

The Skin of the Pike Conger Eel

(*Hamo no kawa*)

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1

The mail carrier entered, his shoes ringing like those of a police officer.

“Anyone here by the name of ... Fukushima Iso?” he said in irritation, pulling from his sheaf of postcards and letters a thick envelope to which were affixed two red stamps.

It was the time of evening when the lights along the Dōtombori begin to be worth looking at, and, as the theater across the way appeared to be in intermission, the Sanukiya was suddenly busy, both the till and the kitchen hectic with hors d'oeuvres for the customers upstairs and deliveries to the theater and the theater-concession restaurants.

“Fukushima Iso? Here! Here!” Ofumi, busy, extended a white hand from the cashier's stand. Men and women, kimono sleeves tied up, bustled round and round the mail carrier, but, preoccupied with their orders, not one employee conveyed the thick letter from the hand of the mail carrier to their mistress.

“You'll have to put your name on the plate outside or have people address it 'In care of...'” the mail carrier said with an angry face, tossing the thick letter into the cashier's stand from almost two meters away, and spun on his heel and stamped out, passing under the *noren* sniffing the smell of eels broiling in the kitchen.

When a large delivery of 40 orders for the theater concession was ready, and 12 parties from upstairs had paid their checks, Ofumi had a moment to take out the thick letter from beneath her knee. First she closely examined its exterior. She immediately recognized the handwriting, but there was no return address. The indistinct postmark

could just be made out as “Tokyo Central.”

“That idiot...” Ofumi whispered to herself, and without opening it, put the thick letter in the drawer of the safe below the till. But after a while, she took it out again. She felt almost frightened to open it.

“Fukushima Iso... Wonder how he knows I changed my name, can't figure it out. Maybe Uncle told him,” Ofumi thought to herself, gazing again at the handwriting of the thick letter's address.

Each time the electric advertising sign reading “Sanukiya,” blinking on the back roof along the canal, changed colors, Ofumi's back was tinted with red, or blue, or purple, or whatever color shone through the glass windows.

The rush that had continued for a time had now dwindled to just one party upstairs and one downstairs. It had been almost an hour since the party of two upstairs had ordered their third bottle of sake; it seemed the two might not be able to pay their check. A couple of waitresses crept up the stairs on tiptoe.

2

Ofumi's uncle Gentarō, entering the restaurant, was taken for a customer by one of the new waitresses.

“Party of one tonight, sir?” she shouted, and everyone laughed. Some even collapsed in laughter, holding their stomachs.

“Uncle, you came at just the right time. I just got this letter, and didn't feel like reading it by myself, I was just thinking of phoning you and asking you to come over,” Ofumi said, taking no notice of the still-giggling waitresses, and looked up at her uncle's large form standing in front of the cashier's stand.

“A letter? Who from? ... Fukuzō, I bet.” Gentarō, filling the narrow entrance next to the cashier's stand with his bulk, passed through to the three-mat room behind the cashier's stand, showing the small knot of his narrow *obi*, and his stocky back, somewhat bent with age, swayed back and forth.

The room being used to store chests of drawers, fly covers, and other furniture, there was no more than a single *tatami* mat of open space in which to sit. Gentarō sat squarely in this open space, his legs crossed, and clumsily brought out a tobacco case from his waist to smoke (a practice he had not taken up until past the age of fifty), but since there was neither *hibachi* brazier nor tobacco tray, was left fumbling with his tobacco-filled pipe to no purpose, gazing at the beautiful lights blinking across the canal.

The other side of the canal was Sōemon-chō, and the lights of the house opposite – who knew what kind of business it was – moved back and forth, their reflection twinkling in the water of the canal like a firefly that has been stepped on. The night breeze of early autumn was chill, and there were ripples on the water.

“Good guess. ... It’s from Tokyo...here it is.”

