

# THE LEGEND OF GOLD

≈ 1946 ≈

“Now I ask you, sir. How can people expect to be served white rice in times like these? There’s none to be had no matter where you look. Besides, I wouldn’t serve it even if I did have it on hand. It wouldn’t feel right if I did. Yes, I know. The Chinaman across the street has got white rice. He’s got it, and he doesn’t think twice about offering it to his customers. You name it, he’ll serve it. Vegetables over rice. Meat with rice. A bowl of steamed rice to go with the main dish. But not at this shop. No, sir, I’m sorry, but we can’t do that for you.

“So just what is it that *we* can do? I knew you’d want to ask. Well, it’s not much. As you can see, this is about the best we have to offer. How about. . . ?”

With that, what came sailing over the top of the counter but a plate with slices of white bread on it. Out came a cup of coffee with cream and sugar. There was a piece of custard cake with bits of ham baked into it. And a plate piled with doughnuts made with real egg yolks. Take any one of them — the bread, the coffee, the cake, the doughnuts — there was not a single item that you’d find served just anywhere these days. In the world in which we live, they are all as rare and hard to come by as a bowl of freshly steamed white rice. You’d think people would be grateful. . . .

But for so long have the inhabitants of this island worshiped the god of rice and offered the firstfruits of every harvest at his altar that even now, when times have changed and his intermediary here on earth has been separated like chaff from the grain and driven out as an impostor, still nothing, but nothing, has been able to dislodge white rice from its time-honored position in the popular mind. It has retained its uncanny sticking power in the psychology of everyday life, silently holding sway over the heart and mind of each and every citizen. Indeed so dark and mysterious is its hold that to want something else — be it

bread, or cake, or doughnuts — is to violate an unspoken taboo. Yes, there is a silent malediction that puts a curse on anything seeking to take its place.

Small wonder, then, that the heart and mind of this sensible businesswoman should be troubled at the thought of having stricken rice from the list of dishes she has to offer her customers. She knew she could brag all she wanted about white bread and black coffee, but in the end, if she did not serve rice, her words sounded like just so much hot air. Such was her logic. It explained her windy disclaimer as well as the touch of false modesty that prefaced each plate as she passed it across the counter to her customers.

SUCH IS THE STORY at this spot here in Yokohama. It is late in December of nineteen hundred and forty-five, and the restaurant stands, like its numerous counterparts, in the middle of the ruins of a bombed and burnt-out city. The shop is a shack made out of sheets of corrugated metal that have been hastily slapped together. The customers shuffle in, pale shadows of their former selves, their figures moving along the wall like the silhouettes of people living in caves who hover over the flickering light of a small fire. We are packed together, all seated in a row and pressed so close that it is virtually impossible to tell one customer from the next. Everyone is silent, our hands and mouths moving noiselessly as we eat. I too number among the cast of shadow figures performing in this silent motion picture. I sit at the far end of the counter, perched precariously on an unstable and makeshift stool. Lighting a cigarette, I seek to enjoy a brief moment of rest.

FOR A MOMENT’S REST is a rare commodity in life amidst the ruins. I know, because some months ago I was burned out of my apartment in Tokyo, and I have been on my feet ever since. I have had to keep moving, and in the process I have spent much of my time standing. Quite literally, I had been standing on trains for seemingly months on end, caught as I was between the hordes of people relocating from one part of the country to the next and the mountains of luggage that they brought on board and piled in the aisles. Like everyone else, I have been hard-pressed to find a square inch in which to breathe, let alone stand. Indeed I have been jettisoned about the country without so much as a chance to sit down and catch my breath.

Such was the case at a little past noon last August 15, when, far from Tokyo, I stood in the aisle of an overcrowded train headed for Toyama. Just as the train cut through the Kurikara Pass [itself the sight of a bloody rout long, long ago], a rumor began to circulate among the passengers, and I learned for the first time that an important broadcast had been made only moments earlier. Suddenly an elderly gent who was standing in the aisle ahead of me lost his balance and let the large gunny sack slung over his back shift and come flying my way. Indeed he had been swaying precariously under the not inconsiderable weight of the sack for some time now, and it was only a matter of when the load would shift and he would lose control of it. The sack hit me square in the chest. It made a thudlike sound, and with that, the watch that I carried in my breast pocket stopped, the time it kept having now ground to a crashing halt.

