

Eight miles to the north of —, there is a small village called —. A long, narrow hamlet strung out along one road, it has many hedges and few shops. The inhabitants, mostly old indigenous stock, had split up and multiplied in branch families, so that the more than a hundred households shared but five or six surnames. Accustomed to saying “so-and-so at the corner,” “so-and-so in front of the bamboo grove,” or “so-and-so at the pole shop,” even now, when the bamboo grove had been down for ten years and “so-and-so” had given up the pole shop a generation ago, people still made use of such terms to distinguish persons of the same surname.

There had always been a cooperative in the hamlet, by which folks helped each other. By now, there were many who did not even know who had founded it. The road running through the hamlet was better than the prefectural roads. But the lanes that entered it from either side, muddy quagmires in the winter thaws and rainy season, were but lines of flat stones wide enough for one person.

For instance, when a house burnt down, for it to be rebuilt just as it had been cost not even half what it normally would. The lumber came free of charge from the communal forest on the mountain, and the labor was donated by so many persons per household.

But even in a place like this, there were sometimes those who were not content with country life. Going up to the city, they would take a job, not do well at it and come back. Even then, the villagers did not grudge them enough help to keep their families together. If they gained the cooperative's approval, they could borrow money at low interest. It was that sort of village.

In the heart of the village, there was a sake brewery, built in the storehouse style, run by a family named Minoya. Sanjiro, its young proprietor, was an only child. By his father's wish, he had attended agricultural college in his middle school days, and was expected to carry on the family business afterward. Five or six years ago, however, the father had died. Sanjiro abruptly found himself the young master of the household.

There having been a single head clerk ever since the days of Sanjiro's grandfather, the business continued to run smoothly. The grandmother maintaining that the master should be in the house, however, Sanjiro had been called back from his dormitory in the city and installed. He had no objections to that, though. He hadn't had any dreams of becoming a doctor of agricultural science so as to give the people of the region a better saké. Besides, he felt relieved simply to not have them say that he gave himself airs as a university man.

He had a close friend called Takeno Shigeo. After graduating from middle school, Takeno had studied literature at a private university in Tokyo, publishing his poems and songs in literary magazines under the pen name Green Leaf. Well up on the doings of the literary world, he often talked to Sanjiro about them.

But Sanjiro had no thoughts of writing himself. He didn't think he could, for one thing, and for another felt no interest in trying. He didn't even read that much. So he hadn't paid much attention to Takeno's anecdotes. After his return to the village, though, when life there had begun to seem a shade monotonous, his friend's influence surfaced in him. Each time he went to the city, he came back with some book or other.

Takeno, meanwhile, commencing a correspondence with a fellow contributor, had not long after advanced to marriage talks with the lady. The daughter of a Tokyo fruiterer, she was not beautiful but she was strong-minded for her age.

A third son, Takeno had thought himself free to marry as he wished. But his considerably older brother, the first son, had unexpectedly opposed the match. To start with, he didn't care for the fact that the girl was a writer. The parents, having retired from family affairs, left everything up to him, so that his disapproval was the same as the family's disapproval. Takeno, angered, cut off relations with them. He made up his mind to support himself by opening a fruit shop with the girl in a nearby town.

At this time, Sanjiro of the Minoya also got married, to a farm girl whose family was distantly related to his own. Having always liked the girl, he'd gone along willingly with his grandmother's suggestion.

The girl's name was Seki. Taciturn and none too quick, she had no education. But she was a true country beauty. Although she was bothered by her short stature, her beautifully proportioned arms and legs kept it from being uncomely. Her head was small, with a wealth of thick hair that had a reddish tinge. But the smoothness of her skin, the regular shape of her nose and a feeling of firm elasticity about her whole body made her seem healthy just to look at and gave pleasure to all who saw her. If there was one defect of which she was unaware, it was that there was no light in her tea-brown eyes.

Before long, Seki was pregnant. In her fifth month, toward the end of autumn, she came down with the then prevalent influenza. The family worried about this illness during pregnancy, and sure enough she suffered a miscarriage. Although Seki herself soon recovered, her mother-in-law, who'd worried the most about her, ended by contracting the same illness. This developed into pneumonia, and she eventually died of it.

