

## 6. The Fourth Day

### 第四日

#### I

Komatsu took the cigarette end from his lips and flung it into the air with some force. It flew up in a straight line; when it struck the wall a shower of sparks and tobacco shreds cascaded down, and then it flipped over and fell to the ground.

With curiosity he watched the butt's aerial stunt as he stretched his limbs to get the blood flowing freely around his body again. Leisurely he closed his eyes. He could hear the life harmoniously and rhythmically pulsing, singing in his veins.

The feeling of having no work to do—the sense of liberation from the sundry intricate tasks of his job—was inutterably comfortable, pleasant to the point of giddiness. He couldn't remember experiencing a time like this in oh-so-many years.

Outside the sun was glaring down brilliantly, but this room had only one small window, making it cool and dim, while constant waves of sound came in from the courtyard. Sometimes the waves were of laughter or debate, shouting or whispering; rarely, they turned into repressed quarreling. Sometimes among the sounds came the piercing laughter of women, as shrill as a file sharpening a saw, enough to set the hairs on end of anyone listening. Occasionally the sound of a motor vehicle could be heard from the front yard, as a peaceful day began to writhe back into life. Obviously another batch of "resident compatriots" (Japanese expatriates) had arrived, coming from a distant county or having been delayed for some reason or other.

Komatsu turned to look at his colleague, a short man named Yokoyama of the Economics section, who remained lying motionless, curled up on his side facing the wall; for a long time now he had been lying in the same position in the same obstinate silence. Komatsu knew that he wasn't really sleeping; it was just that he had things on



his mind. Almost the whole afternoon the two of them had each lain stretched out on his bed, ignoring one another, allowing the time to slide away past their tightly sealed lips. It was as if they had already said everything there was to be said; there was nothing left worth talking about.

And in fact in the last few days, apart from taking their turns on watch, they'd had no end of idle time, idle minds, and idle tongues. Cigarettes alight, they had talked about everything. Through the eddies of blue smoke that crawled in the air like caterpillars they perspicaciously viewed the world. Every matter appearing or potentially appearing on the surface of the earth, both large and small, underwent their ardent and exacting analysis: the Potsdam Declaration, the atomic bombs, concentration camps, refugees, food supply and birth control, democracy and public order. . . .

The topic that most commanded their consideration and fervor was the future of Japan in defeat. Yokoyama would immediately fall into Malthusian despair. Quite clearly, the four cramped little islands of Nippon were about to face enormous population pressures, and neither of them could think of any effective way of solving the problem. Perhaps Japan should take Britain's path. But Japan lacked the territories Britain had relied on for the establishment and development of her light industry. Japan had the same difficulties as the UK but not her advantages. Poor Japan, where would she go now?

Those problems that could be settled were mostly solved satisfactorily on their lips, the insoluble ones stuck like fish bones in their throats. Now, their argumentative, hysterical enthusiasm was past and each of them preferred to sink into thought, undisturbed. They needed to have a really good think. There were so many things they had to think about, so many that it made them feel completely adrift and at a loss. It was just as if they had suddenly been taken from a brightly lit place into a dark room, where they needed some time before they could get their bearings.

For so long now they had given no thought to their parents or their wives, left at home in the mother country. Now it seemed they should take advantage of their present leisure to think carefully about all that. Previously everything was so simple, undisputed; everything was man-

aged for them without the need for individual thought. Nation, family, and life were a continuum, all roped together in a line. Now, things were different. The rope had been cut, and what had formerly been linked together had become separate, independent events that had to be dealt with one by one.

On his cot Yokoyama still lay silent, motionless. Komatsu glanced at him, perplexed, and then got up and walked to the window. His broad shoulders covered it like a curtain.

—Just let the poor guy go on trying to think of a way forward for Japan!

## 2

The department occupied two adjoining private houses. They had blocked one of the entrances, making the other one the front and only entrance; they knocked through the two-meter-high wall between the two yards to form a single compound. In one day they had selected all the furniture and fittings from the two houses that they wanted to keep and destroyed the rest, and then cleared and swept out the dozen or more rooms and spread rush mats on the floor to make a temporary collection center for the "resident compatriots."

