

from *Life of a Sensuous Woman*

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An Old Woman's Hermitage

A beautiful woman, many ages have agreed, is an ax that cuts down a man's life. No one, of course, escapes death. The invisible blossoms of the mind finally fall and scatter;¹ the soul leaves; and the body is fed like kindling into a crematorium fire in the night. But for the blossoms to fall all too soon in a morning storm—ah, how foolish are the men who die young of overindulgence in the way of sensuous love. Yet there is no end of them.

On the seventh of the First Month, the day people go out to have their fortunes told, I had to visit Saga in northwest Kyoto.² As if to show that spring had truly come, the plums at Umezu Crossing³ were just breaking into blossom. On the eastbound ferry to Saga I saw an attractive young man dressed in the latest style but unmistakably disheveled. His face was pale, and he was thin and worn, obviously from too much lovemaking. He looked as if he didn't have much time left and was getting ready to leave his inheritance to his own parents.

"I've never lacked anything at all," he said to the man with him. "But there's one thing I would really like. I wish my pledging liquid could keep flowing on and on like this river and never stop."

His friend was startled. "What I'd like," he said, "is a country without women. I'd go there and find a quiet place to live, far from any town. There I'd take good care of myself, so I could live to a decent old age. The world keeps changing, and I'd really like to see a lot of different things."

The two men had opposite attitudes toward life and death. One sought as much sensual pleasure as he could get, even though he knew that it was shortening his life, and the other wanted to give up love altogether and live many more years. Both longed for the impossible, and they talked in a dazed way, halfway between dreaming and waking.

After we reached the other side, the men joked and horsed around, staggering along the path on the bank and stamping without a thought on the parsley and thistles that were coming into leaf. Finally they turned away from the river, left the last houses behind, and entered the shadows of the mountains to the north. I felt curious about them and followed at a distance. Eventually we came to a grove of red pines and, within it, an old fence made of bundled bush-clover stalks that were beginning to come apart. Beside the braided bamboo gate a gap had been opened so a dog could pass through. Inside the fence, in deep silence, stood a meditation hut, its front roof sloping down from a boulder above the mouth a natural cave. Ferns grew in its thatched caves, and vines clung to the roof, leaves still tinted with last fall's colors.

To the east stood a willow tree, and from below it came a soft sound. Clear pure water was flowing naturally through a raised pipe of split bamboo from a source nearby. I looked around for the venerable monk that I assumed must live there and was surprised to see an old woman, one whose face the years had given a refined beauty. Her back was bent, but her frost-touched hair was well-combed. Her eyes were as soft and hazy as the moon low on the western horizon. Over an old-style sky blue wadded-silk robe embroidered with gold thread, she wore another splashed with a dappled pattern of thickly-petaled chrysanthemums. Her medium-width sash, with flowers in a lozenge design, was tied in front—stylish even at her age. To the crossbeam above the front of what seemed to be her bedroom was attached a

¹ From a poem by Ono no Komachi: "They fade invisibly and change, these blossoms of the mind in our human world." (*Kokinshū*, Love 5, no. 797)

² A secluded area about an hour's walk northwest from Kyoto. It housed many temple complexes and hermitages.

³ This crossing spans the Katsura River. This agricultural area has some of the oldest shrines in Kyoto.

weathered plaque that read “Hut of a Sensuous Hermit.” A scent of incense lingered in the air. I think it must have been First Warbler’s Cry, a very fine aloeswood.⁴

I found a place outside a window and stood there, so overcome with curiosity that my mind strained to leap out of myself and into the hermitage. As I watched, the two men, looking thoroughly at home, went right inside without even announcing themselves.

“So, you’ve come again today,” the woman said smiling. “There are so many pleasures in the world to captivate you men. Why have you come all the way here to see me, like wind visiting a rotting old tree? My ears are bad, and words no longer come easily. It’s just too difficult for me now to keep up relationships properly, the way I’d need to do if I wanted to stay in the world. I’ve been living in this place for seven years already, and the plum trees are my calendar. When they bloom, I know spring’s come. When the mountains are white with snow, I know it’s winter. I almost never see anyone any more. Why do you keep coming here?”

“He’s being tortured by love,” said one of the men. “And I get very depressed. Neither of us understands the way of sensuous love deeply enough yet. We’ve heard many things about you, and we’ve followed the same path you’ve traveled. Right here to your door. You’re so very experienced, won’t you please tell us the story of your life in the words people use now? Please do it in a way that will help us understand more about life and the world today.”

One of the men poured some fine saké into a beautiful gold wine cup and strongly urged the old woman to drink. She relented and gradually lost her reserve and began to play on her koto.⁵ She was so skillful it was obvious she played it often. For a while she sang a short song about deep love. Then overcome with emotion, she began to relate, as if in a dream, all the loves in her own life and the various things that had happened to her.

I didn’t come from a low-class family, she began. My mother was a commoner, but my father was descended from middle-ranking aristocrats who mixed with high officials at the court of Emperor GoHanazono.⁶ Families, like everything else in the world, go up and down. Mine came down very hard, and we were so miserable we didn’t want to go on living. But I happened to be born with a beautiful face, so I went to Kyoto to serve a court lady of the highest rank, and I learned most of those elegant, refined ways of aristocrats. If I’d continued to serve there for a few more years, I’m sure I would have had a very happy future.

From the beginning of the summer when I was eleven, I became very loose and forgot I was supposed to concentrate on serving my employer. When people did my hair, I wouldn’t be satisfied and I’d redo it myself. I was the one, you know, who invented the version of the Shimada hairstyle⁷ that has the hair swept up behind and the chignon tied and folded flat in back. It became quite stylish. I also created that way of tying the topknot without showing the cord that became so popular. I’m sure you know the white silk robes with colorful Goshō-dyed patterns. Well, in the beginning only court ladies wore them. But I spent all my time and energy making new patterns and colors for them, and soon they became quite popular with ordinary women.

⁴ A brand of incense, named for the Japanese Bush Warbler, one of the first birds of spring in Japan. Aloeswood is the tree whose resinous wood is used in making incense.

⁵ A stringed musical instrument that is the national instrument of Japan.

⁶ An Emperor of Japan who ruled from 1428 to 1464, and died in 1470.

⁷ An elaborate, upswept style featuring buns at the back of the neck. In this variation, the bun (the *chignon*) is tied together and held against the back of the head with pins or combs.

Aristocrats, you know, are always thinking about love, whether they're composing poems or playing kemari.⁸ Those women's pillows, why, they're always in use. Whenever I saw women and men lying together, I'd feel excited, and when I'd hear them in the dark, my heart pounded. Naturally I began to want to make love myself. Just when I was beginning to feel love was the most important thing in my life, I also began to get love letters from a lot of men. They all were full of deep feelings and tender thoughts, but I got so many I had no way to get rid of them all. I had to ask a guard to burn them for me. Of course I made him promise to keep it secret. Later, you know, he told me something strange. The places in the letters where the men swore by their patron gods that their love for me was true and would never change, those places, he said, didn't burn. They rose up with the smoke and came down in the Yoshida Shrine,⁹ where all the gods of Japan gather together. There's nothing as strange as love. Every one of the men who longed for me was handsome and knew how to look attractive, but I didn't have special feelings for any of them. I was interested in a young samurai who was working for one of the aristocrats. He was of low rank and wasn't good-looking, but his writing, even in his very first letter, sent me into another world. He kept on writing more and more letters, and before I knew it I was beginning to suffer and yearn for him, too.