That had been three years ago. Seki did not become pregnant again. The impatient grandmother often brought up the subject, causing a bitter look to come into Sanjiro's face. But Seki herself paid her no mind.

After the faithful old clerk Okakura had fallen prey to palsy and retired to his home town, Sanjiro, left on his own, had to do everything in the family business. So it appeared—actually, however, the doughty grandmother, from long experience, managed all matters in his behalf.

Bit by bit, Sanjiro's interest in literature had grown. Placing a large bookcase in the parlor, he enjoyed the gradual accumulation of new publications there. Lately, he'd taken to writing short pieces and showing them to Takeno.

He thought of trying to impart a taste for such things to Seki. By himself, it was somehow lonely. But that was too much to expect of Seki. Remembering his own backwardness, he could imagine how it would be for her. Therefore he was neither disappointed nor resigned.

One day a postcard came from Takeno. The playwright S and the novelist G would be speaking at the town hall in a few days, and he was by all means to come. Sanjiro thought he would take Seki along. Saying so in his reply, he added that perhaps Takeno could put them up for the night.

The day came. Although it was fine weather for October, a disagreeably warm wind was blowing. As the lectures began at three, Sanjiro decided to set out for town after an early lunch. During the preparations, his grandmother, who'd been assisting in them, abruptly collapsed. It was nothing serious, but her spirits were low and leaving her in the care of the servants was out of the question. Sanjiro said to Seki:

"What shall we do? Takeno is expecting us. How would it be if you went by yourself? If you go, I'll be able to hear about the lectures from you. Won't you go?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing to worry about if I stay with Grandmother. You go and have a good time."

"Yes," replied Seki, turning her innocent eyes on him.

Soon, ensconced in the rickshaw that had been waiting outside, Seki set off. Standing in front of the shop, Sanjiro watched the rickshaw go off into the distance. Her low pompadour (done in the "eaves" style which nowadays one did not see much even in the country) all atremble in the vehicle's vibrations, not once turning around, Seki slowly receded down the long, straight, hedge-lined road.

His grandmother had a slight fever, and her face was unusually flushed. Reading a book by the bedside of the dozing invalid, Sanjiro now and then wrung out and changed the cold cloths for her forehead.

Outside the sake storehouse, workmen were tightening the hoops of a big cask. The dry sound of their mallets, mingling with the wind, could be heard in the sickroom. Now and then, Sanjiro stepped out to see how the job was going.

What was she doing, about now? At odd moments, Sanjiro thought of Seki. As he imagined her solitary figure, engulfed in the overflow audience, it only then dawned upon him that she would be completely out of place in such a scene.

That evening, laying out his bedding alongside his grandmother's, he retired early. How long had it been, he thought, since he had slept in the same room with his grandmother?

At nightfall, the wind had died down. But now there was the sporadic sound of raindrops on the eaves. It was a curiously sultry night. Sanjiro found it difficult to sleep. The sick person's fever seemed to have abated somewhat, and she was fast asleep, breathing calmly. The rain gradually increased in intensity.

The next morning, when Sanjiro got up, the sky was beautifully clear. The wind had veered to the north, and there was a bracing autumnal crispness in the air. It was a morning that made one feel good. His grandmother, who had risen earlier, her gray hair bound neatly in a bun, was already busy in the kitchen.

"There are some things I have to buy. I thought I'd go into town and meet Seki. Are you well again?"

"Yes, I'm all better now. "

After breakfast, Sanjiro decided to set out for town immediately. It having suddenly turned cool, he wrapped a shawl for Seki in a bundle kerchief. Fastening it to the handlebars of his bicycle, he set out.

Truly it was a morning that made one feel good to be alive. The fine gravel of the roadway had been rinsed fresh and clean, and dewdrops glittered like jewels on the trees and grasses. In the fields, against the wet, black earth, the purple flowers of the scallions seemed extraordinarily beautiful. In the distant sky, a faint line of geese winged its way. Feeling a carefree pleasure, Sanjiro sped along on his bicycle.