For four days the "resident compatriots," scattered like stars across the vast yellow plain, had been converging here. At irregular intervals the army trucks carrying them roared up and in through the open gates, bringing with them billows of yellow dust before stopping in the front courtyard with its tall elm. The people were startled and disorientated; having stared blankly into the distance for so long, their eyes suddenly widened as they looked in surprise at the surroundings and at the people on the ground. With great difficulty, taking all the time they needed, they negotiated the chaotic piles of luggage and climbed down, the women in the arms of the men, one by one, like so many sacks being unloaded. These were bags of flesh fattened by filth and debauchery. Heaven knows what they were doing here. Each surrendered her entire bulk to the man who received her, kicking her heels in the air, laughing contentedly in his embrace, and squealing in feigned distress. The men's faces were without exception thin and wasted from worry and hardship, covered all over with dust except for just three

holes, two above and one below. From the upper round holes radiated two beams of nervous insecurity. The impression of defeat was further deepened by their piteous demeanor of utter witlessness, like men in a trance.

Now the rooms around the courtyard were stuffed right up to the thresholds with these "resident compatriots" and their luggage and assorted belongings: suitcases, backpacks, bedrolls, and what have you. At first the people were talking and laughing or humming songs, but now the humming had stopped, as had the talk of "Japan this" and "Japan that," and they simply sprawled on the floor in sleep.

Over in one of the corner rooms a woman lay fully clothed, apparently asleep, her head pillowed on a pale green bundle. Her Western-style white floral-print dress had two buttons undone at the neck, shamelessly revealing her snowy upper chest and the swell of her left breast. Her sleeping face was contorted painfully as if with neuralgia. This face was sunk on her chest as if admiring its beauty.

In another room a skinny man with wild hair sat by the door, forever reaching in through his shirt to scratch at a place below his waist. Each time, he soon pulled out something between finger and thumb, placed it in his palm and held it up to the light for a thorough inspection, then reached through the doorway and tipped it out. In every almost oblivious move there lurked a deep primitive instinct, reminiscent of monkeys.

Komatsu turned his back and reached for a cigarette on the table by the window. These people, who seemed to live by sense of touch alone, made him feel queasy.

At some point Yokoyama had turned over in bed to face this way and was now staring vacantly at Komatsu with his childlike, round, and innocent eyes. Apparently he had been paying attention to Komatsu's movements for some time now.

"Gimme a cigarette." Yokoyama sat up lazily.

"Do you think they'll all really make it here today?"

"Who cares!" Komatsu replied, not beating about the bush. "We're packing them off tomorrow anyhow."

Because of the blocked-up windows the room was extremely dark and gloomy, casting dim gray shadows on Yokoyama's face, body, and all around him, so that the man himself, sitting cross-legged in the

gloom, looked like a portrait. Those round, round eyes of his were fixed on some place beyond the circle of grayness in which he sat.

"They're a burden," said Yokoyama, slowly blowing out a mouthful of smoke. "In normal times they know how to look after themselves, but now somebody else has to ship them out like a load of bricks."

As he spoke he spread his right hand and flicked nervously at his brow as if shedding the burden just like that.

"Why did they come here anyway?" Yokoyama went on. "The men came to make their fortune, that's alright, but the women, that's hard to understand. This was the front line!"

From the front courtyard the sounds of voices and motors rose up again. Obviously another batch of "resident compatriots" had arrived.

The two men smoked in silence.

Suddenly a tall, powerfully built man charged in like a whirlwind, a canvas military backpack in one hand.

"Hah! Goddammit, I'm done in," the big guy shouted. "That yellow dust alone is more than anyone can bear."

He took off his army cap and threw it and the backpack together onto one of the beds. In the same movement he snatched the handkerchief out from his belt and began dabbing away at his face and brow, like a woman applying powder.

"Eh? Suzuki—so here you are too!" said Yokoyama, smiling at their guest. "How embarrassing, running for your lives like women!"

"Embarrassing? Well, I was the last to run!"

Suzuki gave a great laugh. Due to long years wearing his army cap, the area above his brow was white as a *mantou*, in marked contrast to his grimy, sunburned face.

"Mentally prepared, are you, Suzuki?" asked Yokoyama.

"For what?" Suzuki pressed his handkerchief to his forehead and stared blankly at Yokoyama.

"What else? The concentration camp! Internment till who knows when? Your days of sincere repentance, as required by the United Nations!"

Yokoyama was deliberately aiming to scare, but his voice was rather at odds with his intention. Within it was a sound that came from the depths of the soul, the sound of a wolf howling at the moon in the dark night. Komatsu couldn't help glancing at Yokoyama.