After counting the mixture of silver and bronze coins paid by the upstairs party – who had been able to pay after all – and noting down the beer and crucian carp with green onion paste served to a new customer, Ofumi found a moment to turn and speak to Gentarō. In her hand was the thick letter.

“I knew it -- from Fukuzō. What does he have to say? ... ‘Send money’ again? *I* know.”

Gentarō crinkled up his eyes and, holding the letter up to the light coming from the restaurant, peered at the address on the envelope, but it was too dark to read.

“I think I’ll have you read it first. ... I haven’t opened it yet.”

This is what she said, but Ofumi’s hand still firmly grasped the letter, and she made no move to give it to Gentarō.

“You should read it first. ... It came to you, after all.”

“It’s because I’m a little afraid, I don’t know why.”

“Don’t be an idiot, that doesn’t make any kind of sense.”

With a disparaging smile hovering at the end of his nose, Gentarō was playing with the smokeless pipe.

“Well, then, I’ll read it in there. ...Uncle, please watch the till for me. After those five orders of eel are served, send Kinta to check the fish tank. ...Got it, Kinta?”

Ofumi lightly rose, and, after giving these instructions to Gentarō and Kinta, the cook, she entered the dim three-mat room, still holding the thick letter.

“OK, I’ll fill in for you. Umph,” Gentarō said, raising his fat buttocks. Grasping the pipe in his right hand and the tobacco case in his left, he took Ofumi’s place in the cashier’s stand.

Wearing a dotted handkerchief knotted as a headband, filleting eels with smooth, mechanical motions, Kinta, the cook, glanced sideways at Gentarō’s face and grinned.

“We’re just gonna have to put an electric light in here, too. Mom is so frugal she says we don’t need it, but it’s so dark you can’t do anything, don’t you think, Uncle? ...After all, we’ve got 28 light-bulbs burning, one more five-candlepower bulb won’t make any difference, will it, Uncle?”

Rattling and feeling her way among the rubbish on the shelf in the three-mat room, Ofumi spoke as if to herself in a loud voice. Soon she struck a match and lit a

lantern.

From time to time Gentarō turned and looked at Ofumi's plump profile shining white as she concentrated on the unfolded, long letter in the light of the candle flickering in the breeze off the canal. He recalled with a pang that his niece was already 36 years old.

It seemed to Gentarō like just the other day that he had watched, every morning, his niece's receding back as she left for elementary school, carrying a box lunch in a knit bag, when her friends called, "Fukushima-san, let's go." Still thinking, he was looking at Ofumi's "New Butterfly" hairstyle – she had never worn any other style except for the day she was married to Fukuzō, whom they adopted into their family – as she bent her head and pored over the letter from her husband who had left home. The "New Butterfly" was moving slightly, as if quivering.

"This letter doesn't say anything... just rambles on. Says he's sick so please send money...asks how the kids are doing...then says this time he'll really change his ways, wants to apologize and go back to how things were. Same old thing..."

Although her mouth spoke as if it were no important matter, Ofumi's eyes could be made out dimly, in the light of the candle, gleaming strangely as she looked intently at the letter.

"Well, you read it too, Uncle. It's good for a laugh."

Trying to act as if it didn't matter to her, with an affected smile on her lips, Ofumi reluctantly put the letter down. Standing, she approached her uncle from behind, without a word, to take his place in the cashier's stand.

Gentarō, with an "Oof," ponderously raised his large body and, crouching forward, went to sit in the three-mat room, where the lantern was still burning. He had not yet taken even a puff from his pipe, and was still holding it in his right hand, along with a brush.

"Uncle, the brush...the brush," said Ofumi, retrieving the cashier's brush from Gentarō's hand. Feigning weariness, she sat on the cushion, still warm from Gentarō's fat legs, and forced out a yawn.

Finally lighting his pipe from the candle's flame, Gentarō took a puff, making sucking sounds with the poorly cleaned pipe, and blew out smoke clumsily. He cast his eyes on the letter, still unfolded untidily on the table.