When he dismounted outside Takeno's fruit shop, the latter was prying open on a ditch-board a crate of apples that apparently had come a long ways. As he raised his face, until then lowered and red with effort, a look of consternation floated across it. Seki, he told Sanjiro, had spent the night at the Cloud-Viewing Pavilion.

She was not here now. Sanjiro's eyes grew wide. At first, the contrast of Seki and the Cloud-Viewing Pavilion seemed excessively comical. As the most elegant and expensive inn of the town, the Cloud-Viewing Pavilion was thought of as off-bounds to people like themselves. But Sanjiro's amusement was quickly converted to unease by a certain significant air of Takeno's.

Discarding his work apron on the spot, Takeno led Sanjiro inside. From the head of the dusky ladder-stairs, he showed him into a room on the low-ceilinged second floor of the shop. There, he gave Sanjiro the details of what had happened.

The day before, it had been evening by the time the lectures ended. Afterward, there was a reception sponsored by the town newspaper at a teahouse-restaurant called Pure Gardens, the mansion of a feudal lord in the old days. Takeno had attended. Seki and his wife, however, having been introduced that afternoon in the green room by a local music teacher called Yamazaki Yoshié, had promised to meet S and C after the party at the Cloud-Viewing Pavilion. With Yoshie, they waited for them there.

By the time S and G, sent off in an automobile in the heavy rain, finally arrived, it was after ten o'clock. Both men were more or less drunk. But at first, at least, they were comparatively well-behaved.

S, a fair-complexioned man, had gentle eyes and a broad forehead hidden slantwise by his soft hair. Polite in his manner of speech, with a low voice, he was a man whose very gestures somehow gave an impression of the feminine. G, on the other hand, a man whose eyes, nose, chin, and neck were all strongly drawn, a broad-shouldered, powerfully built man, gave off a feeling of might. To Takeno's wife, that impression of strength was somehow frightening.

Fruit and sweet sake were brought in for the ladies. Seki and Takeno's wife did not have much of either. Only Yoshié, downing one drink after another, had a good time by herself.

Yoshie's relationships with men were a source of much gossip. Her liaison with S, also, to those in the know, was something of an open secret. Although the rumors about her were not too savory, with her opulent physique, sexy voice, and flashy personality she was considered indispensable by the town's young set.

There was a lot of light-hearted chatter. The conversation of the two men was more interesting than their lectures had been. G, in particular, talked about whatever he felt like. Skillfully concealing their crudity, he ended up talking about things that were not usually brought up in the presence of ladies.

Seki, completely overawed, an empty smile on her face, looked at the others with lonely eyes. Takeno's wife felt sorry for her, but there was no sign of the rain's letting up. When, finally, she made preparations for leaving, Yoshié, who was

rather deep in her cups, strenuously detained her. Thinking it better to leave her on her own, Takeno's wife lightly parried her. But Yoshié, carried along by her own momentum, insisted more and more stubbornly. Since Yoshié was the kind who had to have their own way even if they didn't care one way or another, Takeno's wife made ready to leave nonetheless. In the end, Yoshié grew truly angry. "If that's so, then I'll leave with you," she said recklessly, looking as if about to cry and with a sidelong glance at the men. In a wheedling tone, she added: "That's right, G. I'm going with them."

"Is that so?" G replied, with deliberate indifference. "But doesn't S have some business with you?"

"No jokes allowed." S was grinning broadly.

"Well, how about Yoshie? Doesn't she have some business with you?"

Yoshié, getting to her feet with brusque alacrity, went over to G and thumped him twice on the back. G assumed an impassive expression. Takeno's wife felt that she could not stay any longer. With the astonished Seki in tow, she started to leave. Yoshié came over with a grim look in her eyes.

"If that's how you want it, I won't keep you. I'll just keep Seki-san. It's all the same where Seki-san stays for the night, isn't it? It's out of the question for her to go back in this downpour."

"If it's all right, why doesn't she stay here for the night?" S chimed in.