"Ai, let's not even talk about it. Losers in war, don't you know how . . ."

"I do know!" The corners of Yokoyama's lips twitched slightly. "Some hunters trap the hind legs of the wild boar and let it die slowly. That's the cruelest death, and that's just how Japan was defeated!"

"All right, all right! I look forward to hearing your grumbling another time, right now I need a wash."

Suzuki opened his pack, took out his soap box and safety razor, and went out. With his pendulumlike, swaying gait, from behind he looked as if he were drunk.

## 3

Just after Suzuki left, Hirotsu appeared at the door. He was the oldest man in the General Affairs section, and as he said himself, if his daughter hadn't turned her nose up at all the young men who sniffed at her skirts he'd surely have been a grandfather several times over by now. But among all his colleagues he was the most positive and cheerful: free from care and worry, when he laid his head down at night he slept like a great hog. He was very tall, but not slim like Suzuki; he had a good layer of flesh on him and a ruddy complexion. His big, round head, always shaven so close that it shone blue, plump body, and pink cheeks almost gave people the impression that he was younger than any one of them.

"Come on, Yokoyama, let's have a game." As soon as he came in, Hirotsu's booming, cheerful voice drove out the heavy atmosphere in the room.

"What, you're not still brooding about Japan, are you?" Then he turned to Komatsu and said, "The Head wants you."

Hirotsu walked over to the head of the bed and took out a wooden board and two small cloth bags: a go board and pieces. He opened one of the bags, and with a rattle and clatter tipped out a great pile of black pieces.

"One of the compatriot couples just now: guess how much luggage they had between them!" Hirotsu made one hand into a funnel, filled it with go pieces and poured them back into the other hand. "Eight pieces, big and small! Plus a boiler, a galvanized bucket, crockery, ev-

erything but the kitchen sink! To them it's just a house removal! To people like that Japan herself is worth less than one of their vases."

"Come on! Don't be a woman, taking it to heart so."

Komatsu walked out of the room. When he reached the room on the corner, he couldn't help taking a look in through the door. The place where the woman had been sleeping just now was empty, and there was no sign of her. There were a few other men and women in the room at the moment; if not rummaging in the piles of luggage, they were all either sitting dull and subdued or just lying lazily on their sides. Two women sitting close together and talking in low voices in the far corner now stopped and stared rudely at Komatsu.

A large truck stood in the front courtyard, unloading its last batch of cargo; on the ground a man and woman were moving luggage.

Komatsu thought to himself: could that be the foolish couple Hirotsu mentioned?

The office and quarters of the Head of Department were upstairs in the main building of the front court. As he stepped in on the ground floor Komatsu happened to glance at the adjutant's billet on the left. The Head's adjutant, the Special Advisor, and a businessman named Akuzawa were sitting on the tatami with *sake* cups, plates, chopsticks, and so on spread out before them. The three of them looked somewhat uneasy, as if their secret had been discovered.

"Komatsu," said the adjutant, smiling shiftily. "The Head sent for you."

The SA beckoned to him: "Come and join us!"

Komatsu declined and went on upstairs.

These three characters were known behind their backs as the Big Three. They often got together on the sly for drinking and womanizing, and it seemed that the Head of Department was aware of this. Of the three only the SA was not universally disliked. The adjutant had a big head, a big nose, a pencil mustache, and a fat belly; his face exuded all the guile and treachery of the merchant class. Because of his habitual arrogance, his fawning on superiors, his bullying, and other despicable behavior, he was roundly loathed by all in the department.

Akuzawa was the local manager of a Mitsui subsidiary. His dealings in the field were an endless, shameless string of swindling, intima-

tion, and extortion. He referred to all Chinese as swine. His usual form of address for them—"Hey you!"—embodied sentiments of the most utter contempt and venom. His malicious attitude and conduct had undermined the department's political propaganda work more than anyone could have foreseen. A few years ago the military police had laid simultaneous charges against many large companies in every district and arrested many of the bosses, agents, and the like. It shook them up a bit for a while, and resulted in a great boost to civilian and military morale. The Head was among the majority in favor of capital punishment for this gang of unscrupulous profiteers. One time, from the next room, Komatsu had heard him roaring, "Take the heads from their shoulders! Take the heads from their shoulders! Take the heads from their shoulders!"