"It's a mystery to me how he knew to write my name 'Iso' on the envelope," said Ofumi when he had read three or four lines of the letter. Bent over the letter, Gentarō turned his head to look at Ofumi.

"It's because I told Fukuzō when he was still here. Oiso's better than Ofumi, I told him, a 'shore' (*iso*) in the given name goes with the 'island' (*shima*) in the family

name 'Fukushima.' That's why he wrote it on the envelope. I also says to him, Your name Fukushima Fukuzō's got too much 'good fortune' (*fuku*) in it, it's actually bad luck. The name Fukushima Riki's got the right number of strokes, change your name to 'Riki.' Has he written his name that way on the envelope? When he wrote to me, he wrote 'Riki,' sure enough, and for the addressee he wrote 'Mr. Fukushima Teruhisa,' he didn't write 'Gentarō.'"

Gentarō tried to divert the whole of the conversation to name divination, of which he was fond.

"It's too complicated, everyone's got two names...but I wonder, if he changed 'Fukuzō' to 'Riki,' would he be a better person?"

Adopting the manner of one chatting of this and that, Ofumi tried to elicit a judgment about the husband who had left her.

"He'd be no good even with a different name."

Answering brusquely, Gentarō straightened and re-crossed his legs. Ofumi checked some grilled eels and cooked egg that had arrived from the kitchen, noted them down on the check for No. 16, and sent a waitress upstairs with them.

"The other day, I was having a master of name selection tell my fortune, and I thought I'd check Fukuzō's while I was at it. All I said was the name 'Fukushima Fukuzō' and his age of 44, and right away the master said, 'This person is no good. He's a man of dissipation, and won't stop his dissipation his whole life through. The time he stops will be when his life has run out. His nature is unfeeling and cruel. In future, he may be somewhat successful for a time, but he'll fail again, and then he'll repeat this over and over, a little worse off each time.' That's Fukuzō all over, isn't it?"

Laying aside his pipe, which had finally stopped up altogether, Gentarō spoke in a low, depressed tone. Pretending not to hear, Ofumi continued to face the kitchen, a look of great displeasure on her face.

3

When Gentarō had bowed his head again to continue reading the long letter, a loud voice was suddenly heard from the canal below.

"Hey!... Hey!... Sanukiya!... Hey, Sanukiya!"

Heaving his heavy body up with a grunt, Gentarō opened the half-glass *shoji* and put one foot shakily on the two-foot-wide balcony over the water. Just then, the loud voice was again heard from the canal.

“Hey, Sanukiya! Give us two eel dinners!”

“Yessir, um...” was Gentarō’s odd reply. He peered down at the canal, but could see only the dazzling reflection of the many-colored electric advertising signs on the surface of the black, flowing water.

“Uncle, Uncle,” called Ofumi’s voice from behind him. When he turned to the cashier’s stand, he saw her place both hands at her left hip, pantomiming something long extending diagonally from there.

“Oh, you mean a police saber.”

Finally understanding, Gentarō answered Ofumi in a low voice, and then, to the surface of the black water, yelled, “Yessir, coming right up.”

“All right, make it quick.” Staring intently down at where the voice had come from, Gentarō could see, hugging the stone wall directly below as if glued there, a small boat with a red light, dim and besmeared with soot, and two white figures stirring within. One of the white figures suddenly turned black: he had apparently put on an overcoat.

Not following the order of first-come, first-served, the order from down on the water that had hurried the cook was soon ready, and, along with side dishes, pickles, a tea bottle and such, was placed in a flat basket attached to a rope for just such occasions as these, and lowered to the water by Gentarō.

A peculiar reply of “*San-kyuu*”¹ was heard from the water, and Gentarō could not suppress a smile at its foolishness.