It was hard for us to meet, but I managed to arrange things sometimes, and we were able to make love. Rumors started, but I couldn't stop myself. In the faint light early one morning, someone saw both of us together out in the shifting mist,¹⁰ as they say, and while the mist swirled ever more thickly, my employer secretly fired me and had me discreetly left beside the road at the end of Uji Bridge.¹¹ I was merely punished, but the man—how cruel they were! He lost his life for what we'd done.

For four or five days I couldn't tell whether I was sleeping or awake. I couldn't sleep, but I couldn't get up either. Several times I was terrified when I saw the man's resentful-looking shape in front of me. It refused to even speak. I was in complete shock, and I thought about killing myself. But the days went by, and you know, I completely forgot about that man. It's amazing how quickly a woman's mind can change. But I was thirteen at the time, and people looked on me leniently. Ridiculous, they'd think, surely she hasn't done that already. And what could have been more ridiculous than their own thoughts!

In the old days, when it came time for a bride to leave for the groom's house, she would grieve at leaving her parents' house and cry at the gate until her sleeves were all wet. But these days young women know a lot more about lovemaking. They grow impatient with the slow bargaining of the go-between woman, rush to get their trousseaus ready, and can't wait for the fancy palanquin to come and take them away. When it arrives, they practically leap in, excitement glowing everywhere, to the tips of their noses. Until forty years ago, young women used to play horse outside their front doors until they were eighteen or nineteen. And young men didn't have their coming-of-age ceremonies until they were twenty-five. My goodness, the world certainly does change quickly!

I was very young when I learned about love. I was still a flower in bud, you could say. And after that I had so many experiences that the pure water of my mind turned completely the color of sensuous love, like the water in the Uji River where it turns yellow from all the mountain roses on the banks. I just followed my desires wherever they went—and I ruined myself. The water will never be clear again. There's no use

⁸ Kemari is akin to hacky-sack or soccer. The object is to keep one ball in the air, with all players cooperating to do so. Players may use any body part except their arms and hands to keep the ball aloft.

⁹ A Shinto shrine that came to represent the superiority of that belief system over Buddhism and Confucianism. It was said to be the home of the 3,000+ gods worshipped in Japan.

¹⁰ From a poem by Sadayori: "In faint early light, mist on the Uji River begins to break, and through its gaps: fish trap poles in the shallows." (*Senzaishū*, no. 420)

¹¹ She was born in Uji, south of Kyoto, so this is the road home.

regretting it now, though. I certainly have managed to live a long time, but my life, well, it wasn't what you'd call exemplary.

Mistress of a Domain Lord¹²

The land was at peace, and calm breezes drifted through the pines of Edo. One year the daimyō lord of a certain rural domain was in Edo spending his obligatory year living near the castle of the shogun. There he was able to be with his wife, who was required to live permanently in Edo, but during the year she died. Since she'd left no male heir, the lord's worried retainers gathered more than forty beautiful young women from leading warrior families in Edo, hoping one of them would bear a boy baby for the lord and ensure the continued rule of the lord's clan over the domain—and the retainers' own employment. The head chambermaid was resourceful, and whenever she saw the lord feeling good, she brought a young woman near his sleeping chamber and did her best to put him in the mood. All the women were fresh as budding cherry blossoms, ready to burst into full bloom if wet by the slightest rain. Most men would have gazed at any of these women and never grown tired, yet not a single one suited the lord, and his retainers began to grow anxious.”¹³

The retainers didn't bother to look for other women among the commoners in Edo. Ordinary women raised in the eastern provinces, you know, they're rough and insensitive.¹⁴ They have flat feet and thick necks, and their skin is hard. They're honest and straightforward, but they don't feel deep passion and don't know how to express their desire to men or attract them by acting afraid. Their minds are sincere, but they're ignorant of the way of sensuous love and can't share it with a man who knows it.

I've never heard of any women more attractive than those in Kyoto. For one thing, Kyoto women have a beautiful way of speaking. It's not something they study. They pick it up naturally living in the capital, where women have talked that way for centuries. Just look at how different Kyoto is from Izumo Province. In Izumo they have an ancient tradition of love and courtship going back to the days of the gods, but the men and women there slur their words so badly it's hard to understand them. But then just go offshore from Izumo to Oki Island. The islanders there look like country people, but they speak the way people do in the capital. And Oki women are gentle and know how to play the koto, play go, distinguish fine incense, and compose and appreciate waka poems. That's because long ago Emperor GoDaigo was exiled to Oki with his entourage,¹⁵ and the islanders maintain the customs from that time even now.

So the daimyō's councilors thought that in Kyoto, at least, there must be a woman their lord would like. To look for one, they sent the lord's old and trusted retainer, the overseer of the inner chambers. The overseer was more than seventy. He couldn't see a thing without glasses and had only few front teeth. He'd forgotten what octopus tasted like, and the only pickled vegetables he could still eat were finely grated radishes. Day after day he lived without any pleasure, and as for sensuous love, well, he did wear a loincloth, but he might as well have been a woman. The best he could do was excitedly tell a few sexy stories. As a samurai, he wore formal divided skirts and robes with starched, high shoulders, but since he served in his

¹² Daimyō were powerful feudal lords who ruled most of Japan from their large hereditary land holdings. They were subordinate to the shōgun and the emperor.

¹³ If a daimyō lord died without a male heir, administration of the domain was given to a new clan, so the current retainers became unemployed rōnin.

¹⁴ Edo (the ancient name for Tokyo) was in the eastern provinces. The citizens of Kyoto considered themselves far more sophisticated than the rustic and unrefined residents of those provinces.

¹⁵ Emperor GoDaigo was exiled there in the 14th century.

lord's wife's private chambers and in the women's quarters, he wasn't allowed to wear either a long or a short sword. Too old to be a warrior, he was put in charge of watching the silver lock on the doors to the inner chambers. That's why the councilors chose him to go to Kyoto to find a mistress--and to chaperone her all the way back to Edo. It would be like putting a precious Buddha statue in front of a puzzled cat. You just can't let a young man alone with a woman, you know, even if he's Shakyamuni Buddha.

The old retainer finally arrived in the capital, which looked to him like the Pure Land paradise on earth. He went directly to one of the exclusive Sasaya clothiers on Muromachi Avenue that caters to aristocrats and warrior lords. There he announced himself and was led to a private room. "I cannot discuss my business with any of the young clerks," he told the person who received him. "I need to talk very confidentially with the owner's retired parents." The old retainer, who knew nothing of how things worked, felt uneasy as he waited. Finally the retired shop owner and his wife appeared. With a grave expression on his face, the old retainer said, "I've come to choose a mistress for my lord." "But of course," the retired owner said. "All the daimyō lords have them.