The Head of Department, Mr. Saito, was alone, wearing slippers and sitting quietly smoking a cigarette in a big rattan chair, the back of which was much higher than his head. He handed Komatsu an official letter and told him to take it to the garrison. He spoke sparingly, his head somewhat bowed. When Komatsu took the letter he looked up at Saito for a moment. He saw a pair of bloodshot eyes and the highly complex expression of a man who, the greater the misery in his heart, the more he puts on a calm front. He even thought he detected a slight tremble in Saito's lips as he spoke.

On the way over, Komatsu thought of Yokoyama's comparison of Japan to a trapped boar. Whether it was Japan at war or Japan in defeat, he thought differently from Yokoyama. He felt that Yokoyama's sighs were real enough, but his words and his simile were lacking in realism. It wasn't Japan's hind legs but her heart, her very heart that had been struck. This led him back to Mr. Saito. If there was anyone here who truly and sincerely took grief for the nation's defeat on his own shoulders, it would be the Head. Komatsu found himself strangely saddened by Saito's terrifying expression, which seemed to suggest that he was just looking for someone or something to bite a piece out of.

In between Yokoyama and the Head of Department there was another kind of person. Perhaps those "resident compatriots" belonged to this category. When these folk met, they too started talking about "Japan this," "Japan that." But in the torrent of their chaotic and en-

tangled conversations, Japan frequently disappeared like soap bubbles, leaving only their own affairs hanging emptily between them.

As for Akuzawa and his ilk, they were un-Japanese, saboteurs of the war effort who should be cast out by the entire nation.

The army was garrisoned in town; Komatsu knew a lot of folk there, some of whom were fellow provincials. But they merely happened to come from the same place as him, that was all.

Having carried out his official task, Komatsu met a fellow provincial and had a chat with him. This man told him how a contingent of troops had been withdrawing from the front yesterday and on the way a soldier had fallen in his sleep from the train. The train had rolled over his head; it exploded like a hand grenade.

"Just think," said the man. "He'd marched and fought all over the combat zone and survived; then to die so senselessly just when he was happy to be on his way home—it's a bit ridiculous, don't you think? What if his parents and his wife learn how he died, imagine how they'd feel!"

He went on: when the fatherland told them to go and kill the enemy, they went—every one of them was loyal to the fatherland and hoped to win the war for the fatherland. But now, having given their all for the fatherland only for the war to be lost, now they should be allowed to think of their own personal affairs.

Later, Komatsu ran into some other friends, and no matter what they talked about, they never strayed far from the lesser hopes that they shared: for home, property, a certain way of life, their wives, children. In a word: time to go home!

Komatsu was taken aback and deeply moved by the openness and warmth of feeling in his friends' personal testimonies. In the past, even just a few days ago, not one of them would have dared to speak like this. They might have harbored such thoughts, but the fatherland did not allow them to be spoken; if someone did dare to voice such ideas, they would immediately be branded un-Japanese, a fearsome accusation that could cripple a person for life. So they had fought on the front line, closed with the enemy, and faced death again and again; some had spilled their last blood on the battlefield, now to rest in a corner of this foreign land.

Every one of them believed this to have been right; they did their duty, that which the fatherland required of them. But now they had cast off such thinking and such attitudes like a pair of worn-out shoes, and without the least reluctance. So rapid had been this change, so clear-cut and so complete, that it seemed like they had just awakened from a long dream. This now seemed to be the general way of thinking in the minds of all Japanese, whether at home or in the war zone.

Two or three months ago Komatsu had received a letter from his mother that mentioned a neighbor named Toyota. Between the lines were traces of something resembling envy. Toyota had been in the Pacific Fleet with Komatsu's younger brother; Komatsu's brother had died at sea in the battle for Guam, but Toyota had only lost a leg and subsequently been sent home. Now, the letter said, he had opened a small eatery, which was doing very well; he and his wife worked from dawn till late at night. Often in the middle of the night Komatsu's mother heard them coming home talking and laughing; they had a really nice life.

Obviously, long years of war had diluted the zealous feelings of the nation at the start and cast them into somber shadows; the people had lost interest in the war, and a general wish had crept silently into their consciousness: the hope that the war would soon end! All of this could be encapsulated in those words of Komatsu's fellow provincial: now they should be allowed to think of their own personal affairs.