Of course, if the truth be told, my watch had never been quite right since the night of the bombing raid when I was burned out of my apartment in Tokyo. I had pretended to myself that it worked, and I had kept it running by carefully winding it three times a day without fail. Yet with this latest blow, the watch grew increasingly temperamental. Even an additional winding each day did not suffice to keep it from hesitating. Yes, I admit, there were even times when, in order to extract its compliance and to get its hands moving again, I went so far as to take it out of my pocket and give it a good shaking.

But what of it? It appears that everyone's watch is broken nowadays, there being nowhere to turn to find the standard by which to tell the correct time. Consequently, I have taken to setting my watch via a process of, first, scrutinizing the weather outside and, then, comparing it with the physical state I happen to be in at the moment. Depending on what I find, I have advanced the hands on the watch or set them back, according to whatever seems appropriate. I have not felt it was wrong for me casually to set them at random, telling myself, "Why, this feels about right." In short, given the conditions under which we live at the moment, a broad and generous approximation has been my answer to the question of how to determine the hour of each passing day. That's right — my solution has been a kind of formula in which I let the course of my own inner chemistry define the parameters of physical time.

In the days and weeks that have come and gone in the wake of August 15, this eccentric watch has been my sole companion. Unreliable as it may be, it has kept me company; and I have reciprocated by keeping it safely tucked inside my breast pocket as I have dashed about the country, from one part to the next. I traveled to all of Hokuriku, and to Kinki, and even to Shikoku.

Everything was in ruins, no matter where I went. It was a terrible sight, yet the more I saw of the destruction, the less it pained me to know I had joined the ranks of those who, by virtue of having been burned out of their houses, had become the homeless and disenfranchised of society. As a matter of fact, I had ceased to think at all about what people meant when they spoke of someone like myself as a displaced person. Indeed so total was my loss that I no longer knew who I was or what I had once been, when it came time to recall events of the not so distant past, or how I had felt or reacted at the time. I found that I had no memory of them. They might as well have belonged to another — perhaps previous — lifetime, for that is how remote they had become in terms of my present circumstances.

That is because in the season and landscape that are total destruction, time and place stretch forth like an endlessly flat and unvarying plain. Indeed it is as though the very meaning of change was lost, and like a river that bears no water, one ceased to know of the variety that comes in life from alternating waves of joy and sadness. Everything had become a flat, dry riverbed. Such was the state of my life, and in that static and unchanging condition, I was like a flake of ash that had fallen from a burning ember. When the wind blew, I scurried. Whipped by its force and driven from one place to the next, I drifted. From Toyama I headed to Fukui. From Fukui I moved to Tokushima.

At no stop along the way was there a train station left intact. The buildings had been blown away in the bombing raids; only the tracks remained. The station platforms had been leveled to the same flat surface of the adjoining streets. And each time I saw a locomotive lumber in — the cars top-heavy with their load of passengers, the train swaying from side to side as it slowed to stop and take on still more people — I would gasp at the sight of it and want to sink into the ground beneath me. So exhausted was I that the thought of standing up on yet another train was more than I could bear. But in that instant — in the

crucial second when it was time to rush forward and climb aboard, or otherwise be left behind – what kept me among the living and made my feet move across the face of the earth was something no more profound than the sound of my watch, which, functioning however badly out of sync, still counted the time of this world, its insistent tick-tick-tick sounding ever so much like an admonition to stick to life and not give up. . . .

**N**OW, IF I AM TO TELL YOU why I was so rootless and given to running about the country, moving hither and yon, then I shall have to confess to being a man possessed of three secret desires, none of which I have revealed to anyone before.

The first concerns the watch of which I have already spoken.

