ever seen.

My infatuation and intoxication grew deeper with every mile we travelled from Japan. When I reached Paris I threw myself wholeheartedly into a life of decadence. The bashful Oriental mind can hardly imagine the things I found there. Paris was a whirlpool of lust and desire – a dizzying vortex of excess, debauchery and sick perversions. It was everything I'd dreamed it would be – a paradise of sensual pleasures. I leaped in headfirst, desperate to be sucked into the whirlpool. I gave myself up to it, body and soul. A true hedonist is quite happy to pay with his life for pleasure. Alcohol, tobacco, gourmandizing and women: a hedonist would happily sacrifice his health and life to satisfy his appetite for these toxic pleasures. I plunged into an ocean of debauchery. I lived in the moment, resigned to the knowledge that each wave of pleasure might be my last. And these premonitions of mortality only made me more reckless.

Wine and women were more irresistible than ever, and I dived to the very depths of depravity.

'Within a year and a half of arriving in Paris, I realized that I'd become completely assimilated. I had become utterly Westernized, not just mentally but physically. Most people who travel to the West experience something similar, I suppose. But I can't believe that many have ever exhibited symptoms as extreme as mine – and within such a short space of time. My entire physique had changed. At first, I hardly noticed. But occasionally I'd run into other Japanese travellers, and none of them would recognize me as a compatriot. Some thought I was Italian. Others took me for a Spaniard. The true extent of the change I had undergone hit me when I was drinking with a girlfriend in a café one evening.

'A Japanese man was sitting at the next table and when I looked closely I realized I knew him. It was my old friend S. We'd been at university together and had been quite close at one stage. But he obviously didn't recognize me, even when he looked straight into my face. How odd, I thought. And then it dawned on me: I had changed so much that even my old friends couldn't recognize me. I cannot describe the happiness I felt at that moment. I walked over to his table, looked him in the eye, and spoke to him in French. Even when he heard my voice, he didn't recognize me. I was overjoyed.

'I raced home, my feet hardly touching the ground. I ran to my rooms and stood before the mirror in raptures, mesmerized by my own reflection. I remembered some photographs I had had made just before leaving Japan. I dug them out and compared them with my reflection in the mirror. What a contrast! It was incredible! Face, build, skin colour, the expression in the eyes . . . Was it really possible that a simple change of environment could alter a man so much in just a year and a half?

'I'd always been thin at home but I'd started to put on weight as soon as I boarded the ship. I'd been drinking night and day throughout the voyage, and by the time I arrived in France my clothes didn't fit me any more. So I knew I'd put on weight. But I hadn't realized until now just how radically this had changed me. It wasn't just that I looked different. As I looked at the photographs and compared them with the figure in the mirror before me, it would have been closer to the truth to say that I'd become someone else entirely. Matsunaga Gisuke, born in the village

of Soekami in the province of Yamato, the descendant of Matsunaga Hisahide, was no more. He had vanished from the world and been replaced by someone else. The man I now saw before me was someone of no discernible race or nationality. You couldn't have said whether he was Japanese, Italian or Spanish. And this was me! This mysterious man was what I had become! A shiver ran through me. It was like something from one of those strange Western stories about doppelgängers. Except that in my case, I was the one who had turned into someone else. I felt possessed. I looked down at Matsunaga's photograph again. Was this really the man I had been just eighteen months ago? It was no surprise my friend hadn't recognized me. I hardly recognized myself.

'That moment made up my mind. I told myself: I am no longer Matsunaga Gisuke. Who was this man in the photograph – this spindly, gloomy-faced Oriental? I wanted nothing more to do with him. Our relationship is over, I said, and tossed his picture to the floor. A sense of joy welled up inside me like nothing I had felt before.

'I was Japanese no longer! I had been transformed into a Westerner! I was mad with joy. I clapped my hands and stamped my feet. I sang and danced around the room. Images came to me of Japanese food and clothes and customs. But they came to me not as memories of things I had experienced myself. They were like scraps of information I'd picked up about the lives of a faraway tribe. To get there you'd have to travel down to Marseilles and board a ship for the Orient. Eastward and eastward you'd sail, crossing the seas for six weeks or more until finally you reached a small island country called Japan, where the people have yellow faces and live in dark, gloomy houses. They speak in tiny, mumbling voices, and in the morning they sip miso soup out of wooden bowls coated in black lacquer. What a dank, colourless existence! And they don't even have any furniture in these shadowy houses. No beds, no chairs, nothing. They spend their lives down on the floor, crouching under low ceilings and sitting on their heels. Just imagining it made me feel claustrophobic. How suffocating! If the person I was now – I went by the name of Jacques Morin since leaving Matsunaga behind forever – if I had been dropped down into that world and forced to live like that again, I don't think I would have survived a single day.