## 4

On the way back Komatsu avoided the commercial streets and took a detour via the suburbs. After a while he came to an earthen embankment and irrigation ditch that doubled as rampart and trench. The department headquarters were on a street near this embankment.

On one side were fields and orchards; on the other side, between the embankment and the city wall, were vegetable plots and more orchards. Dotted among the vegetable plots were small thatched huts. Willow trees hung their pendulous branches right down to the ground, shading each hut and its tiny front yard.

Climbing to the top of the embankment, Komatsu saw a figure standing motionless and alone on its far end near the department.

"That guy!" Komatsu flashed a pitying and contemptuous glance at the figure. It was Yokoyama.

"Listen," said Yokoyama, when Komatsu came near him, "that's field artillery, isn't it?"

Komatsu listened in silence. Yes, there was the heavy boom of artillery fire coming from somewhere or other, in irregular bursts with lulls in between, but it didn't seem to be very near.

"Well, there were reports of instability," said Komatsu. Just now at the garrison he'd been told of intelligence that Chinese forces would be advancing to positions in the city tonight.

The sun was already low in the sky. Two long clouds were converging from either side, like a pair of gathering hands just waiting for the sun to come down into their clasp, as if it were a watermelon. The sky behind the clouds presented the turbid pallor of late summer. From the horizon the western sky was already gradually drawing up the sallow and pallid red colors of sunset. This was the backdrop for the scattering of villages that cowered on the land, bleak and hushed, as though dead. Only the sporadic cannon fire occasionally broke the overwhelming sense of desolation all around, and reminded one that living people were still active on this great open plain.

"How awful this endless flat country is!" Yokoyama exclaimed. "Komatsu, do you think Japan had the wrong idea here?"

"Do you think so?"

"I'm asking you!"

"I don't know!"

The sun safely parted the two convergent clouds as it came down between them. The clouds dispersed to either side and became a pair of dark gray curtains covering half the sky. The brilliant red fringes of the last golden rays ignited a shimmering sea on the horizon.

A twilight mist began to flow and spread unchecked all over the plain.

The plain was deep, broad, endless. It seemed to stretch from some unknown place in the remote distance right to their feet, and then past them to some other place far, far away in the distance. Before it everything seemed tiny, commonplace, puny.

Perhaps it was as some people said: it was a bottomless swamp and Japan had unfortunately allowed both her legs to stick in it. Was this not a tragedy?

The department had bought a fat pig locally, and four or five Chinese cooks had prepared a fairly modest banquet for a dozen or so tables. This was a sending-off for the "resident compatriots." First thing tomorrow they were off on their way to internment, so this was a last gathering, and the department wanted to give everyone a happy time; after all, they had been through quite some times together in the war zone.

The top table was occupied by the Head and other high officials in the department plus some prominent local figures. For the occasion a few of the prettiest young "resident compatriot" women were chosen to wait on table, to ply the men with drink, and to add to the atmosphere of merriment. By now the feast was already into its third round of *sake*. Drop by drop the yellow liquid was dissolving people's concepts of decorum and rank, encouraging them to drink even more uninhibitedly.

Some of the women had long since left the feast, but the men were by now pretty drunk and sinking into maudlin lamentation. Their emotions were tending toward the heavy and serious. The *sake* may have been cheering, but it was also bitter. Not for a moment did they forget that their fatherland was defeated in war, though only the moon that hung bright in the sky could glimpse the red hearts in their breasts.

Clink! Another toast. But can you be sure that what they drank was not tears!

Come on! Another cup, let's have another cup!

The pretty waitresses poured them yet another brimming round.

Drink!

Give us a dance!

Clink!

The Head drank one cup after another, but spoke very little. Perhaps precisely because he spoke so little, he drank all the more. He kept his mouth shut, burying himself deep in his rattan chair with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes shone with a hot light; like an eagle he watched the men's excited, tragic-heroic faces. No one noticed his face, as taut as sheet metal, as cold and stern as sheet metal.

Since nightfall the cannon fire of the day had become more persistent, and seemed to be nearer. The boom of each quickening salvo

gripped hold of the people by their ears. At lamp-lighting time they had received news that the situation had grown even more volatile, so the garrison had posted sentries outside the city and the department had added to the guard at every post.

The Special Advisor cocked an ear. The pure, bright moonlight bathed his face in a dismal wash of white. He listened carefully for a while before saying, slowly and quietly, "It seems even nearer now; are they really moving in?"