One of the waitresses came into the three-mat room and went out on the balcony. Gazing at the red lights across the canal, she softly sang the *rappa-bushi* bugle song, beating time on the railing, but suddenly she turned to Gentarō and said,

“Mr. Uemachi², Miss Yachiyo is really something. She was on vacation all summer long. She’s back now, but she’s probably made a lot of money, don’t you think?”

Yachiyo of the Tondaya, said to be the very best of the *geisha*, lived alongside the canal at the Kagaya, whose lights, among all those across the canal, were especially brightly colored, and it was from there that the high sound of *shamisen* plectrums seemed to be flowing. The sky was full of stars, which seemed to compete in color with the lights of both banks reflected in the black water of the canal.

Gentarō made no reply to this gossip about the famous *geisha*, so the waitress, with wavy hair, dark complexion, and large feet, resumed her bugle song, beating time on the railing.

After a short while, Gentarō, who had been sitting motionless with crossed arms,

¹ English “Thank you” pronounced in Japanese fashion.

² The waitress addresses Gentarō using the place of his residence: Uemachi, Osaka.

the letter open before him, saw the empty dishes in the basket drawn up from the canal by the waitress. Turning suddenly toward the cashier's stand, he spoke in a flustered voice.

"Hey, how much is it gonna be?"

"It's all right, have her say they can pay whenever they drop by," said Ofumi without turning around, her fingers clicking on the abacus. Almost simultaneously, the waitress, who understood the situation, peering down from the balcony, shouted loudly,

"That's all right. You can pay whenever you drop by."

They apparently said something from the water, too, but it was not understandable. Soon the small boat with its single dim, sooty red light slipped silently over the black water, breaking up the reflections of the lights from both banks, and was rowed off into the darkness.

4

Gentarō, who had been thinking with his arms crossed, bent his head once again and turned to the long letter. Next, he was reading under his breath in a low voice; it required some time before he was finished reading.

From the cashier's stand, Ofumi watched with her sharp eyes the ceaseless comings and goings of the customers, and made her utmost efforts to ensure that the 28 male and female employees worked efficiently. As the night grew later, the customers grew more and more numerous. The T-shaped dirt-floored entrance area just inside the *noren*, leading on one side to the downstairs room and on the other to the steep stairs, was regularly sprinkled with water, and reverberated unceasingly with the sound of footwear.

From now until the peak of business, just before the theaters let out, would be a battle, Ofumi thought, standing to re-tie her *obi*. Intermittently she would turn around to look at her uncle reading the letter, trying to read his face.

"It says here... send 20 yen," said Gentarō, squinting and looking toward Ofumi.

"That's right," said Ofumi lightly, as if it were someone else's business.

"Just how much money does Fukuzō owe, I wonder?" Gentarō prompted. In the midst of her work, Ofumi calculated in her head and answered,

"At least 1,000 yen, I guess." She still sounded as if she were chatting about the weather.

"Last time he left he had debts of about twelve hundred yen, and the time before

that, with one thing and another, it amounted to at least 800 yen, didn't it? Add the 1,000 for this time, and it's 3,000 yen, you know. We've bought ourselves a pricey adopted son..."

Under cover of her busyness, Ofumi pretended not to hear Gentarō's words, which had become cynical of their own accord. She espied a pair of employees, a man and a woman, whispering in a dark corner.

"Tomekichi and Otsuru, what're you getting up to, right when we're busiest? The reason we can feed 28 employees is thanks to the business, you know, and if you won't take the business seriously, we don't need you, so get the hell out," Ofumi cried. The male and female employees, looking as surprised as if they had been struck by lightning, sprang apart and disappeared in opposite directions.

"He's asked the sweet sake dealer to lend him 20 yen, hasn't he? He's already got a 30-yen debt to them from when he ran off this spring, you know. He's got his nerve!"

With an air that said he'd pursue him wherever he tried to run, Gentarō inventoried Fukuzō's faults to Ofumi's back.