Exactly what kind of woman are you looking for?" The retainer opened a paulownia-wood scroll box and took out a painting of a woman. "We want to find someone," he said, "who looks like this." The retired couple saw a woman between fifteen and eighteen with a full, oval face of the kind so popular then, skin the light color of cherry blossoms, and perfect facial features. The lord's councilors wanted round eyes; thick eyebrows with plenty of space between them; a gradually rising nose; a small mouth with large, even white teeth; ears a bit long but not fleshy and with clearly formed earlobes; a natural forehead and unaltered hairline; as well as a long, slender nape with no loose hairs. Her fingers were to be long and delicate with thin nails, and her feet, about seven inches long, with the large toes naturally curved the way a truly sensuous woman's are and with arched soles. Her torso was to be longer than most women's, her waist firm and slim, and her hips full. She should move and wear her clothes gracefully, and her figure should show dignity and refinement. She was to have a gentle personality, be skilled at all the arts that women learn, and know something about everything. The old retainer added that she was not to have a single mole on her body.

"The capital is a big place," the retired owner said, "and a lot of women live here. Even so, it won't be easy to find a woman who meets all these requirements.

But it's for a domain lord, and expense is no concern. If the woman exists, we'll find her for you." The retired couple then went to see an experienced employment agent named Hanaya Kakuemon on Takeyamachi Street. They discreetly explained all the conditions and asked him to search for suitable candidates.

Employment agencies live off commissions. If an employer pays one hundred large gold coins as a down payment, the agency takes ten. This is broken down into silver coins, and even the errand woman gets 2 percent. An applicant for a mistress job has to have an interview, and if she has no proper clothes, she has to rent what she wants. For two and a half ounces of silver a day, she can rent a white silk robe or one of figured black satin, a dapple-dyed robe to wear over that, a wide brocade sash, a scarlet crepe underskirt, a colorful dye-pattern shawl to cover her head like an elegant lady, and even a mat to sit on in her hired palanquin. If the young woman makes a good impression and is hired, she has to pay the agency a large silver coin as its fee.

A woman from a poor family needs to have a new set of foster parents who own property and will vouch for her. The agency negotiates with the owners of a small house, and the young woman formally becomes their daughter. In return, the foster parents receive money and gifts from the lord or rich merchant who employs their new daughter. If the woman works for a lord and bears a baby boy, she becomes an official domain retainer, and the lord gives a regular rice stipend to her foster parents.

Competition is intense, and candidates try very hard to make a good impression at the interview. In addition to renting clothes, they have to spend half an ounce of silver for a palanquin and two carriers—no matter how short the ride is, the rate is the same to anywhere in Kyoto. And the woman needs a girl helper at two grams of silver a day and an older maid at three. She also has to pay for their two meals. After all this, if the woman is not hired, not only does she still have no job, but she's lost well over three ounces of silver. It's a very hard way to make a living.

And that's not the only thing the woman has to worry about. Well-off merchants from Osaka and Sakai constantly come to Kyoto to visit the Shimabara licensed quarter or party with boy kabuki actors near the theaters along the river by the Fourth Avenue Bridge. Sometimes these men have some free time and prey on women applicants to amuse themselves. The merchant pays a jester with a shaved head to pretend to be a wealthy visitor from the western provinces and has him ask women from all over Kyoto to come interview to be his mistress. The merchant attends the interview, and if a woman catches his eye, he asks her to stay and secretly negotiates with the owner of the house for a secluded room. Then he asks the woman to sleep with him for just that one time. The surprised woman is terribly angry and disappointed, but when she tries to leave, he says all sorts of things to persuade her. Finally he mentions money, and since the woman has paid so much for the interview, she gives in. For selling herself, she gets two small gold pieces. There's nothing else she can do. But women who aren't from poor families don't do that.

The employment agency carefully chose more than 170 attractive young women and sent them to the old retainer for interviews, but he wasn't satisfied with a single one. Desperately, the agency kept on searching, and when they heard about me, they contacted someone in the village of Kohata on the Uji River. Together they came to see me at my parents' house in an out-of-the-way part of Uji, where we were trying to live inconspicuously away from the world until people had forgotten what I'd done. But I agreed to an interview, and I went right back to Kyoto with the anxious agents just as I was, without putting on good clothes or makeup. When I got there, the old retainer thought I was even better than the woman in the painting, so the search was called off. Everything was decided on the spot, and I got to set the conditions myself. I became an official domain mistress.¹⁶

And so I went with the retainer all the way to Edo, far off in Musashi Province in the east. There I lived very happily day and night in the lord's third mansion in Asakusa,¹⁷ on the outskirts of the city. Everything was so luxurious, well, in the day I couldn't believe my eyes. I felt I must be seeing the most beautiful cherry blossoms in the world on the Mount Yoshino in China¹⁸ that people talk about. And at night they had top kabuki actors from Sakai-cho come, and we'd watch their plays and variety shows and laugh hour after hour. Everything was so luxurious you couldn't imagine anything else you'd want.

But women, you know, are very basic creatures. They just can't forget about physical love, even though warriors have very strict rules keeping women and men apart. The serving women who live in the inner rooms of those mansions almost never even see a man and don't have the slightest idea what the scent of a man's loincloth is like. Whenever they look at one of Moronobu's suggestive prints, they'll feel a rush and go dizzy with desire. Without even imagining they're really making love, they'll twist and push their own heels or middle fingers way around and move their implements. And when they're finished, they still feel unsatisfied. They want to make love with a flesh-and-blood man all the more.

¹⁶ She is the daimyō lord's semi-official second wife. Usually the mistress would live with the daimyō while he was in his home domain on alternate years, but in this case the lord's wife has died, so she goes with him to Edo.

¹⁷ A daimyō lord usually had three mansions in Edo: the first was for his family and formal audiences, the second for emergencies, and the third for his mistress and relaxing.

¹⁸ Mount Yoshino was said to have the most beautiful cherry blossoms in Japan, giving rise to the belief that there was an even more beautiful and ideal Mount Yoshino in China.

Daimyō lords usually spend most of their time in the front rooms of their mansions overseeing domain business, and without knowing it, they become attracted to the young pages with long hair who are constantly waiting on them. The love a lord feels for a page is deeper than anything he feels for a woman. His wife is definitely in second place. In my opinion, this is because a lord's wife isn't allowed to show her jealousy the way commoner women do. Men, high or low, fear a jealous woman more anything else in the world, and those warriors take strict precautions.

I've always been an unlucky woman, but with the lord I was fortunate. He was tender to me, and we enjoyed our lovemaking. But things didn't work out. Before I could get pregnant, he started taking herbal pills. They didn't do much good, though. He was still young, but in bed he just couldn't do anything anymore. It was just extremely bad luck. I couldn't talk about it with anyone, so I spent all my time regretting what had happened. The lord kept losing weight, and finally he became so weak and haggard he was just awful to look at. I was amazed to discover that the councilors thought it was my fault. They said I was a woman from the capital who liked fancy sex and had worn out their lord. Those old men didn't know the first thing about love, but they made the decisions. I was suddenly dismissed and sent all the way back to my parents-- again. If you look closely at the world, you'll see that a man who's born sexually weak is a very sad thing for a woman.