By birth I am a person whose physical health has not always been the most reliable, and it has had its moments of being erratic and unpredictable. Accordingly, it has not always been wise, or even convenient, for me to rely upon the state of my health as the sole, or best, indicator of whatever information one might require in order to determine the correct time of day. Consequently, I thought I might be better off to locate a dependable repairman in some remote corner of the land and have him fix my watch. That way I would be free to rely on my watch, and that would save me at least the trouble of taking it out of my pocket every now and then to give it a good shaking. This was the first of the three wishes I hoped to fulfill.

As for the second, it concerns the matter of a hat. Because I had been foolish enough to let my favorite black felt go up in flames the night that my apartment in Tokyo burned, I ended up wearing what I had worn the night of the air raid, namely, the army cap that I happened to have on my head at the time. The cap was all that was left to me in the way of a hat, and as to the spectacle I made of myself as I went about in such strange-looking gear, I cannot begin to guess. But I could hardly bear the thought of having to go about dressed in something so totally odd and inappropriate. I thought how nice it would be were I to locate a shop where a sporty touring cap or, better yet, a real hat with an indented crown and a brim was for sale. In short, what I wanted was the kind of hat worn by a real human being. That was my second wish.

As for the third, I am almost too embarrassed to mention it. I say embarrassed because it concerns my feelings for a certain woman who had been the object of a not inconsiderable infatuation on my part. I had meant to tell her of my feelings, but alas, I had allowed far too much time to slip by, and I had never summoned the courage to tell her straight out how strongly I felt. Moreover, by not having spoken up, I never learned how she felt about me. I have continued to live in total ignorance as to the status of our relationship. As a matter of fact, it would be safe to say that my longstanding desire for her has been no more fixed or any more predictable than the continually precarious state of my physical health.

Nonetheless, word reached me that, although her house had burned in the air raids and her husband had died in the war, she herself managed to come through unscathed. Moreover, I learned she had left Tokyo to seek refuge with relatives who lived somewhere in the western part of Japan. That was all I knew, and that was why I set forth to scour the countryside – from Hokuriku to Kinki to Shikoku – searching in vain to find her. Without so much as a real clue as to her whereabouts, I traveled from one prefecture to the next, calling at places where she was reputed to have family. Come what may, I simply had to know what became of her. That was my third wish.

Still, I have yet to see the realization of even one of my three dreams, however modest they may be. To the contrary, all of my best intentions appear to have gone astray. Take the case of the watch. I would have sent it out and had it fixed, but if one is not careful these days, he may very well find his watch has been returned as repaired, but only after all of the works inside have been replaced with inferior parts. That is because the task of finding a reliable repairman in today's world is not unlike that of finding a truly honest man. Indeed it may well be as difficult, if not impossible.

Or take the case of the hat. Go to a haberdasher's shop in any part of the country these days, and it will be only too happy to supply you with a military cap. For that's all they have. In today's world, obtaining a hat worthy of a real human being is not unlike trying to find a man with a real head on his shoulders. Like the watch, the matter of finding an appropriate hat for my head was a problem that would not be amenable to an easy solution.

And as for the all-important issue of the woman who was missing from

my life, what did I have to say for myself? She seemed to have disappeared without a trace. Was it that she had gone into hiding somewhere, and she was secretly avoiding me? No matter how earnestly I tried or how frantically I raced about the country, I had no success in locating her. As a matter of fact, I uncovered nothing—not even a clue or a fleeting glimpse caught, perhaps, as we passed in a crowd. I was like a man grasping for straws, the scintilla of my hopes gone, so that after three, going on four months of being on the road, I remained empty-handed. With nothing to show for my troubles and convinced I would never find her, I gave up and returned to Tokyo. I was crestfallen and in despair.

Since then, I have been lodging at the house of a friend who lives on the outskirts of the city. Until some better arrangement presents itself, it is the best I can do. Perhaps the most that I can say of my current situation is that it resembles, however superficially, the circumstances once described by the great haiku poet Bashō. Returning to his humble abode in the city of Edo after one of the many pilgrimages he made deep into the countryside, he wrote, "My hermitage! No sooner have I settled in than I am ready to head for the open road."