"And the sweet sake dealer's not the worst of it. You remember Kyūkichi, who worked here making deliveries for us last year? Now he's with Marutoshi in Shimanouchi. They say Fukuzō showed up there last spring and asked Kyūkichi to lend him one yen! He's got absolutely no pride when he's in a tight place."

Resuming her nonchalant manner, as if talking of the weather, Ofumi turned around from time to time and nodded at her uncle's words.

"This going to our suppliers and asking for loans is what makes me the maddest, going to the sweet sake dealer, the sake dealer, the shaved bonito dealer...no matter how much we ask them not to lend him money, for their part, they wonder if he might not come back, and so they lend him the money, even if they don't want to. I can see their point, if Fukuzō does come back, he's the master of the Sanukiya again, they're afraid he might take revenge on them then. Really, our suppliers have the short end of the stick," said Gentarō in a tone of heartfelt sympathy, and heaved a deep sigh.

"But after all, he's been in Osaka from the time when he was an apprentice at the *udon* noodle shop all the way up to age 44. Even though he was born in Yamato, he's pretty much an Osakan. He's even got friends and acquaintances we don't know about, that's why when he's left to his own devices in Tokyo, he sends out letters all over the place asking for loans, and tries to paint over debt with more debt. He's a pack of trouble," said Ofumi, finally speaking in a way that suggested she was not merely talking of others' business, a blue vein throbbing in her broad, white brow.

"Hey, he says here, 'Please send pike conger skin.' What makes him think he has

the right to ask for anything?” Gentarō laughed as he read the small writing at the very end of the long letter.

“Pike conger skin with vinegar and soy sauce is his favorite food, you know. They say you can’t find it in Tokyo.”

Recalling her husband’s favorite food, Ofumi’s thoughts seemed to have been thrown into confusion.

“Yeah, take pike conger skin, slice it thin, sprinkle it with vinegar and soy sauce and let it sit overnight, and you’ve got something that goes great on warm rice,” said Gentarō casually, folding up the long letter.

5

Okaji, retired and now living in Ohama in Sakai raising her three grandchildren, entered the restaurant with her youngest granddaughter of three years on her back.

“Oh, Mom, you picked a good time to come. Uncle’s here, too.” Ofumi greeted her mother with beaming face.

“Welcome, Ma’am,” each of the veterans among the male and female employees said, and for a moment stood as if at attention.

“Grandma, boo. Mama, boo. Grandpa, boo,” Okaji said to her granddaughter on her back, giving the words a melody as if singing, as she passed straight through to the three-mat room where Gentarō was sitting cross-legged.

The granddaughter, let down from her grandmother’s back, began to whimper in spite of the sight of her mother’s face and her great-uncle’s face, and hung on her grandmother.

“I’m all worn out,” said Okaji wearily, arranging with both hands the small New Butterfly hairstyle her thin hair was tightly done in, and then busily picking up her granddaughter and giving the child her withered breasts to play with.

“That kid looks the most like Fukuzō,” said Gentarō in a gloomy tone, looking intently at the child on his elder sister’s knee.

“If her nature’s the same too, she’ll come to no good.”

As she laughed, Okaji gently removed the small hand clutching her withered breast, and tucked the two sides of her kimono collar back together. The child finally left her grandmother’s lap, and, watching her great-uncle warily, toddled toward the balcony, her flat, fair-complexioned face with its narrow, drooping eyes weaving from side to side.

“If she was a boy, I’d be worried, but she’s a girl, so it’ll be all right,” Ofumi said

sarcastically over her shoulder, turning from the till amid the bustle of the restaurant, as busy as a battlefield.

As if unhearing, Okaji took up the pipe sitting in front of her younger brother and tried to take a puff, but, noticing that it was stopped up, she frowned and said,

“Hey, it’s stopped up again. This is what comes of smoking when you don’t know how.” She bent her head and, making a twist of paper, began carefully cleaning out the pipe.