A Monk's Wife in a Worldly Temple

I have a small build, so I unstitched the sewn-up openings under the arms of the robes I'd worn as a girl and put them on again.¹⁹ I looked so young people called me a female version of the Daoist wizard Tie-guai.²⁰

In those days Buddhism was at its proverbial high noon, and truly, even in broad daylight, women dressed as temple pages²¹ would walk right into temple precincts and visit the monks there. I, too, finally overcame my shame and had my hair done up like a boy, with thick, long hair in front and the top of my head shaved. I learned to speak like a boy and move my body almost like one, too. When I put on a loincloth, I was surprised to see how much like a boy I looked! I also changed to a boy's narrow sash, but the first time I stuck long and short swords through it, they were so heavy I couldn't keep my waist and legs steady. And when I put on a boy's cloak and wide-rimmed sedge hat, I began to wonder whether I was really myself.

I hired a young man with a long ink moustache painted on his face to carry my spare sandals and other things, and I set out together with a professional jester from the licensed quarter who knew a lot about how things worked in Kyoto. We asked around and found a temple known to have wealth and a sex-loving head monk. We walked right through the gate in the earth walls surrounding the temple, pretending we were going inside to see the small cherry tree in the temple garden. Then the jester went to the head monk's quarters and began whispering with the monk, who seemed to have a lot of free time on his hands. Soon I was called into the reception room, where the jester introduced me to the monk. "This young warrior," the

¹⁹ Young girls wore long, loose sleeves with openings under the arms that were sewn up in their late teens. In this chapter the woman is about 25 or 26 years old.

²⁰ According to legend, this wizard could breathe out younger versions of himself from his mouth. He is one of the Eight Daoist Immortals.

²¹ Boy assistants to high-ranking monks, and often their sexual partners. In the 17th century women were able to enter temple precincts more easily, ushering in a new type of page.

jester said, “has lost his lord, and he has no one to depend on. He’s been able to make some contacts, but while he’s waiting for an offer from another lord, he’ll drop in here from time to time for a little recreation. I most sincerely ask you to take care of him to the best of your ability.” He went on and on about a lot of similar things.

The head monk was flushed with excitement. “Just last night,” he blurted out, “I got someone to teach me how to make an herbal mixture to induce abortions. It’s something you women really need to” Then he clapped his hand on his mouth. It was all quite amusing.

Later we drank some sake and spoke more freely. As we savored the smells of meat and fish coming from the temple kitchen, my fee was set at two small gold coins per night. Later, the jester and I went around to temples of every persuasion suggesting they switch to the Woman-Loving sect, and we didn’t find a single monk who didn’t convert.

Eventually the head priest of one temple fell in love with me, and I agreed to become his temporary wife for three years in exchange for twenty-five pounds of silver. I became what people call an “oven god.”²² As the days went by, I was more and more amazed by what I saw and heard at this floating-world temple. In the past, a group of monk friends who lived in various halls around the temple compound had gotten together on the six days a month when special purifications and austerities are required. They all solemnly pledged that on days except for these six, they would strictly obey their abstentions. And they vowed to rigorously limit their fish and poultry and their sex with women to the nights of these six days, except, of course, when the days fell on the memorial days for various Buddhas and the sect founder. To pursue their pleasures, they went all the way to Third Avenue in downtown Kyoto and visited places like the Koiya Inn.²³ On other days, the men acted like model monks. The Buddhas, who know all, looked on them leniently, and everything went smoothly.

But in the last few years, this large temple had been growing very prosperous, and the monks were losing all restraint. At night they replaced their black robes with long cloaks and went to the licensed quarter pretending to be shaven-headed herbal doctors. And the head priest would bring his secret wife of the moment right into the monks’ living quarters. He’d had his monks dig far down below one corner of the main living room and built a secret underground room for the wife. Between the ground and the raised floor of the quarters, they’d constructed a narrow window in a place that no one could see from the outside. That way the woman could have a little light. They’d also filled the space between the ceiling of the underground room and the quarters floor with earth and constructed soundproof walls more than a foot thick all the way around to the back of the room. During the day the head priest forced me down into this underground cell. When the sun went down, I was allowed up and could go as far as his bedroom. Living like this was depressing enough, but sleeping with the priest made me even sadder. It was just a job, and there was no love in it. I had to give myself to that disgusting priest day and night, whenever he wanted to have sex, and I began to lose interest in living. Nothing gave me pleasure any more, and I gradually lost weight and grew weaker. But the priest didn’t let up in the least. His expression showed that as far as he was concerned, if I died he’d just have me secretly buried somewhere on the temple grounds without even a proper cremation. And that would be that. It was frightening.

Later I got used to the situation, and I even came to enjoy it. When the priest went out to chant sutras at a parishioner’s house on the night after a death or on a memorial day, I found myself waiting up late, wishing he would come back. And when he went out at dawn to pray over the ashes of a cremated person,

²² Daikoku, one of the gods of fortune, was often worshipped as a kitchen god or an oven god. But this was also a euphemism for a woman living and cooking in a temple. This practice was forbidden, yet widespread. Her payment of two gold coins is a significant amount of money.

²³ A famous seafood restaurant that had plenty of private rooms for the monks to meet women.

I felt as if we were saying good-bye to each other, and I hated for him to be away, no matter how short a time it was. Even the smell of incense on his white robe clung to my body and seemed dear to me. After a while I forgot my loneliness, and I started to like the sounds of gongs and cymbals at the ceremonies. At first, you know, I would hold my hands over my ears whenever I heard them. And my nose got used to the smell from the crematory. The more deaths there were, well, the happier I was, since they meant more offerings for the temple. Early each evening, I called in fish peddlers and made suppers of duck meat with and without bones, blowfish soup, cedar-broiled fish, and other fine seafood.²⁴ I did take one small precaution, though. I always put a cover on the brazier so the nice smells wouldn't escape.

The young monks in training saw our loose way of living and imitated us. They hid salted red herrings in their sleeve pockets and wrapped them in pieces of old calligraphy practice paper covered with half-written Buddha names. After soaking the papers, they would place them in warm ashes to bake and would eat herrings from morning until night. It gave them wonderful complexions and lustrous skin and kept them vigorous and healthy. Some monks go off for long periods to a mountain or forest where they eat only berries and plants. Other monks are so poor they have no choice but to eat only vegetables. You can spot these kinds of monks right away from their lifeless expressions. They look like rotting trees. I'd worked at the temple from spring until early fall. At first the priest was terribly afraid I would run away, and while I was up out of my underground room, he would lock the living quarters each time he went out. But later he came to trust me and just glanced in at me from the kitchen from time to time. Gradually I became bolder, and when parishioners came to visit the priest I no longer rushed underground but simply slipped out of sight into another room.

One evening I went out onto the bamboo verandah to get some fresh air, and a strong wind was moaning in the trees and ripping the thin leaves of the plantains in the garden. It was an eerie sight. Everything in the world really does change, I felt, just as they preach. I lay down on the porch with my head on my arm and was soon very drowsy. Then I saw what looked like a phantom shape. Her hair was completely gray, and her face was covered with wrinkles. Her pathetic arms and legs were thin as tongs, and she was bent over with a crooked back. She came toward me crawling on all fours.