"Yes." Smiling docilely, Seki gave a slight nod of assent.

"You will stay, then?"

"Any place is fine."

Takeno's wife was taken aback. Before she knew what to say, she was pushed out into the corridor by the powerful Yoshié. S got up and came out to see her off. Behind him, Yoshié called after her triumphantly:

"No matter who you are, you can't be a stuck-up prude all the time!"

Sanjiro could not understand the purport of this story. It seemed a matter of no importance, yet it also seemed somehow a terribly troubling event. He could not make out which. But the tense solemnity with which Takeno told the story was out of the ordinary.

Below, a rickshaw stopped. Takeno hurried downstairs. Shortly afterward his angry voice was heard, upbraiding his wife.

"She's come back with an outlandish hairdo." Looking disgusted, Takeno came back upstairs.

"What kind of hairdo?"

"I'll soon make her change it."

"It doesn't matter, does it? I'd like to see it myself. Her other one was too old-fashioned. She needed something a little more up-to-date." Speaking with intentional cheerfulness, Sanjiro got to his feet and went downstairs. At the foot of the dusky stairs, Seki and Takeno's wife stood vaguely facing each other.

"Let me see your hair." Sanjiro led Seki into the bright part of the shop. The ear-covering hairdo, in the fashionable style called *mimi Itakushi*, accompanied by rouged cheeks, became Seki unexpectedly and extraordinarily well.

"Very nice. Very nice." Squeezing his wife's pointed little chin between his fingertips as she kept her eyes shamefacedly lowered, Sanjiro turned her toward him. He actually did not receive the slightest disagreeable feeling from the hairdo. Seki twisted her chin out of his fingers and lowered her eyes again.

"You look tired. Shall we go home now?"

Seki nodded.

"Did you understand the lectures?"

Seki shook her head.

"That's too bad. But I'm told there were songs by Miss Yamazaki. Did she have a good voice?"

Seki nodded.

"Did you and Miss Yamazaki stay at the Cloud-Viewing Pavilion last night?"

Seki shook her head.

"You were left there by yourself?"

Just then, still looking aside, Seki gave a smile whose meaning he could not tell. It startled him. Unthinkingly, he stared at Seki's face. But with a weak, hooded gaze she looked vaguely away, out at the street. After that, Sanjiro did not have the heart to ask her anything more. It seemed like something forbidden, and he himself felt frightened to ask. He was frightened just by Seki, who would give him a straight answer as soon as he did ask.

His feelings were violently roiled.

Deciding to return at once, he went back up the ladder-stairs. At the top, Takeno and his wife were whispering about something. When she heard Sanjiro, the wife hurriedly got to her feet. Waiting for him to come all the way up, she went back downstairs. Sanjiro resolved to act as calmly as he could.

Until the rickshaw came, the two men sat facing each other. But not a word passed between them. Hunched over at the Sentoku copper brazier in which there was no fire, both hands held out, Sanjiro struggled with the void in his heart. Through the slender, vertical apertures of the latticed bay window, the second story of the auctioneer's shop could be seen across the street. Bathed in the soft beams of the autumnal sun, with *Knitted Goods* dyed in white on a red background, its large banner waved back and forth in slow billowings.

"Ah, yes. I brought along a shawl." Just then, Sanjiro remembered that kind of thing.

"The rickshaw has come." Hearing his wife's voice below, Takeno went downstairs. Sanjiro, first looking around the room, not for anything in particular but just in case he'd forgotten something, carefully descended the steep, dusky stairs.

Seki was standing among the produce displays of apples, grapes and bananas and the like. Takeno, his arms folded and with an ill-humored expression, stood in the doorway. Bending over, Sanjiro put on his clogs. Takeno's wife, selecting several apples from the wood shavings of the crate, placed them in a roughwork basket and handed it to the rickshaw man.

"Be sure and come again soon."

"Thank you." Sanjiro, tucking up his kimono from behind, answered in a flat voice.