“A letter arrived from Fukuzō ... Take a look,” said Gentarō, pushing the thick envelope toward his elder sister.

“That’s what that is? ...I was about to make a twist of paper out of it to clean this pipe.”

Okaji merely glanced at the envelope, and continued cleaning the pipe, drawing out poisonous-looking black tar.

“Read that letter, at least part of it. We can’t talk about it unless you read it.”

“If it’s a letter from Fukuzō, I know pretty much what’s in it even without reading it... I’ve got bad eyes, I can’t read in this light. How about if you read it to me?”

Putting the pipe down, Okaji skillfully trimmed the wick of the shortening candle. Then, the pipe’s passage now delightfully clear, she took a puff in satisfaction and blew out thick smoke. Gentarō was staring at his sister’s face as if admiring her superior smoking skill.

The child came back to her grandmother’s lap, and peacefully fell asleep without playing with the shriveled breasts, an innocent look on her face.

“I don’t feel too comfortable reading Fukuzō’s letter to you ... how about if I tell you the gist of it,” said Gentarō, and then, as if bracing himself, said,

“Well, let’s see, there’s the usual request for money... This time, he’s giving us a big discount, a one-time-only offer of 20 yen... Next, he wants us to transfer title to the restaurant to his name. Next, no bellyaching even if he occasionally brings a *naniwa-bushi* singer to perform at the restaurant, or has a movie or *niwaka* play shown. If we agree to these conditions, he’ll come home, we’re not to worry about the debts that he’s incurred, because he’ll repay those himself... He goes on and on, but boil it down and that’s all you get for the net meaning. –Oh, that’s right, and please send one yen’s worth of pike conger skin.” As he spoke, Gentarō unfolded the long, scroll-like letter in one direction and, folding it up in the other direction, tossed it down.

Okaji, who had been listening silently with an angry look on her face, now spoke with an eerie, mirthless smile on her lips.

“It’s ridiculous, are *we* supposed to humbly request that *he* come back? If he

seriously believes we'd agree to that idea, he's got another thing coming," she said, laying her grand-daughter on a cushion and removing a quilt from a cupboard to cover her with. The faint, regular sound of the child's breathing could be heard through the boisterous noises of the restaurant.

"The best of Fukuzō's schemes to bring entertainers to the restaurant was when he employed Nara-maru for three days for 1,000 yen, we had sales of 1,000 yen and broke even, right where we started. We lost money on all the rest. No good comes of dabbling in that kind of thing... First, he'll employ no entertainers whatsoever. Second, title to the restaurant will be transferred to him only after he comes home, shows that he can behave responsibly, and clears up his debts. Third, he'll sign a statement that he won't run away from home under any circumstances. If he doesn't agree to these conditions, I'm determined, this time, not to let him cross the threshold of this restaurant ever again."

Okaji's face was mostly unwrinkled and of regular features, even though she was within four or five years of reaching seventy. That face now taut with tension, Okaji spoke in a voice audible to the employees and even to the customers in the restaurant.

At the cashier's stand, Ofumi, an unconcerned look on her face, was turning the pages of a ledger.

6

After ten o'clock, although the street outside was as busy as ever, the restaurant became much quieter.

"Mom, you should stay the night here. You can't go home this late."

Finally unoccupied enough to feel that she was herself again, Ofumi had left the cashier's stand and stood at her mother's side.

"It's not that I couldn't get home, but it's a deal of trouble taking a sleeping child on the streetcar...it's been a while since I last stayed the night, I guess I will. -Uncle, are you leaving soon?"

Gentarō, who had been dozing over the open newspaper, looked around in surprise and said,

"Oh, yes, I'll be leaving now." He reached for the tobacco pouch in front of his sister to put it away, but his sister, who had been smoking continually, was still holding the pipe.