"I've lived in this temple for many, many years," she said in a voice so full of sorrow I could hardly bear to listen. "The priest told people I was his mother. I'm not from a low-class family, but I decided to do a disgraceful thing, and I came here. I was twenty years older than he was, and I'm ashamed to say I was so poor I couldn't get by any more, and I began to sleep with him. Later we became close and exchanged many pledges, but they. . . . For him, all those pledges were nothing, nothing at all. When I got old like this, he pushed me into a dark corner of the temple. He gives me nothing but old rice offerings he's taken down from the altars. And now he sees I'm not about to die eating only that, so he glares resentfully at me. He's treated me terribly, but still, you know, it isn't really so bad. There's something else that gnaws at me until I can't stand it. Every single day. It's you! You don't know anything about me, but whenever I hear you and the priest saying little things to each other in bed, well, you see, even at my age I just can't forget sex. So I've decided to get rid of this terrible longing I have and feel good again. I'm going to bite right into you. Tonight!"

I was completely shaken. I knew I had no business being in that temple a minute longer. Finally I devised a method of escape that impressed even me. I stuffed a lot of cotton wadding between the outer and inner layers in the front part of my robe. That made me look quite heavy. Then I went to see the head priest.

²⁴ All of these foods would have been prohibited in the temple precincts.

“I haven’t told you until now,” I said, “but I’m several months pregnant. I’m not sure exactly when, but the baby could come any time now.”

The priest lost his usual composure. “Please go back to your parents’ house,” he said. “Have a safe delivery and then come back here.” He gathered up a lot of offertory coins from different places and gave them to me, swearing he was very worried about all the needs I’d have at home. Then he gave me some tiny silk robes that grief-stricken parents had left as offerings after their babies died. The priest said he couldn’t stand to look at them any more, and he gave me all he had, telling me to sew them into things for his baby instead. Then he began celebrating and named the child Ishijiyo—Everlasting Rock—a boy’s name, even though it hadn’t been born yet.

I’d had enough of that temple. There was a lot of time left on my contract, but I never went back. The priest must have been very upset, but in a situation like that, well, there was no legal action he could take.

A Teacher of Calligraphy and Manners

“The irises you sent are exquisite.²⁵ Watching them gives me endless pleasure in ways too many to begin to count.” This is the kind of thing a woman has to write to begin a respectable thank-you letter in early summer.

In Kyoto, ordinary women can learn to write in a flowing woman’s hand from women calligraphy teachers, who also sell their skills transcribing letters. These commoner teachers start their careers when they’re young, serving for several years in the mansion of an aristocrat and learning from experience all the proper ways of elegant comportment, writing, and speech as well as the various traditional ceremonies that mark off the year. When they finish their service, most of these women are models of respectability and make a decent living teaching what they’ve learned. Parents tell their daughters to emulate these teachers and send their girls to study under them.

I, too, had once worked for a high-ranking aristocratic family. Although I’d been through a lot since then, some very kind people thought it would be a shame for me to waste my experience and knowledge, and they helped me establish my own calligraphy school for girls. It consisted of a single room, which served as my bedroom at night, but it was a pleasant place, and I was extremely happy to finally have a house of my own. I pasted a notice on the doorpost announcing that I taught calligraphy to women, and to help me, I hired a young woman from the country who’d just arrived in Kyoto.

Taking care of other people’s daughters isn’t an easy job. Day after day you continually have to exert yourself correcting brush strokes on the girls’ practice papers and generally act as an example, demonstrating and explaining to them the cultured manners and decorum they’re expected to learn. To avoid rumors, I completely gave up relationships with men and managed to overcome every temptation to meet them.

Then one day an obviously vigorous young man in a state of extreme passion came to me and asked me to write a letter to a certain woman with whom he fervently wished to become intimate. Since I’d worked in the licensed quarter, I knew how to compose love letters that would reach their readers’ hearts. I could make a woman reader want to fly together with a man, sharing the same wings and eyes, or make her desire to become one with him, like two trees linked by a shared limb. Choosing precisely the right

²⁵ Sending in-season flowers was a sign of the good taste and manners required of upper-class women, and imitated by commoners.

expressions, I could make the woman who read one of my letters fall deeply in love with the man who'd asked me to write it. I could see directly into the feelings of young women still living with their parents and persuade even the most experienced woman who knew everything about men. I used different ways of affecting each woman, but there was none my letters didn't move.

Nothing shows a person's feelings better than a letter. No matter how far away the person you're thinking of is, you can communicate your thoughts with your brush. You may write at length, using phrase after polished phrase, but if your letter is filled with falsehoods, it will show and soon be forgotten. Truthful brush strokes go straight to the heart. As you read, you will feel as if you're meeting the writer, who's right there with you.

When I was working in the licensed quarter, there was one man among my many customers whom I loved very much. Whenever I met him I forgot I was performing and opened my heart completely to him. I trusted him and told him everything. The man also opened himself to me, but when his parents discovered our relationship, they forced him to stop his visits. I was so sad I wrote him every day and had the letter secretly delivered to him at home.

Later he told me that while he was confined in his parents' house he felt as if we were still together--as if I were right there with him. After reading each of my letters several times, he would go to sleep at night with it pressed against his skin. Sooner or later the same dream would come. In it, the letter would take on my shape, and we would talk and hold each other all night. The people guarding the man slept near him, and they would hear two voices coming from the place where he was sleeping. They certainly had a hard time believing what they heard! Eventually the man's parents relented, and when we met again he told me about everything he'd experienced. I discovered that the thoughts I'd been thinking each day had also reached his mind--exactly as I'd thought them. Actually, though, there's nothing strange about that. When you spend a long time writing a letter, you forget about everything else. If you put your whole mind into thinking something, it will always reach the other person.

I turned to the young man who'd visited my school. "Since I'm taking on the full responsibility for writing your letters," I said, "I can assure you that sooner or later the woman will respond to your love, no matter how uninterested she seems now," I put all of myself into composing the best letters I possibly could. But as I wrote more and more letters, I found I'd lost control. The man who'd asked me to write the letters had become very, very dear to me.

During one of the man's visits, I was unable to continue writing. I sat there holding my brush and thinking only about him. Then I abandoned all shame. "What an incredibly coldhearted woman she is," I said. "She's torturing you and not showing the slightest sensitivity to your feelings. You're just not getting anywhere with her. Why don't you love me instead? We'd have to talk about it, of course, and we'd have to set looks aside. But I'm kindhearted, and with me you can realize your love without even waiting. You've got a lot to gain with me right now."

The man looked surprised, and he remained silent for some time. He didn't know whether the woman he was writing to so often to would ever agree to meet him, and he realized it would be a lot quicker with me. He didn't seem to think I was a bad substitute, either. Judging from my wavy hair, curving large toes, and small mouth,²⁶ he thought I must be a very passionate woman.

"Please let me be frank," he finally said. "Even in relationships I begin myself, money's out of the question. I won't be able to give you even one new sash. And after we've known each other a short time, if you start inquiring whether I know any dry goods dealers and ask me for two rolls of ordinary silk or a roll

²⁶ All thought to be signs of a sensuous temperament.

of crimson silk, I just won't be able to promise you that. I've got to make that absolutely clear right from the beginning."