Although it hadn't been so bad that morning, when the wind blew against you now it was cold. Seki said nothing. Even when Sanjiro spoke to her, she kept her cheeks buried in the shawl and didn't answer. His sulky, silent wife beside him, with a sense of crushed loneliness and a dread of touching the quick no matter what he said. Sanjiro thought: That's how she is. Earlier, the stylish ear-covering hairdo and rouged cheeks had been pretty, but here on the sunlit country road they were ugly.

Sanjiro didn't feel like saying much himself, but the rickshaw-man kept up a stream of talk. What kind of thing was post-office insurance, a factory was going up on the edge of town and so dry fields would be more valuable than paddies, the son of so-and-so in Sanjiro's village had graduated from medical school in Niigata

and was either coming to the town hospital or setting up practice in the village—the list of such topics was inexhaustible. It became painful for Sanjiro to talk to him. Although worried about her fatigue, he said to Seki: “How about it? Shall we walk the rest of the way?”

When the road to the village branched off from the prefectural road, there was a tall hackberry tree. Smitten by last night’s rain, dead leaves lay scattered all about. Seki alighted from the rickshaw. Transferring the basket of apples to the bicycle, which they wheeled along beside them, they began walking. The scent of the rice plants, fully ripened, was wafted powerfully to their nostrils. Annoyingly, locusts kept leaping around their feet. One, in panic-stricken flight, landed on Seki’s shoulder, for a while becoming their road companion. Seki though, saying nothing, as if unaware that Sanjiro was even there, walked along with her eyes vaguely focused on a point in the far distance. Sanjiro suddenly felt that she had discerned a sort of vision there, that in looking at it she felt an intoxication like a swoon. Her eyes were too dreamy for it to be the lonely, crushed chagrin that Sanjiro felt. It was a very sweet dream, a sort of absentminded trance. Her emotion came home to Sanjiro with a peculiar clarity. The blood rose irresistibly into his cheeks. His heart pounded. The relations of G, said to be brimful of energy, and this beautiful body of Seki’s, actually stirred up his sexual feelings with a strange power. In his imagination, it was no longer the lovemaking of others.

“Seki.” His breath coming fast, he spoke in a gentle voice. “Last night, you weren’t alone, were you? Somebody slept with you.”

“At first, Yoshié-san slept next to me.”

“And then?”

“After a while, Yoshie-san wasn’t there any more. Mr G came in.”

“And then?”

“Mr G said he’d been chased out by Yoshie—san and Mr. S.”

“And then?”

“ . . . ” Seki abruptly lowered her eyes.

All of a sudden, Sanjiro wanted to take Seki in his arms then and there. Seki was unbearably adorable. He began to be dangerously drawn in by his impulsive urge. Then, as if with a thud, he came back to himself. Astonished, he leapt away from his weird emotion.

“What kind of man are you?” he asked himself, then stopped, waiting for his feelings to calm down. A shallow emotion flowed into his heart, and he pitied Seki.

A while later, in a spot where there were woods on one side of the road and paddies on the other, leaning his bicycle against a telephone pole, Sanjiro relieved himself in the roadside weeds. It was a long piss. Happening to look up, about halfway up the pole he spotted something green. What was it, he thought, then recognized it for a rain frog. But why was it living in a telephone pole at the edge of the forest? In a small navel-like cavity, rotted out around where a branch had grown when the pole was a standing tree in the mountains, a pair of frogs crouched one on top of the other. Sanjiro looked at them with an extraordinarily fond, affectionate emotion. A little above them, a rusted iron arm with a cobwebby bulb at its end overhung the road. The rain frogs had set up their modest household here to catch the insects that clustered around the bulb. Surely they were mates, Sanjiro thought. He pointed them out to Seki, but she displayed no interest whatsoever.

Shortly afterward, the couple arrived at the village. It was the same quiet, humble village of the day before. It was the same village that Sanjiro had left just a few hours earlier, and yet it seemed like a place that he hadn't seen in a very long time.

That evening, removing from the bookcase the four or five short story collections and the two collections of plays, Sanjiro carried them out unobserved by anyone to the trash pit on the mountainside behind the house. With a furtive timidity, as if he were doing something wrong, he burned them all and at last felt in the clear.