"This room is so small, whenever I sleep here I remember the time I rode in a "Thirty-rice-bale" passenger boat on the Yodo River. It seems like a "Wanna eat?" boat

selling food and drink might draw up to the window any minute,” said Okaji, returning the pipe to her brother and lying down next to the sleeping form of her granddaughter.

“Uncle, why don’t we go eat *zenzai* sweet red-bean broth or something? It’ll be a nice change of pace, I’ll ask Mom to keep an eye on the till. Mom, you’ll do that, won’t you?” Ofumi spoke in a carefree manner, as if she had forgotten everything that had happened, and immediately began preparing to go.

“Go ahead. My eyes aren’t what they used to be, but it’s the job I was doing ‘til just recently. I reckon even I can handle the till when the restaurant’s not busy.” Okaji got up and quickly sat down at the till.

“‘Before one changes his mind again,’ as they say...C’mon, Uncle, let’s go.”

Letting the energetic Ofumi take the lead, Gentarō bent his thick back, ducked under the restaurant’s *noren*, and went out onto the bustling Dōtombori.

“‘Led on by a cow, a pilgrimage to Zenkōji Temple,’³ they say, but this looks like ‘Led on by a horse, a cow goes out,’” said Okaji, squinting and smiling beneath the bright electric light of the cashier’s stand, as she watched the two go out.

7

In front of the theater across the street a red banner had gone up, and on it was written the total ticket sales for the night. There people had crowded together in a black mass, and, bathed in the light of the streetlights, were looking at the hoardings and such. The hoardings, depicting every scene, from introduction to finale, in lurid pictures not quite *ukiyo*e or anything else, were mounted across the entire front of the theater, and their wide borders of a brocade-style pattern – sparrows in bamboo and the like – made them all the more garish.

Ofumi and Gentarō made their way through the crowds, brushing by women in heavy makeup holding up their kimono skirts, or women carrying something square – apparently a box – wrapped in a yellow-green *furoshiki* wrapping cloth, and turned a corner toward Sennichi-mae.

“They say Sennichi-mae’s the kind of place you almost never see anyone wearing Western clothes, and now I see it’s true,” said Gentarō, trying to look at as many people as possible among the crowds that seemed about to collide with them.

“That doesn’t include soldiers? They’re all wearing Western clothes.”

³ Proverb similar in meaning to “Goslings lead the geese to water,” i.e., good things may come from the least likely circumstances.

Speaking in her typical bantering manner, Ofumi grinned and turned into the narrow alley behind the Hōzenji Temple. Having passed among the numerous restaurants, on almost every corner, with the various dishes ranged on their counters, entering this alley, too, the smell of food seemed to well up from its nether reaches.

There was also a music hall along the alley. The alley was barely wide enough to allow two people to pass each other, so the voice of the music hall barker calling for customers seemed loud enough to break the eardrums of passers-by. Giving a glance to the signs with their little pointed roofs ranged there bearing the names of entertainers, and then passing on to the *zenzai* sweet red-bean broth restaurant beyond, Ofumi stopped in front of the large Otafuku statue that served as the restaurant's sign, placed there as if enshrined.

"This Otafuku is pretty old, isn't it? She's always got the same expression no matter how many years pass...I bet she's been here since you were a child, Uncle."

With a strangely impressed look on her face, Ofumi did not move from in front of the Otafuku statue. She thought the appearance of the statue – the white face overflowing with a beaming smile, the black hair hanging straight, the bright blue and red of her kimono, her pose of bowing forward to welcome customers – looked just the same as it had the first time she saw it several decades before.

From the first time she had seen this Otafuku statue as a child to today, countless things had happened, Ofumi thought. And in the future, she wondered, how long would this statue continue to show her smiling face?