I was back in Tokyo at last, and the first order of business lay in getting myself cleaned up. I gave my underwear a thorough laundering. I raked up a pile of pine needles, heated the bath, and doused myself from head to toe with copious buckets of scalding hot water. For what I brought back from my travels amounted to nothing more than the soot on my face and the lice that covered my body.

Yet, as I scrubbed myself clean, what called forth the fatigue that comes to a body weary from travel and that left me feeling limp and utterly spent was not the pained recognition of having been unable to fulfill even one of the three wishes on my list. Nor did the weariness arise from the disgust that I experienced at the sight of my filthy, lice-ridden body. Nor was it even the sheer physical exhaustion that had come from the overcrowding on the trains, the lack of a decent inn anywhere, or the chronic shortage of food. No, it was none of these. To the contrary, the cause lay in something altogether different.

It was a thought that came to me one day in the course of my travels. It was an insight that struck me all of a sudden, and having opened my eyes, it

has weighed on my mind ever since. Indeed it is an issue so ponderous that it concerns the destiny of each and every one of us living through this moment in history. Namely, I speak of the fast one that has been pulled on us, the outrageous sleight-of-hand that has been used in the application and promotion of the so-called Concept of Guilt [and the definition thereof as the "Repentance En Masse of the Hundred Million"] that is currently being foisted on the public with regard to the events of the recent war. For surely as we live, it sits in judgment upon us all, its authority unquestioned. Indeed so rigorous and pervasive is the imposition of this concept that, irrespective of any serious discussion of guilt or innocence, the presumption is that everyone has something to hide—that, for having been party to the fray, one carries a secret scar beneath one's breeches, whether a heinous blot on one's record or a mere knick on the shins. No, no exceptions will be tolerated, and no one permitted to speak to the contrary. However blameless and free of marks upon one's person, no one shall be allowed to emerge as clean and unscathed. It is the "doings of fate" by which we are all to be scarred in the same broad stroke. Because that is what the "Concept of Guilt" has come to mean.

But at least by dousing myself in water hot enough to scald the flesh off my back and by washing away the lice and the soot, I managed to feel refreshed for the first time in months. The stiffness in my neck and shoulders, which were weary with the weight of my heavyheartedness, began to abate a bit, and a sense of well-being—even lightness—started to return. And now that I had given a bit of thought to the matter, it might very well be that I am wrong, and I err in my weighty interpretation of the so-called Concept of Guilt. For surely what most people define as guilt or sin is nothing so abstract or complex. To the contrary, for them it is something that is very concrete and easily identified. Why, come to think of it, might they not say guilt is like soot, which rains from the sky? Or like lice, which spreads from too close contact with one's neighbors? To be sure, it is something tangible, even material, so that like sacrifice in an ancient Vedic ritual, it can be bought, burnt, and offered up as a quick and easy absolution of one's sins. . . .

ONE DAY as the year was drawing to a close—yes, the day of this very morning—I set out for a walk down what remained of the streets and

neighborhoods of Tokyo. Lately I have been in exceptionally good health, although I am at a loss to explain why this should be the case. My complexion has taken on more color, and I have even gained a pound or two. As a matter of fact, my health is the best it has been since I was a child and I began to remember such matters. Everything was functioning well.

My watch too has ceased to act in a temperamental fashion, and it is no longer necessary to take it out and give it a good shaking. And, as if that were not curious enough, it now suffices to wind it only three times a day.

Of course, were one to delve into the source of the new and unusually fine state of my health — or, conversely, to look back at the reasons for its poor condition in the past — wouldn't we find the difference lies in the new and powerful supply of energy that has been released inside me? Until now this energy has been a latent force that lurked within my weak and sickly constitution, but at long last it has come to the fore, and now it is asserting itself for the first time. Need I point out, moreover, that this time around its belated emergence as a source of vitality and power has nothing to do with the watch I carry in my breast pocket or any positive influence it exerts on me now that by some means or other it has managed to keep time more accurately? Clearly the cause of the change lies in something far more extraordinary. I know what I am about to say may sound very pompous and smug, but that it does is a reflection of the newly found confidence that I have gained by being able to look at matters from the vantage of hindsight. . . .