"Surely not!" said the square-faced consultant Sakamoto coolly. "We still have a strong military capability here; they're not likely to take the risk."

"If they come we'll do 'em, teach 'em not to mess with the Imperial Army!" Akuzawa, seated to the left of the Head of Department, spoke indignantly, excitedly. He was already a bit drunk. Both his fists were very tightly clenched. "So they think Japan was defeated, do they? That's a joke! Japan didn't lose the war! Japan had the Pacific and the Chinese mainland at her feet. Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration because she didn't have an atom bomb; we didn't invent the atom bomb in time. Japan lost at science!"

"That's dead right!" The SA slapped the table as he chimed in.

Akuzawa was deeply moved by his own words; his face was twitching in paroxysm, and his head slightly tilted to one side. He waited until his emotion had abated before continuing.

"We must develop scientific enterprise in Japan, make it robust! We only need ten years, just ten years for Japan to rise again. You have to make Japan strong and rich. Ten years! Just ten years! Let's go for it!"

Akuzawa concluded his oration in the atmosphere of vehemence it had whipped up. Arrogantly he stretched out a hand. Face contorted and eyes blazing, he looked a stern and valiant figure, reminiscent of those ancient warrior heroes whose swords clashed in the moonlight.

"That's right, ten years: let's go for it!"

The SA stretched out a hairy hand to meet Akuzawa's. And so across that table a fervent and sincere handshake took place, a sacred ten-year vow!

Clink! *Kampai!*

Komatsu was sitting at a neighboring table, so he saw all of this as clearly as could be, but all it produced in him were a frown and

a feeling of nausea. Underneath the highly melodramatic gestures he perceived their basis in a pathetic and capricious patriotism.

He put down his cup and left the table.

At the other tables, among the “resident compatriots,” the effects of the *sake* were already coming into full play: the men were showing themselves in their ugliest colors. Several were flirting with the women, some insisting on kisses, and others making them sit in their laps and spouting: “You are my heart and soul, my very flesh!” The women struggled and squealed like monkeys. One of them had begun to play on a samisen. The strings strummed thickly and monotonously like an old woman coughing, sounding very strange.

As Komatsu passed the top table Sakamoto reached out to grab his arm:

“Komatsu, have a cup with us!”

Komatsu told him that the next guard watch was his.

“There’s plenty of time yet!” said the consultant, turning to a waitress: “Miss Tomiko, pour us some *sake*.”

Komatsu raised his cup. The Head had not changed his posture but was silently surveying all the excited faces from on high, as though distancing them from himself. Akuzawa held his hand over his cup; with his head slightly inclined and a moist sparkle in his eyes, he affected a statuesque splendor. Oh! Those were tears!

Komatsu frowned again, then drained his cup in one and returned it to Sakamoto.

Tomiko refilled the cups to the brim. Sakamoto never took his eyes from her. She was young, beautiful, and always smiling.

“Miss Tomiko, you are very beautiful! I offer you a toast.”

Tomiko smiled radiantly. “I don’t drink.”

“No excuses! You’ve attended on us very well tonight. I’m in a good mood, and I want to drink to you.”

“I said no! I don’t drink.”

“I won’t take no for an answer!”

Sakamoto made to grab Tomiko. She immediately recoiled. Just then one of the cooks came out carrying a large bowl of piping hot stew for the top table; seeing Tomiko step back he hurriedly dodged to one side. Sakamoto saw what was happening and cried out urgently: “Tomiko! Tomiko . . .” But Tomiko had already bumped into the cook, and the stew

spilled. It splashed onto the cook’s hand: he frowned, but the worst was that some of it flew onto Akuzawa and the Special Advisor.

The cook was petrified: he just stood there aghast, with the half-empty bowl of stew still in his hands, not knowing what to do next. What he never expected was that Akuzawa leapt up and walloped him on his right cheek.

“You bastard! Are you blind or what?”

Akuzawa’s angry eyes were popping, and his curses venomous.

The cook, unable to keep his feet, staggered back and fell over beside a table, almost tipping it over. The bowl of stew flew out of his hands, splashing scalding sauce and meat everywhere. The people at the nearest tables jumped up, crying out in alarm.

Sakamoto got up and tried to help the cook to his feet, explaining as he did so in his broken Chinese: “He drunk! He drunk!”