'I know what you're thinking. What am I doing in Japan now? Why

didn't I live out the rest of my days in Europe? You might well ask. The devil was toying with me again. As I told you, I was in love with Paris and the life I had there. It was a life of perfect indulgence – one pleasure after another, day after day after day. I had no intention of coming back – I expected to die there when the time came. And I kept getting fatter. At my peak, I weighed nearly 170 pounds. My skin got whiter all the time, the redness in my cheeks more and more pronounced. I was aglow with health. I had resolved to stay in Paris if it killed me. But, in fact, my new lifestyle seemed to be doing me no harm at all. I plunged deeper into the world of the senses – determined to drain the cup of pleasure to the last dregs. No matter how deeply I drank, it was never enough. If a man wants to be fit and healthy, all he needs to do is live the way they do in the West. Live life to the full. Your appetites are there to be satisfied. Have your fill, whether it's food or women you hunger for. The self-effacing Oriental philosophy of restraint just makes people weak.

'I was the living proof. Since I'd become Westernized and bulked up, I'd become the picture of health and vitality! And it wasn't clean living and a healthy diet that did it, that's for sure. It didn't seem to matter how I neglected my health: I got bigger all the time. What better evidence could there be for the benefits of positive living than the fine physique I had developed since I came to Europe? I was convinced I had made the right decision. I became reckless.

'How wonderful life was back then! A pleasant climate, wonderful food and not a care in the world. I enjoyed a string of successful love affairs. If I gambled, I won. I was sailing on an ocean of happiness with the wind set fair behind me – all I had to do was sit back and let the breezes blow me from one happy day to the next. I still had plenty of money. And even if I somehow managed to spend it all, there were plenty of ways for me to make a living, so long as I wasn't too proud to lower myself a little. This was Paris – even black Africans can live pretty well in Paris. And if it didn't work out, I was ready to die by the roadside. So there I was – optimistic and carefree and ready for whatever the future might hold. Or so I thought.

'That's when things started to go wrong. Just when I thought nothing could harm me, up jumped the devil and turned everything upside down. It was a beautiful day when it happened – a bit like one of those days you

sometimes get in Japan as summertime fades into autumn. I was out for an afternoon stroll along one of the boulevards. Everything was perfect and I stopped for a moment to enjoy the view. I stood and looked up through the branches of the plane trees into the clear blue sky. And in that instant – and why, I've never known – I lost my balance. I started to shake. My vision blurred. I saw spots dancing across the sky. Then everything went dark and I almost fell over backwards. It ended in an instant, and before I had time to realize what was happening, I was back to normal again. I went on my way and forgot all about it. Until it happened again. And again.

It was the same every time – I'd look up at something and suddenly my vision would swim. I became dizzy. I'd feel a sharp, heavy tug at my neck, as if I had a lead weight attached to the back of my head, pulling me backwards. Over time, it got worse. After a while, it didn't just happen when I looked up any more but sometimes when I looked down. One time I dropped a glove in the street. I bent down to pick it up and felt all the blood in my body rush to my head. The veins in my neck bulged and my whole face turned bright red like a boiled octopus. I could feel myself losing consciousness – any moment I was going to fall flat on my face. What the hell was happening? It was terrifying. I had no idea what was wrong. I tried to shrug it off and waited for it to pass. The occasional dizzy spell is nothing to worry about, I told myself. Anyone could have them. But it was no use. Soon it was happening every time I washed my hair or bent down to tie my shoelaces.