Namely, my conclusion is this: can we not say that heretofore modernity has been an understudy in the drama of history, and it has been anxiously awaiting its chance to appear on the stage? Until now it has been made to stand in the wings, unheard and unseen, its potential cloaked in the heavy curtains of possibility. As of this moment, however, suddenly there has been an opening, and it has stepped into the limelight to take its place on center stage. It is announcing to the world that "believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen, thanks to the marvelous invention known as the 'Introduction of Time,' it is possible at last to bring you all that you've been waiting for!" That was the sort of madcap scenario I had in mind. It was my answer to the question of why there had been a sudden increase in the quality of my health and well-being. Surely, it had to be the reason, or at least something very close to it.

Suddenly, everything about a city that had been familiar to me and everything about the state of my health and my life struck me as radically new and different. I strutted about the streets of Tokyo in a lighthearted mood, and when the urge came upon me to get a bite to eat, I stopped in my tracks, and taking the watch out of my breast pocket, I spun the hands on the dial and reset them at exactly twelve noon. It was as though I had become the pendulum of a clock that swung over the land and that measured its hours and minutes. Indeed were one to compare my time with the precision clocks at the observatory in Greenwich, surely he would find — would he not? — there was no significant deviation. In short, given the way things had worked out according to my new definition of time, what need had I to spend a minute more searching for a reliable watch repairman or an honest human being?

The section of Tokyo that I happened to be walking through is famous for its bookstores that specialize in old and rare books. Ever since the night when my apartment burned and I had consigned a veritable mountain of books to the flames, I had gotten away from reading and collecting the printed word. There had been any number of other things to worry about. But as time went by and my love for books began to return, I found myself gravitating once more in the direction of this section in downtown Tokyo where the used booksellers are located. Still, once I got there, I discovered there was virtually nothing I really wanted to read or buy no matter what store I entered. I was repelled in particular by the rather foul and smutty smell of some of the more inane titles currently on the market. I decided to turn down a side street and take off in the direction of a different part of town.

As I sauntered along, I came upon a corner shop selling men's haberdashery. Out in front of the store were some brand-new touring caps. My first thought was the hats were there for purposes of display, but when I inquired inside and learned they were for sale, I did not hesitate. I purchased one immediately. Quite some time had passed since I discarded the cap that I had worn in the air raids, but lacking a decent substitute, I had decided that my notion of a proper hat was satisfied, at least for the time being, by putting nothing on my head at all. Now, suddenly, a suitable replacement presented itself quite by surprise. Not only was it brand-new, but the hat fit just right,

and it looked good on me too. And though, like most everything else manufactured in this country of late, it did not represent the best in quality, still it felt right when I picked it up and popped it on my head.

Thus it happened that two of my three wishes were granted. As for the third . . . alas, my memory has grown so dim, I fear I can hardly remember what it was. . . .

They say love cannot survive prolonged separation. However passionate my feelings may have been, the length of time that I spent divorced from the object of my affections had grown so long and the prospect of my learning of her whereabouts so scant, it was becoming increasingly apparent I simply might not be able to sustain my sense of devotion for very much longer. My patience had worn thin, and my watch could no longer calculate the extent of the separation—the period of time was simply too great. So that, whereas I had long thought of love as an affair dependent upon only oneself and a matter solely internal to the heart and mind of the person involved, it began to dawn on me that I had been operating under an illusion. In the end, love is but one of many external events that happens in one's life. It is an event that takes place in the world outside one's self, and it is acted upon by forces that all too often lie beyond one's control.

So what was I to do?

To hell with love, I told myself. I thought it best to content myself with the renewed state of my health, a watch that ticked merrily away, and the look and feel of a brand-new hat. Perhaps it was the aura of pride and respectability they lent me; at least they made me feel better. Besides, at the very moment that I am standing here in the middle of the street, the one and only thought that occupies my mind—and does so to the exclusion of all else—is, to put it as simply and forthrightly as possible, the desire to sit down and have a decent cup of coffee.