The cook clambered to his feet, brushed himself down, and made off without a word.

Going back to his seat, Sakamoto protested to Akuzawa: “What do you think you’re doing! He didn’t do it on purpose, you know, why on earth did you hit him?”

“Didn’t do it on purpose?” Akuzawa’s ire was unabated. “Hasn’t he got eyes? These swine, you can’t be lenient with them. Best of all to just behead the lot of ’em!”

Before his voice had died away the Head finally broke his long silence. Sternly he demanded answers from Akuzawa in a voice that was severe and imperious: “Why did you hit him? What cause do you have to hit a man?”

He leapt to his feet and strode toward Akuzawa.

All at once the whole assembly went dead silent; no one dared utter a word or move a muscle. They all held their breath, and swallowed back the saliva that rose in their mouths.

The bright moon shone down. The wind soughed, rustling the leaves in the trees. It was so silent all around that it seemed a falling needle could have been heard. The atmosphere was raw, cold, and grim. Komatsu sensed that something big was about to happen. “Here it is; it’s coming at last,” he thought.

Saito grabbed hold of Akuzawa’s lapels and dragged him away from the table.



“What cause do you have to hit a man? Huh? Talk!”

As he spoke he brandished his fist in Akuzawa’s face, then bang! Akuzawa reeled but did not fall. Then came another blow. He reeled again. The Head leaped at him and grasped him round the neck, stuck a foot between his legs, and tried to throw him to the floor.

Akuzawa didn’t struggle, nor did he resist or ask for mercy. But although he was short he was stockily built, and it wasn’t easy for Saito to wrestle him down. The Head summoned up his strength for another try. The two men staggered some distance, collided with a table, and came crashing down together with the table and chairs. Cups, plates, bowls, and dishes clattered to the floor in a chaotic mess of fragments.

All the women were shrieking, their faces pale with fear and alarm. The more timid among them couldn’t bear to watch any more and ran indoors, their hands over their faces.

Akuzawa got up very quickly, but Saito lunged at him again. This time they smashed into another table: crockery and cutlery clattered and showered down again.

Still Akuzawa did not defend himself; still he uttered no sound.

After their third tumble to the ground Saito immediately leaped up and began stamping furiously on the body still sprawled on the ground. He’d gone crazy. He was a carnivorous beast that had smelled blood.

“Why’d you hit him?” he roared. “What cause do you have to hit a man? Huh? Talk!”

Kazuki of the Intelligence section was standing to Komatsu’s left, looking like a general with his head held high and his hand on his left hip, where his sword hung. This guy’s mysterious, inexplicable behavior was an infuriating, daily riddle to his colleagues. Now his face was solemn as he yelled bizarre imprecations into the middle of the ring. “Think you can get away with that? Son of a bitch! Think you can get away with that?” Nobody could figure out who his words were aimed at or what they meant.

Saito stamped down on Akuzawa, raised his foot again, stamped a second time, and then a third. By the third kick Akuzawa could bear it no longer. This stamping expunged all his dignity, reserve, pride. . . . All that remained were the survival instinct and the basic senses.

“Aiya! Mr. Saito! Sir! Aiya!”

There was utter anguish in Akuzawa’s wails. Saito paid no heed, but just kept kicking: four, five, six, seven . . .

“Aiya! Mr. Saito! Aiya! I lost my temper, I—aiya! Aiya!”

“Lost your temper? Not likely! You think too highly of yourself. You’re a member of the superior Japanese race! You despise others, the ‘inferior’ races. But oh, the shame! The superior have lost the war, and somehow the inferior are victorious. What are you going to make of that then? What have you got to be so cocky about?”

Mr. Saito was positively murderous now, as he struggled for breath.

“Pah! You reckon Japan can rise again in ten years? You want to develop science in Japan? You blowhard! Japan was defeated not because she doesn’t have the atom bomb but because she has a shower of dirty swindlers like you for merchants; our boys at the front put their lives on the line while you lot made an easy killing in the rear. If anyone should lose their heads it should be the likes of you, not anyone else. Understand? Think you can help Japan back to the top in ten years? Hah! Quit dreaming! Even in a hundred years Japan will never rise again! Understand? You son of a bitch!”

“Aiya! Mr. Saito! Have mercy on me, please! Aiya! Mr. Saito! Sir! Aiya!”

Akuzawa kept on wailing, but he was now stretched out stiff and motionless.