'The worst time was when I was eating a bowl of hot soup in a restaurant one day. It happened suddenly, as always. One moment everything was normal, the next I was in the throes of an attack. My face turned red and I could feel myself about to pass out. I thought I was going to collapse into my soup. Luckily I managed to pull myself back just in time; I came to my senses as my nose was about to hit the soup. But it was a shock. Maybe the soup was too hot. But if I was going to have an attack every time I bent my head to eat, I was going to have to be more careful where I took my meals from now on. Was I having a breakdown? Or was some horrible virus wreaking havoc with my brain?

It was strange, but now I started to hear the voice of cowardice whispering in my ear. I'd made up my mind to die here if need be. And as far

as I was concerned, nothing had changed. But these dizzy spells terrified me. My heart started racing, and I felt as though I were about to lose control completely. Cowardice creeps up on you. It eats away at your soul before you know what's happening. And when it strikes, it's irresistible. You might think you're ready to die, but there's no defending yourself against an attack of cowardice. "I don't mind dying" is not the same as "I am not afraid of death". The two conditions are perfectly compatible. You might not mind the idea of dying, but the fear remains.

I found myself trembling at the slightest thing. What was wrong with me? I'd told myself I didn't mind dying – and now I was scared out of my wits by a little thing like this? But it didn't make any difference how I reasoned with myself. Suddenly, without warning, my whole body would start to shake and tremble. The colour drained from my face. I looked like clay. I was drenched in a cold sweat, unsteady on my feet. Sometimes it happened in the streets, in a crowd of people. All I could do was escape as quickly as possible. I'd make a mad dash for it, scampering home wildly like some lunatic, tugging out my hair in clumps. If it happened at home, I'd pound my feet against the floorboards and throw myself against the doors and walls. I picked things up and hurled them across the room. Eventually, I would dash to the washstand and douse myself with cold water.

The palpitations grew worse and worse. My chest pounded as though my heart were going to explode. The attacks never lasted more than a few minutes, and after a few shots of brandy I usually felt more or less normal again. But I never knew when the next attack was coming. I lived in fear, a bottle of brandy constantly at my side.

At first, these foolish attacks only happened when I was alone. So long as no one else noticed anything, it was easy enough to deal with the effects. But before long this changed too. In those days I was obsessed with a young chorus girl called Suzanne. We met as often as we could, and spent most of our nights and days together. And then, one evening, it happened. We met in our usual place, and were sitting back, exchanging sweet nothings on a chaise longue. Now, this Suzanne had pure skin as white as alabaster. And as I lay there admiring the arm in front of me, I was struck again by how beautiful she was. I'd spent many a happy hour in rapt contemplation of her skin before, but that night, for some reason, I was more bewitched than ever. I was transfixed by her pure white arm.

I allowed my eyes to move slowly up her arm to her shoulders. Ah, her shoulders! They were like nothing I'd ever seen – pale, shimmering perfection, even more sublime than her arms! I felt a shudder run through me. Every hair on my body stood on end. As the dazzle of her white skin flashed upon my optic nerve, I felt the world start to spin. I felt dizzy and there was a cold stabbing in my chest. Suddenly my sense of awe (How white her skin! How perfect!) turned to fear. My legs shook, as if I had made the mistake of looking down from the top of a cliff into the gaping abyss below. I know it sounds ridiculous to talk about a woman's pale skin as something terrifying. But it was so beautiful! And it belonged to the woman I loved more than anyone else in the world! This was enough to set anyone's heart hammering.

"What's wrong? You're so pale," Suzanne said in a voice of tender concern. She slid over beside me. As she moved closer, her white skin loomed before my eyes. My terror reached a climax. I thrust away her hand and dashed to the washstand to throw cold water over my head.

"Suzanne! Brandy! Quickly!" And that's the last I remember. One moment I was screaming for brandy, the next I was out cold.

It pains me to think about it even now. To be blessed with such a wonderful woman and to be rendered incapable of enjoying the act of love with her! I fled her embrace and trudged back to my lodgings alone, cursing myself. The first thing I had to do was get through the following evening. We had an arrangement to meet again and I knew that any repetition of tonight's performance would mean the end. The best thing I could do was to finish the relationship myself as painlessly as possible.

Not that I had tired of her. I knew she would be waiting for me and I could barely stop myself from rushing to see her right away. As soon as my attack had passed, her pure white skin, which had inspired such horror and revulsion the night before, once again took on the air of something magical. How could I have contemplated separating from such a wonderful woman? I was more in love with her than ever.