I hopped on a train and headed for Yokohama. It was only yesterday that I learned the name of this new place to eat. . . .

I am seated at the counter at the far corner of the room, barely visible and floating, as it were, on a cloud of cigarette and coffee fumes. There is a vacant stool next to mine, and the customer who has just now entered the

shop and who is defily threading her way among the tables, is about to plant herself on the chair next to mine. The legs of the cheaply made stool emit a sharp screech as the woman, getting situated and making herself comfortable, leans in my direction. She is dressed entirely in red from head to toe, and her powdered bosom fills the air with its oily perfume. Like a ripe flower ready to drop its petals, it comes perilously close to spilling into my lap. . . .

Yet when I looked up at her face, what did I see but the person who has been the object of my relentless search across the length and breadth of the land. Yes, it was the face that I have sought in vain for these past months in spite of many a hardship on the open road. Yes, hers was the face that I had nearly forgotten yet somehow managed to remember.

"Of all the . . ." It was the woman who took the initiative in starting a conversation. "I always wondered what had become of you." At the same time she straightened in her chair and then leaned back to get a better look at me, she inched closer. With her knee practically touching mine, she called to the woman who owned the restaurant.

She spoke as though she knew her well and did not hesitate to impose. She proceeded to order one of everything on the menu. Then, opening her handbag and producing a pack of Lucky Strikes, she took out a cigarette and put it to her lips. The large purse was still halfway open, and I could easily see its contents. It was stuffed with packs of cigarettes, bars of chocolate, as well as other items not produced on the domestic market. I tried not to be obvious, but when she caught my eye wandering, she announced I was welcome to "anything at all." She would be only too happy to share.

Before I had time to wonder if I knew what to say or whether I could get my mouth to move and come forth with an appropriate reply, I realized I had been undone by this unexpected rendezvous. I found myself shot through with a sudden and renewed burst of passion for the lost object of my love. It was like a second bout of fever that returns with even greater virulence, and it left me unable to collect my wits or get my nerves under control. No external event was this. To the contrary, as the fevered delirium of my past infatuation returned with renewed intensity, I felt my entire frame burn as though it had become a veritable pillar of fire.

Never before had this woman spoken to me, or treated me, in a manner

so intimate and uninhibited as she did now. I was taken completely by surprise, and I had no idea what to do next. Finally, I succeeded in stammering out a word or two, and phrasing my speech in the courtly tones of the past and of a time that reflected the nature of our previous acquaintance, I asked her where she now “resided.”

“Here in the ‘Hama,” she replied, tossing the phrase out in a dry, matter-of-fact way. Her voice sounded casual enough; still, I thought I detected a certain pained expression in its tone. “Couldn’t you guess?” she seemed to say in an offhanded and unspoken chastisement of my having asked what was blatantly obvious.

Judging from the way she spoke and the manner in which she dressed and handled herself, there was nothing to make one think that the woman came from a “good family.” Neither was there any sign of her having been a sad victim of the war — namely, a widow left without a husband or a place to live. Perhaps it was sheer imagination on my part, but what resonated in my ear when she enunciated the word “Hama” was not *Yokohama*, but a place that sounded a lot more like “Hommoku,” or the part of town that had been taken over by the Occupation Army and set up as a red-light district. The thought shocked me; and though I heard what she said, and I saw how she looked as she sat there beside me, still my mind steadfastly refused to believe it. I was prepared to doubt the validity of my own eyes and ears before questioning anything else.

That is because, when it comes to the matter of my memory of this woman — of the mental image that I had constructed of her in my mind — there is but one face that I see and only one voice that echoes in my ears. It is a cameo portrait of her that I formed long, long ago. Yes, I speak of a time so far in the past that it stands separated from us in time by the distance of exactly one year.