How insensitive and mean, I thought to myself, to say an arrogant thing like that to someone he wants to make love with! There was no shortage of nice men in the capital, and I decided I'd have to look somewhere else.

It was the rainy season, and just then a soft rain began to come down. Suddenly it became very quiet outside. A sparrow flew in through the window, and the flame in the lamp went out. Taking advantage of the darkness, the man threw himself on me and grabbed me tightly. He was breathing heavily as he forced himself on me, and as he began, he took some expensive tissue paper out of his robe and placed it near the pillow. After he finished, he slapped me gently on the small of the back, apparently thinking I'd enjoyed it. He even sang an old wedding song, saying he'd love me till I was a hundred and he was ninety-nine.

What an idiot, I thought. You have no idea how fragile life is. Do you really think life is an old song and you're going to live to be ninety-nine? You said some pretty disrespectful things just now. You won't last even one year. Pretty soon you'll have a sunken jaw and be walking with a stick. And then you'll leave the floating world altogether.

I made love with that man day and night. When he lost his desire, I strengthened him with loach broth, eggs, and yams,²⁷ and we continued. Gradually, as I expected, he ran dry. It was pitiful to see him shivering in the Fourth Month of the next year, still wearing thick winter robes when everyone else had changed into early summer things. Every doctor he'd seen had given up on him. His beard was long and unkempt; his nails lengthened unclipped; and he had to cup his hand to his ear in order to hear. At the slightest mention of an attractive woman, he turned his head away with a look of endless regret.

A Stylish Woman Who Brought Disaster

Kickball has long been a sport for aristocratic men and warriors, but I discovered that women play it, too. At the time, I was working as the outside messenger for the wife of a daimyō domain lord in the lord's main mansion in Edo.²⁸ My job was running errands and dealing with people outside the women's quarters, and once I went with the lord's wife to their third mansion in Asakusa, where she sometimes went to relax. In the large garden inside the mansion, azaleas were beginning to bloom, turning all the small fields and hills a bright crimson. Nearby I saw some waiting women wearing long divided skirts of a matching crimson. Their long sleeves were fluttering and swaying as they played kickball inside a high, rectangular fence. They lifted the deerskin ball almost noiselessly with special shoes, and using only their feet, they strained to keep it moving in the air for as long as they could. They were extremely good and used the Multiple Cherry, the Mountain Crossing, and other difficult kicks. I was amazed that women were doing this. It was the first time I'd seen anything like it.

Earlier, in Kyoto, I'd been quite surprised to see court ladies practicing indoor archery, but people at court said it was quite natural. The women were following a venerable tradition begun in China by the imperial consort Yang Guifei.²⁹ Still, I'd never heard of women in Japan playing football in all the centuries

²⁷ All thought to increase a man's sexual desire.

²⁸ A daimyō lord's wife and children were required to live in Edo as virtual hostages of the shōgunate. The lord himself had to live in Edo every other year.

²⁹ The well-loved consort of Emperor Xuanzong, who ruled in the 8th century. Many legends were attached to her name.

since it was first played here by Prince Shotoku.³⁰ But the wife of a domain lord is free to do anything she wants. How magnificent she was!

Later, as evening approached, a strong wind began to blow, bending the trees in the garden. The kickers had a hard time controlling the ball, which wouldn't spin and constantly swerved off course, and soon everyone lost interest in the game. The lord's wife had just taken off her kickball robes and put them away when her face suddenly took on a fierce expression as if she'd remembered something. Nothing her attendants said cheered her up, so finally they stopped speaking and tried not to move or make any noise. Then a lady in waiting named Kasai, who'd served for many years, spoke up in an obsequious tone of voice. Her head moved back and forth and her knees trembled with excitement.

"Tonight," she said, "please honor us by holding another jealousy meeting. ³¹Until the tall candle burns itself out!"

The lord's wife's face suddenly took on a pleasant expression. "Yes," she said. "Yes indeed!"

An older woman named Yoshioka, the head waiting woman, pulled on a brocade-tufted cord that ran along the wall of a corridor. At the far end a bell rang, and soon even the cooks and bath maids appeared and sat without the slightest hesitation in a circle around the lord's wife. There must have been thirty-four or thirty-five women in all. I also joined them.

"You may speak about anything at all," Yoshioka told us. "Don't hold anything back. Confess something you yourself did. How you blocked another woman's love for a man and hated her. How you were jealous of a man going to see another woman and spoke badly of him. Or the pleasure you felt when a man and woman broke up. Stories like these will bring great joy to our mistress." This certainly was an extraordinary kind of meeting, I thought, but I couldn't laugh, since it was being held at the command of the lord's wife.

Soon they opened a wooden door with a painting of a weeping willow on it and brought out a life-size doll that looked exactly like a real woman. The artisan who made it must have been a master. It had a graceful figure and a face more beautiful than any blossom in full bloom. I myself am a woman, but I was entranced and couldn't stop gazing at it.

One by one, each woman spoke what she felt. Among them was a lady in waiting named Iwahashi who had a face so classically unattractive it invited disaster.³² No man would want to make love with her in the daytime, and she hadn't slept with a man at night for a very long time. In fact, during all that time she hadn't even seen a man. Now she ostentatiously pushed her way through the other women and volunteered.

"I was born and raised in Tochi in Yamato," she said, "where I also married and lived with my husband. But that damn man started making trips to Nara. Then people began to tell me he was seeing the daughter of one of the lower priests at the Kasuga Shrine³³ there. She was exceptionally beautiful, they said. So one night I secretly followed my husband. My heart pounded loudly as I went, and when he arrived, I stood nearby and listened while the woman opened the small back gate and pulled him inside.

"Tonight," the woman says, "my eyebrows kept on itching and itching. No matter how hard I rubbed them. I just knew something good was going to happen." And then, with no shame at all, she calmly rests her slender little waist against his.

³⁰ A son of Emperor Yōmei, who spread both Korean and Chinese culture in Japan. Legend has it that he watched or played kickball.

³¹ These meetings were common among upper-class or merchant-class women in the 17th century, who were very restricted in their social and public roles.

³² An ironic reference to the title of the chapter. It is not Iwahashi who brings disaster to the lord's wife.

³³ One of the largest Shintō shrines in Japan.

“I couldn’t bear any more of that and ran right over to them. ‘Hey,’ I shouted, ‘that’s my husband!’ I opened my mouth wide to show her my blackened teeth and prove I was married, and before I knew it, I’d bitten into her as hard as I could!” Then Iwahashi fastened her teeth around the beautiful doll and refused to let go. The way she did it made me feel that right there in front of me, with my own eyes, I was seeing exactly what had happened that night long ago. I was terrified. The jealousy meeting had begun. The next woman walked very slowly out in front of us as if she hardly knew where she was. She was a typical woman who lets her emotions run away with her. I don’t know how she was able to say the things she did.