I plucked up my courage and set out for her house, a prayer in my heart all the way. We managed to meet again several times in this way, but I suffered at least a mild attack almost every time. To make matters worse, it wasn't just her skin that set me off any more – anything pleasurable could act as a trigger. Once my excitement reached a certain pitch, it was all over.

I'd drive myself on, climbing towards a peak of excitement – and then, suddenly, a valley of fear would open up and I'd come thudding down with a crash. When her burning lips drew close to mine, when she wrapped her arms around me as if she never meant to let me go, when we lay giggling and tickling each other in innocent play . . . My attacks always came at the worst possible moments. The greater the pleasure on offer, the worse the fear became: as if it were determined to shatter our happiness into pieces. Even when I didn't have an attack, the terrifying thought that it might happen again stopped me from enjoying myself. Here I was, a dedicated hedonist pledged to enjoy life to the full – and look at the state I was in! I'd lost the ability to practise my faith!

'Listen, K. Try to understand. Can you imagine the anguish I was facing every day? My life was a misery. The skies over Paris were as clear as ever. The sun still shone, and there were more beautiful women on the streets than you could count. But none of it brought me pleasure any more. It was torture. If I looked up at the sky my head spun. Go out in the sunshine, and the blood would rush to my head. The sight of white skin terrified me. I was inconsolable.

'My eyes were so bad by now that I couldn't stand the sunlight. I took to hiding like a mole in my gloomy room where no sunlight could penetrate. And then one day an image came into my mind of another room I'd once known. A room just as dark as this one, but somehow gentler and less oppressive. I remembered the old house back home in Yamato.

'It was only a few years since I'd left, but my memories seemed to come from the ancient past. I remembered the old life I'd led in that house for the first two decades of my life. The custom we kept up even now of lighting old-fashioned lanterns when we went to bed; the dreamy flickering light they made by your pillow. The smoke-blackened ceilings and main pillar of the dark bedroom. My wife's peaceful face in the shadowy lamplight, wrapped under the bedclothes and dropping off to sleep.

'What was I doing, thinking nostalgically of Japan like this? I tried to drive the thoughts from my mind. But the harder I tried, the more insistently the memories came back. I was overcome with sentimentality. I felt an indescribable longing for the past. And it wasn't just the old village.

'I thought back on the times I'd spent in the pleasure quarters. Memories of Gion and Shinmachi – the evocative twang of the shamisen, the

delicate, lyrical songs sung with refinement and restraint. Everything I had once rejected; everything I had dismissed as self-serving lies and deceit. But now I discovered with a jolt that the memory of these things had a strange power to calm my ravaged nerves.

'But that wasn't the worst of it. I started to feel that white skin lacked something – a gentleness and sweetness and wholehearted sympathy I knew I could find only in a woman whose skin was tinged with yellow. I imagined the taste of miso soup in the morning. Pickles and rice, soup made from kelp stock, and raw sea bream arranged neatly on a tray. The simplicity and balance of the colours! I dreamed of the clean taste of Japanese food. I cursed myself as I did it. What was I thinking, longing for Japan shamelessly like a lovesick fool? What had happened to my pride?

'But it was no use. I couldn't stop the thoughts in my head. It was the same everywhere I looked. The tastes and fashions of the West seemed loud and vulgar to me now – shallow and without substance. I heard a voice constantly in my ear: *You are an Oriental. You'll never belong here. You can never become fully Westernized.* It followed me everywhere I went. Three times a day when I sat down to my meals, I would hear it taunting me again: *Give it up, it would say. You're not fooling anyone. You don't really think this stuff tastes good. You don't really like drinking from these glittering glasses and cutting up your food with metal prongs and saws. And look at that tablecloth and these porcelain plates. Oh, it's all very neat and hygienic, I suppose. But it's not exactly subtle, is it? Where's the depth to it? Wouldn't you rather eat with chopsticks from a set of lacquered bowls? Wouldn't that agree with you better? Don't you think it's slightly barbaric to hack at food with a knife and fork like this? It's closer to the way animals eat.*

'On and on it went, trying to tempt me back into my old ways. If I went to the opera, my evening would be ruined by a voice in my head that gave me no peace. *Oh, please! This is too much! I don't care how hard you try to pretend to appreciate European music, I refuse to believe that you enjoy this noise! You might fool everybody else – but you'll never fool me.*

'The voice never let up. It ridiculed me wherever I went. *Listen to them yelping up there, those sopranos and baritones you claim to find so wonderful. No more of this nonsense about "voice production" and "timbre". They sound like animals in pain. That ringing in your ears every time they hit a high note? That's your eardrum about to burst. Don't try to pretend. I know you're longing*

for the sweet songs of home. Those gentle songs are what will always be true music to your ears.