AS I REMEMBER IT NOW, it was a night late in December of 1944 and at a time when the air raid sirens had yet to sound with either the frequency or the urgency that later we came to expect as a matter of course. I was sharing a bottle of saké with a friend — an old friend who also happened to be the husband of the woman. We were at their house — a house built high on a hill — and we sat up most of the night drinking and talking. By daybreak

my friend had collapsed in a drunken stupor, and I decided to take my leave and go home.

As I got up to go, the woman — namely, the wife of my friend — insisted on seeing me off. We climbed to the top of the hill, and in order to make certain that I did not miss the cutoff on the path leading to the streets below, she stood outside in the cold morning air for the longest time and watched me as I made my descent down the long slope. It was only by grabbing hold of the trunk of a pine tree and leaning out over the edge of the path that she could follow me as I made my way down the hill.

“Watch your step as you go.

“Now turn to the left.

“Yes, now to your right.”

That was all she said. But her directions were so patient and full of care, and she tendered them in the politest and most elegant of voices. It was almost as though I had been her lover that night, and having plighted our troth in a grand and secret affair, we were sharing the sweetness and sorrow known only to those who love but are destined to part. It was a classic tale — just as in days of yore. My heart was strangely stirred; and my feet, unsteady as they were, hurried blindly on their way as I headed down the hill.

Let there be no confusion, however. My encounter with the woman today is not a case of mistaken identity. The face that I saw before me — and the voice that I heard in this restaurant that had been hastily constructed at a burnt-out site here in Yokohama — was none other than the face and voice that I had seen and heard that rare and wondrous morning a year ago. The sight of her now and the sound of her voice rekindled all of the sweet memories of the fateful day when last we parted. I was filled with great longing for the way life had once been.

PRESENTLY, WE WERE READY to leave the restaurant. As if by unspoken agreement, we left together and headed in the direction of the train station at Sakuragi-chō. She took hold of my arm as though it were the most natural thing in the world for her to do, and stealing an inquiring look at the profile of my face, she laughed and said I looked “as pale as ever.” Perhaps she meant to be funny. Or to make fun of me.

Without her having said it, I already knew the blood in my veins had begun to run cold. I felt the flesh shrink from my bones. I was shaken by a violent chill — my hands and feet going limp, my breathing becoming labored. The state of my health had taken a sudden and decided turn for the worse.

And if that were not bad enough, my new hat got twisted askew, and my watch fell silent. The latter ceased to tick at all, its hands no longer moving.

As we neared the station, the woman, who until now had let her body press against mine, suddenly bolted from my side. She did it with no more than a gentle shove, but it was clear that I was being brushed aside, and she went running on ahead. I tottered, and it took a moment for me to catch myself and get my feet planted squarely on the ground once more.

That was when I happened to look up. I looked across the way to see the powerful figure of a soldier moving toward her. His face shone from out of the crowd as he stood head and shoulders above everyone, his height monumentally tall, his color strangely dark.

The black soldier wore a lightweight pink silk muffler tied jauntily about his neck, and the firm and neat row of his teeth sparkled and gleamed gemlike when he opened his mouth and shouted something in words that I could not decipher.

And there, clinging to the thick chest of the powerful man, were the arms of the woman dressed in red. She was like a butterfly resting on the trunk of a tree, and she clung to it as securely as she could.

Her back was turned to me. But her faceless silence spoke, and I knew she had nothing more to say to me. There would be no final “adieu.” There would be no lingering reservations — no moment of hesitation — in which, for even a second, she might turn and look back. She was gone from me forever.

And what — pray tell — was I to say in calling after her?

“Watch your step as you go”?

“First to your left, and now to your right”?

In truth, there are no words that one might say at a time like this. I was so ashamed, I thought I would die on the spot.

Comprehending nothing, I ran straight for the center of the square in front of the train station, where a great whorl of people churned through the entrance to the station.

The faster I ran, the more the blood in my veins began to circulate. The muscles in my arms and legs started to swell and regain their strength. The terrible chill subsided, and as my step and grip grew stronger and my breathing less irregular, I felt myself return to normal.

Before I knew it, my hat had snapped into place, and my pocket watch had begun to tick merrily away.