“When I was young,” she confessed, “I lived in Akashi in Harima Province. My niece got married and took in her husband as part of her own family.³⁴ What a tramp he turned out to be. And a complete lecher! He slept with every single maid and with the helping women, too. It was perfectly obvious—they were dozing off all the time. My niece tried to keep up appearances, you know, so she let things go and didn’t criticize him. Inside, though, she was very upset at not being able to do anything. So every night I would go and try to help her. I got someone to nail iron fasteners to her bedroom door, and after asking my niece and her husband to go inside, I’d shout, ‘Please sleep together tonight!’ Before I’d go back to my own room, I’d lock their door from the outside.

“Soon my niece was looking thin and exhausted. She didn’t even want to see her husband’s face any more. ‘If he keeps on like this,’ she told me, ‘I’m not going to live much longer.’ Her body was shaking when she said that. She was born in the year of the fiery horse,³⁵ so she should have caused her husband to die young, but he was the one who was wearing her down. She got very sick because of that despicable man and his endless urges. I’d like to make him do it again and again right now with this doll here. Until he falls over dead!” She hit the doll and knocked it over, and then she screamed at it for some time.

Then another lady in waiting named Sodegaki got up. She was from Kuwana in Ise Province. She told us she’d been a jealous person even before she got married. She was so jealous of her parents’ maids she wouldn’t let them put on makeup or use mirrors when they did their hair or put white powder on their skin. If a maid had a pretty face, she forced the woman to make herself look as unattractive as she could. Stories about how she acted got around, though, and people began avoiding her. No men in her hometown or for miles around would think of marrying her. So she came all the way to Edo to look for work.

“Hey, beautiful doll,” the woman yelled. “Yes, you’re so very, very smart, aren’t you? You even know how to make another woman’s husband stay overnight at your house!” Then she began to disfigure the innocent doll.

Each woman tried to speak more jealously than the rest, but none of their stories satisfied the lord’s wife. When my turn came, I went directly to the doll and pulled it down onto the floor. Then I got on top of it.

“You!” I said. “You’re just a mistress. But the lord likes you, so you act as if you’re more important than his wife, sleeping with him on the same long pillow, just as you like without thinking anything about it. Listen, you, I’m not going to let you get away with it!” I glared at the doll, ground my teeth, and acted as if I truly hated the doll from the bottom of my heart.

What I’d said turned out to be what the lord’s wife herself had been thinking. “Exactly,” she said, “exactly!³⁶ Let me tell you about this doll. You see, the lord treats me now as if I hardly existed. He’s had his beautiful mistress from the domain brought all the way here to Edo, and he doesn’t think about anyone

³⁴ Among commoners, a groom often took his wife’s name and legally became a member of her family.

³⁵ A “double-fire” year in the 60-year zodiacal cycle. It was believed that a woman born in such a year would be so passionate she would wear out her husband.

³⁶ The narrator is able to figure out what is bothering the lord’s wife because she was herself once a lord’s mistress. The narrator’s actions here suggest that she has sympathy for the mistress.

but her day and night. It's very sad being a woman--complaining does no good at all. But I did have this doll made to look like her. At least I can cause pain to it."

Before the lord's wife had finished, something strange happened. First the doll opened her eyes and extended her arms. She looked around the room for a while, and then she seemed to stand up, although by that time no one was watching closely anymore. All the frightened women were scrambling away as fast as they could. Then the doll grabbed the front of the lord's wife's outer robe and wouldn't let go. I only barely managed to separate them. After that, nothing more happened.

Perhaps because of this incident, a few days later the lord's wife fell ill and began to speak deliriously of terrible things. The waiting women thought she must be possessed by the doll's soul. If they didn't stop the resentful doll, it might cause even more serious harm, so they secretly decided to get rid of it. In a far corner of the mansion they burned the doll so completely that nothing at all remained, but they showed their respect and buried the ashes in a formal grave. After that, people began to fear the burial mound, and they claimed that every evening they could clearly hear a woman's wailing voice coming from inside it. The rumor spread beyond the mansion walls, and the lord's wife became the object of widespread ridicule.

Word of the affair eventually reached the lord, who was at his second Edo mansion with his mistress from his home domain. Astounded, he started an investigation and ordered the outside messenger to report to him. Since that was my job, I had to appear. I couldn't hide what I knew, and I related everything about the doll, just as it had happened.³⁷ The people who heard me clapped their hands together in amazement.

"There's nothing as nasty as a woman's vengeance," the lord told his aides. "I have no doubt at all that very soon my mistress won't be safe from my wife's avenging soul. Her life is in danger here. Explain the situation to her and have her return to the domain."

When the woman appeared and sat nervously on her knees before the lord, I saw she was far more graceful and beautiful than the doll had been. I was a bit proud of my own looks, you know, and we both were women, but I was so overwhelmed I could hardly bear to look at her. Such great beauty, I thought to myself, and yet the lord's wife, out of jealousy, is trying to kill her with curses. The lord declared that women were fearsome creatures, and he never again entered the women's quarters of his main mansion in Edo. His wife became a virtual widow while her husband was still alive.

I had to watch all this and try to take messages between them. Soon I grew very weary of my job, prestigious as it was, and I submitted my resignation. It was accepted, and I returned to Kyoto feeling so disappointed with the world I thought I might become a nun. Jealousy is something you must never, never give in to. Women should be very careful to resist it.

Five Hundred Disciples of the Buddha — I'd Known Them All

In winter the mountains sleep beneath leafless trees, and the bare limbs of the cherries turn white only with snow at dusk. Then spring dawns come once more, filled with blossoms. Only humans get old as the years pass and lose all pleasure in living. I especially. When I recalled my own life, I felt thoroughly ashamed.

³⁷ The narrator is the one to bring on the disaster, by both causing the doll to seem to come to life and by reporting it to the lord.

I thought I at least ought to pray for the one thing I could still wish for—to be reborn in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land paradise.³⁸ So I went back to Kyoto one more time and made a pilgrimage to the Daiunji temple³⁹ in the northern hills. It was supposed to be a visible Pure Land right here in this world. My mind was filled with pious feelings, and I’d chosen a good time to visit. It was the end of the Twelfth Month, when people gathered to chant the names of all the Buddhas and to confess the bad deeds they’d done during the year and ask for forgiveness.⁴⁰ I joined in their chanting.

Afterward, as I walked down the steps of the main hall, I noticed a smaller hall devoted to the Five Hundred Disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha.⁴¹ All were wise and worthy men who had achieved enlightenment, and I went over and looked inside. Each virtuous disciple was distinctly individual and differed from all the others. I wondered what marvelous sculptor could have carved all these many unique statues.

People say there are so many disciples that if you search hard enough, you’re bound to find someone you know. Wondering if it might be true, I looked over the wooden statues and saw disciples who obviously were men with whom I’d shared my pillow when I was younger. I began to examine them more closely and found a statue that looked like Yoshi from Chojamachi in Kyoto.⁴² When I was working in the Shimabara quarter, we exchanged very deep vows, and he tattooed my name on his wrist where no one would notice. I was beginning to remember all the things that had happened between us when I saw another disciple sitting under a large rock. He looked exactly like the owner of the house in uptown Kyoto where I worked as a parlor maid. He loved me in so many ways that even after all those years I couldn’t forget him.