At this point Sakamoto stepped forward and whispered something in Mr. Saito’s ear, as if entreating him. Saito stopped stamping on Akuzawa.

“All right!” he said, lifting up his head. “Mercy? No problem—but on one condition: ask him if he’s willing to go to the cook and beg his pardon. If the cook pardons him then I will too.”

Straightaway two men helped Akuzawa up from the ground. He was covered all over in mud, and his face was bleeding in several places. He was badly weakened, unable to stand steadily, and his arms hung loose by his sides. The men took him by his armpits and dragged him toward the kitchen. Nobody asked him if he was willing to go or not.

“Son of a bitch! Think you can get away with that?”

The mysterious Kazuki began yelling again. His eyes stared straight ahead, the moonlight reflected in them reinforcing his enigmatic role.

Komatsu went to his room and dressed for duty, then took his Type 38 rifle from the rack on the wall, and went out.

His post was at the rear wall of the compound. A section of the wall here had collapsed, leaving a large gap, which had become a regular shortcut for anyone who wanted to save a few paces when entering or leaving the department. His watch companion, Suzuki, had arrived before him and was sitting on a bench, head bowed, deep in his own thoughts. A light machine gun was already set up on its stand on the ground at the gap in the wall, its muzzle trained on the deep darkness fused with the peach grove beyond the broken wall.

Komatsu propped his rifle against the end of the bench and fished in his pocket for his cigarettes.

Suzuki silently accepted a cigarette, lit it, and began smoking. After a while had passed he spoke: "Did you see that? The scene back there? How hideous!"

Then, with an air of reminiscence, he told Komatsu what had happened yesterday as he made his way back from the front among the ranks of the retreating army. It made Suzuki shudder inside to recall it. Local Chinese had dogged their heels the whole way, flitting like ghosts, relentless, and always shouting: "Lay down your weapons, leave your rifles—"

Their cries seemed to come from underground, and at the same time they seemed to come from all sides, all together; they sounded shrill with grief, grim, savage, and insistent.

Eventually this corps of the once-invincible Imperial Japanese Army just had to start running.

"In a word," said Suzuki, bringing his narrative to an end with unspeakable bitterness, "it's all just wretched. It's all so heartbreaking!"

Komatsu said nothing.

In the sky a disordered mass of white clouds was building, like a pile of white ceramic tiles waiting to be fixed, with larger and smaller wells of darkness in between.

The sky in those wells was deep, remote, and the not-quite-full moon lightly floated through them. At this moment, it showed half its face from the umpteenth well.

Suzuki looked up at the sky, apparently pondering for a long while, and then suddenly sighed with feeling: "Autumn is here!"

Still Komatsu said nothing.

"Komatsu," said Suzuki after a short while.

Komatsu looked up at him from under his eyelids: "What?"

"Komatsu, when we get home, what do you plan to do?"

"Oh, I haven't got as far as thinking about that," said Komatsu.

"What about you, Suzuki? Will you go back to your band?"

Before the war Suzuki had played violin in a dance hall in Tokyo.

"No!" Suzuki shook his head. "When I shipped out I gave my violin to another guy in the band."

"You can buy another."

"Of course I can buy another; but that's not what I'm thinking. I'm thinking that I'll give up that game."

"Why?"

"Look at me, Komatsu." Suzuki straightened up on the bench. "Do I fit with all that?"

Mechanically, Komatsu turned his face toward him and quizzically and inspectorially sized him up from head to toe, as if they were meeting for the first time. Suzuki's shoulders were broad and strong; seated next to him, he was almost a head taller than Komatsu. Komatsu could see that for a strapping big guy like this to play a small delicate instrument like the violin was like a plowman trying to hold a pen. Not too fitting, right enough.

"I plan to go and work in a factory," said Suzuki, his gleamingly close-shaven face smiling sadly, mysteriously. "For me, I think a hammer will fit my hands much better."

Another long, long silence.

So still, so still. From somewhere outside the city a few rifle shots were heard. The peach trees quivered as though alarmed, making a rustling sound, a dim incomprehensible murmuring, like sleep talk.

Komatsu's gaze passed over the tops of the peach trees, to a much farther space. There, the clouds were very few and an expansive pure blue sky opened up. It was high and far and fresh.

"Autumn is here indeed!" thought Komatsu, and once again he wondered when they would be allowed to return home.