'The constant chattering grew more and more insistent, until it wasn't a whisper any more and I could hear it as clearly as I could hear my own voice. *Look, it said, I'm telling you this for your own good. You've got to get out of here now. Go home to Japan! Too much brightness, too much whiteness – of course it's going to make you feel queasy after a while. It's in your blood – you're an Oriental. Living in the midst of this glare for so long is enough to give anyone a breakdown. It's no use trying to force yourself to love white women; it's just not in you. Your constitution won't allow it.*

I did everything I could to resist the voice. But I could do nothing about the fear that gripped me tighter with each day that passed. By now, every aspect of my life in the West revolted me. I shuddered every time I had to walk past a high-rise building or get in a lift or drive in a car at high speed. The squeak of the solid floorboards under my feet, the pounding of the pavements . . . I was sick of being boxed in by covered-up walls in rooms with no natural wood. And the odours: the make-up, the perfume, the clothes, the food, the peculiar smell of the white race that seeped its way into everything. The merest whiff of it was enough to make me gag.

All right, the voice said. Enough. This country isn't the place for you, alive or dead. Just get on the ship. You'll start to feel better as soon as you leave these streets behind. Get on that ship and your fits and palpitations will melt away. You think I'm trying to trick you? Try it and see.

I could feel temptation tugging at my sleeve. Part of me was still appalled by the idea of going back. But all the time, I could hear a voice pushing me forward and urging me back home. *Get out of here! Run away! Quick!*

I took passage on a steam packet. I stood on deck and watched the port of Marseilles recede into the distance. Half of me felt a rush of liberation; the other half felt as though I were being dragged away kicking and screaming.

'Do you remember the first time we met at the Café Kōnosu towards the end of 1908? That was just after I came home. I disembarked in Kobe and came straight to Tokyo without letting the family know I was back. I still had a bit of fight left in me. I couldn't face the thought of crawling back home and begging for forgiveness.

I visited a few people I knew in Tokyo, but none of them recognized me. I decided to recuperate in a hot-springs resort and find some way of getting back to Europe. Then I met you and introduced myself as Tomoda Ginzō, the first time I had ever used that alias.

But my recovery didn't go as well as I had hoped. In fact, my health was getting worse all the time. I lost my appetite and libido. I was reduced to teetotalism. Even the brandy I'd been using for a lift now only increased my fear.

From the end of that year till the following autumn, I visited most of the major hot-spring resorts in Japan – Hakone, Ikaho, Beppu. Near the end, I went into seclusion in a place no one's ever heard of in the mountains of Shinshū. I lived like a Zen monk, miles away from any stimulation. But it did no good. I was wasting away – I could hardly muster the strength to walk. Climbing stairs exhausted me. "I can't take much more of this," I thought. I started to dream of home. If I could just make it back home, with my wife to take care of me, maybe I'd have a chance of recovery . . . Tears flooded my eyes as I remembered everything I'd left behind. An image came to me of the night three years earlier, when my wife and I had said goodbye.

I could see her in front of me, sobbing silently, the tears streaming down her cheeks. And then I remembered – she'd been pregnant when I left home. Barring accidents, the child would be nearly four by now. I could picture the scene vividly: the little child with its arms open wide, calling out in a feeble voice for a father who never came home. And I seemed to hear my wife comforting the child she clutched to her breast: "There, there. It's all right, Daddy will be home soon."

Waves of homesickness washed over me. Eventually, I could barely stand. I spent whole days in bed, shivering under the blankets. One day I held up the mirror I kept by my bedside, expecting to be horrified by how much weight I had lost. But what I saw was worse than that. The face that stared back at me wasn't mine at all.

The hollow cheeks, the thick whiskers, that skin colour, those eyes . . . I had seen this face before. I had changed again. Matsunaga Gisuke was back!