On the other side of the hall I saw Gohei. Even the disciple’s high-ridged nose was exactly his. I once lived together with him. We loved each other from the bottoms of our hearts for several years, and he was especially dear to me. Then, closer to me, I saw a wide-bodied disciple in a blue green robe with one shoulder bared. He was working very hard—and he looked familiar. Yes, yes, it was definitely Danpei, the man who did odd jobs for a warrior mansion in Kojimachi. While I was working in Edo, I used to meet him secretly six nights a month.

Up on some rocks in back was a handsome man with light skin and the soft, gentle face of a Buddha. Finally I remembered. He was a kabuki actor from the theaters down along the riverbank near the Fourth Avenue in Kyoto who’d started out as a boy actor selling himself to men on the side. We met while I was working at a teahouse, and I was the first woman with whom he’d ever made love. I taught him all the different styles women and men use, and he learned well, but pretty soon he just folded up. He grew weaker and weaker, like a flame in a lantern, and then he was gone. He was only twenty-four when they took his body to the crematory at Toribe Mountain.⁴³ The disciple I saw had just his hollow jaw and sunken eyes. There was no doubt about it.

³⁸ Pure Land Buddhism, called *jōdo*, is a sect of Buddhism devoted to the Buddha Amitabha—“Buddha of Infinite Light,” who is known in Japan as Amida. Followers believe that rebirth in Amitabha’s Western Paradise, Sukhavati—the Pure Land—is ensured for all those who invoke Amitabha’s name with sincere devotion.

³⁹ A temple in the northern hills of Kyoto, believed to be where the goddess of mercy, Kannon manifested herself. Kannon is a Bodhisattva, which means she has delayed her own eternal enlightenment to stay behind and help those who suffer in this world.

⁴⁰ The 88 Buddhas Repentance Ceremony, where participants repent by chanting the names of 88 buddhas in order to clear their karmic obstacles and draw out their inner wisdom.

⁴¹ Shakyamuni Buddha was the founder of Buddhism. He lived and taught in India in the 6th century BCE. Several temples in Japan and China had collections of statues that were said to represent the original followers of the Buddha.

⁴² A wealthy area of Kyoto, known for its money brokers.

⁴³ A large cemetery in eastern Kyoto.

Farther on was a ruddy-faced disciple with a mustache and bald head. Except for the mustache, he looked just like the old chief priest who'd kept me in his temple as his mistress and treated me so badly.⁴⁴ By the time I met him I was used to every kind of sex, but he came at me day and night until I was so worn down I lost weight and had fevers and coughs and my period stopped. But even he had died. Endless storehouse of desire that he was, he, too, finally went up in crematory smoke.

And there, under a withered tree, a disciple with a fairly intelligent face and prominent forehead was shaving the top of his head. He seemed to be on the verge of saying something, and his legs and arms looked as though they were beginning to move. As I gazed at him, I gradually realized he, too, resembled someone I'd loved. While I was going around dressed up like a singing nun, I would meet a new man every day, but there was one who became very attached to me. He'd been sent from a western domain to help oversee the domain's rice warehouse sales in Osaka, and he loved me so much he risked his life for me. I could still remember everything about him. The sad things as well as the happy ones. He was very generous with what people begrudge the most,⁴⁵ and I was able to pay back everything I owed my manager.

Calmly I examined all five hundred disciples and found I recognized every single one! They all were men I'd known intimately. I began to remember event after event from the painful years when I was forced to work getting money from men. Women who sold themselves, I was sure, were the most fearful of all women, and I began to grow frightened of myself. With this single body of mine I'd slept with more than ten thousand men. It made me feel low and ashamed to go on living so long. My heart roared in my chest like a burning wagon in hell,⁴⁶ and hot tears poured from my eyes and scattered in every direction like water from one of hell's cauldrons. Suddenly I went into a sort of trance and no longer knew where I was. I collapsed on the ground, got up, and fell down again and again.

Many monks had apparently come to where I was, and they were telling me that the sun was going down. Then the booming of the big temple bell finally returned my soul to my body and startled me back to my senses.

"Old woman, what grieves you so?"

"Does one of these five hundred disciples resemble your dead child?"

"Is one your husband?"

"Why were you crying so hard?"

Their gentle voices made me feel even more ashamed. Without replying, I walked quickly out the temple gate. As I did, I suddenly realized the most important thing there is to know in life. It was all actually true!⁴⁷ The Pure Land, I was sure then, really does exist. And our bodies really do disappear completely. Only our names stay behind in the world. Our bones turn to ash and end up buried in wild grass near some swamp.⁴⁸

Some time later I found myself standing in the grass at the edge of Hirosawa Pond.⁴⁹ And there, beyond it, stood Narutaki Mountain. There was no longer anything at all keeping me from entering the mountain of enlightenment on the far side. I would leave all my worldly attachments behind and ride the Boat of the

⁴⁴ This is the monk who kept the narrator in the chapter, "A Monk's Wife in a Worldly Temple."

⁴⁵ i.e., money.

⁴⁶ Fiery carts were believed to carry condemned souls to their places in hell.

⁴⁷ The narrator is quoting the *nō* play *Tomonaga*, in which a monk prays for the soul of the dead warrior Tomonaga. Tomonaga's soul returns and proclaims that the Pure Land, Kannon's mercy, and other Buddhist beliefs are "actually true!"

⁴⁸ She is referring to a Buddhist poem on the reality of death, "Nine Stages of the Corpse."

⁴⁹ A large pond in western Kyoto.

Buddhist Dharma⁵⁰ across the waters of worldly passions all the way to the Other Shore. I made up my mind to pray, enter the water, and be reborn in the Pure Land.

I ran toward the pond as fast as I could.⁵¹ But just then someone grabbed me and held me back. It was a person who'd known me well many years before. He persuaded me not to end my own life and fixed up this hermitage for me. "Let your death come when it comes," he said. "Free yourself from all your false words and actions and return to your original mind. Meditate and enter the way of the Buddha."

I was very grateful for this advice, and I've devoted myself to meditation ever since. From morning to night I concentrate my mind and do nothing but chant Amida Buddha's name. Then you two men came to my old door, and I felt drawn to you. I have so few visitors here. Then I let you pour me some sake and it confused my mind. I actually do realize how short life is, you know, though I've gone on and on, boring you with the long story of my own.

Well, no matter. Think of it as my sincere confession of all the bad things I've ever done. It's cleared the clouds of attachment from me, and I feel my mind now shining bright as the moon. I hope I've also managed to make this spring night pass more pleasantly for you. I didn't hide anything, you know. With no husband or children, I had no reason to. The lotus flower in my heart opened for you,⁵² and before it closed it told everything, from beginning to end. I've certainly worked in some dirty professions, but is my heart not pure?

⁵⁰ Buddhist teachings are often referred to as a boat. The Other Shore is both the realm of Enlightenment and the other world.

⁵¹ In the Middle Ages many Buddhists believed that they could reach the Pure Land by sailing out to sea in a small boat, or jumping in a river or lake while meditating on Amida and Kannon. This form of religious suicide was chosen most often by outcasts, those who were incurably sick, or monks.

⁵² A Buddhist image. Just as the lotus flower rises from the mud, the pure mind may experience enlightenment amidst the squalor of this world. This is best exemplified by Kannon, the lotus-holding female Bodhisattva.