I felt a shock that was double what I'd felt that night in Paris. Without realizing it, I had been transformed from the man I thought I was. No – the man I *knew* I was: Jacques Morin, that man of indeterminate race and

nationality, who could have been Japanese, Italian or Spanish. Tomoda Ginzō, as you knew him later. That was the man I had been until – when? As recently as the previous year, at least. And now I was transformed back into Matsunaga again. What did it mean? Which was the real me? And was there anyone else out there like me, blessed or cursed with a body that could change from one person to another within the space of twelve months?

Impelled by some strange force, Tomoda Ginzō hardly paused to draw breath. He leaned in close and went on with his story.

But that's not the end. All I wanted to do was go home and live out the rest of my life as a loving husband and father. One day, I would be buried there, in the earth that had borne me. But you already know what happened next.

As Shigeko wrote in her letter, I spent the next few years – from the autumn of 1909 to the spring of 1912 – back in Yagyū living the quiet life of a country gentleman. It was dull, to be sure, but solitude and quiet were just what I needed. It did my nerves good and helped me to shake off the anxiety that had weighed on me so heavily for so long. The area is full of temples and sightseeing spots perfect for soothing the mind. The plum blossoms at Tsukigase in March, the Yoshino cherry blossoms in April, the wisteria in Nara in May, along with all the spring buds and fresh grasses . . . Together with my wife and daughter, I visited the temples of Nara in the spring sunshine: Nan'endō, Tōdaiji, Yakushiji, Hōryūji. And as the three of us stood together in the halls of those ancient temples, hands clasped in prayer before the holy images, I felt my emotions rise. This was where I truly belonged, here back at home in the East. My parents had paid their respects in these same temples. They, too, had prayed in front of these images. For generations, my ancestors had bowed their heads here in the same spot where I now prayed with my own family. I looked up at the face of the Buddha and imagined an unbroken line of ancestors stretching back through the generations, looking down on us as we prayed. I was moved to tears. All my anxiety was gone, and there seemed to be no reason why I shouldn't live the rest of my life here in this country.

But of course, it's no secret what happened next. During the fourth year after my return I started to notice an unexpected change coming

over me again. At my weakest, I'd weighed as little as ninety pounds. But I'd started to put on weight again – slowly at first, so that it was barely noticeable, until I was about 110 pounds. And then my tastes started to change.

Living in the country, we never ate meat at home. Even our fish we rarely ate raw. Normally we stuck to a steady diet of miso soup, pickles, fruit and vegetables. For a time after I got back, this was just what I needed. But after a while my palate cried out for change. I longed for something rich and greasy. I couldn't go on eating the same meal three times a day. I felt I would starve.

I would sigh as the familiar lacquer tray was set down in front of me again, and memories would assail me of the chateaubriand steaks and the steaming bowls of bouillabaisse I had enjoyed in Paris. I longed to eat till my stomach swelled. I wanted food that would burn my tongue and warm my blood. Hunger is an irresistible force: I knew that my whole life would start to crumble unless that hunger was satisfied.

I set out for Nara or Osaka with nothing but food on my mind, determined to get my fill of nourishment. Turtle, eel, beef sukiyaki: I stuffed myself with all the food I could take.

And then I tried drinking again. I ended my abstinence in a restaurant in Osaka, not without a sense of trepidation. I was worried that the taste of alcohol might trigger another breakdown. But nothing happened.

I looked up. I looked down. I spun and I danced. I skipped and I jumped. No dizziness, no nausea, no hot flushes, nothing. Lifts? No problem. Whizzing along in a car was a pleasure. "I'm cured! I'm free! That awful cowardice has left me in peace at last!" I shouted for joy. And out of my intoxication that night was born a creature of insatiable appetites, with a heart that hungered for excess . . .

After everything I've said, I'm sure you can guess what made me leave home again that summer. For all the same reasons as before, I started to loathe my quiet life in the country: the provincial dullness of the village, of Japan, the whole restrained Oriental approach to life.

I started to think obsessively about Suzanne's white skin. I longed to breathe the gay night-time air of Montmartre. I wanted to live as Jacques Morin again. But this time I couldn't just set sail for Europe. I didn't have that kind of money any more. Several times I came close to going anyway.