"My old Granny, who's dead now, said it'd been here since she was a child, so it's gotta be pretty old," said Gentarō. He tried imagining what it was like when his grandmother, who had died the year before last at age 71, had first seen this Otafuku statue. In those days, they say, Sennichi-mae was a cemetery, but was this place (a couple of blocks away) already as bustling as today, with people walking around smelling the aromas of the dishes ranged in the restaurants? Those dishes had all gone into the stomachs of people, and later those people had died one by one. Still later, new people came to make foods, range them on the counters, and walk around, and then they, too, had died one by one. How long would this Otafuku statue continue to watch this endless round?

As he stood vacantly thinking these thoughts, Gentarō felt light-headed, and said to himself, in a voice that even he himself could hear clearly, "There might be a fire, it might be burned up and destroyed this very night." He came to himself suddenly, and, hunching his shoulders, looked all around.

"What are you talking about? What fire? What's gonna be burned up? What

nonsense, get ahold of yourself,” Ofumi said, grinning and pulling at her uncle’s sleeve.

“Let’s hurry up and go inside and eat *zenzai*. What’s keeping you?” Gentarō, suddenly seeming irritated, started to pass under the restaurant’s *noren*.

“Uncle, uncle, forget about that place, let’s go here,” said Ofumi, briskly stepping across the alley from the *zenzai* restaurant, entering the narrow entrance of a trim little restaurant, and standing in the entryway, that had been sprinkled with enough water to wet one’s feet. A small step for removing one’s shoes also had a sheen of water, in which was reflected the dim light of a decorated lantern in a diamond-shaped frame.

“Oh, Madam, welcome. It’s been a while, where have you been hiding yourself, come in, come in,” chattered a plump woman in a red apron, carrying a tray with food on it, passing down the narrow hallway, as she noticed Ofumi standing in front of the step.

“Since I came intending to come in, I’m not crazy enough to leave without coming in,” said Ofumi as she left her *geta* clogs on the step. The red-aproned woman tapped her on the back and said,

“Oh, madam – ” in an exaggerated, mock-exasperated tone, but upon seeing the large shape of Gentarō, who had entered following Ofumi, she kindly said, “Oh, you have company... Please come in. Right this way, please,” and conducted them up a narrow stair to the upper floor.

Passing from the stair, of a slim, elegant design perhaps appropriate to a tea-room, into a passageway, filling it with his bulk, making the floor creak and watching the low ceiling lest he bump his head, Gentarō followed the waitress and Ofumi to a place in the nether reaches of the upper floor, where the passage bent in a dog-leg.

“I don’t want any *zenzai*. I only said that because Mom’d be mad if I said we were coming to this kind of place,” said Ofumi comfortably, apparently pleased, as she surveyed the many groups of customers eating and drinking in the shadows of the many screens positioned around the large room across the passage.

“Welcome, Madam.”

“Good to see you again, Madam.”

Four or five red-aproned waitresses, some thin and some plump, appeared in succession to greet Ofumi. Smoking awkwardly, Gentarō watched keenly as, each time, Ofumi gave the waitress something white wrapped in tissue.

The plump waitress, making a jingling sound like that of a small bell, brought a tray filled with cups and dishes, each of refined taste.

“Please have a drink,” she said, fishing out a cup that had sunk to the bottom of the cup-washing basin, shaking the water from it, and pouring first for Gentarō. Gentarō

only glanced at the cup of yellowish sake on the table, without stopping his awkward smoking.

“You can’t expect a low-class place like this to be like Jutei or Irifune, you may not like it, but have a drink, anyway,” said Ofumi after draining the first cup poured for her, then turning to the waitress with a, “Right, Miss?” and having her pour a second cup.

“Miss, this man may look aloof, but he knows Jūtei and Irifune, and even Tondaya. Don’t take him at face value,” said Ofumi in a voice that sounded as if she were already tipsy.

“Then you can’t put one over on him, he’s worldly-wise. Now then, Sir, please have a drink,” said the waitress, holding a sake bottle of Bizen ware and edging closer to Gentarō.

“He’s been around with Nara-maru, you know. And as for *geiko* performers, he knows Yachiyo, and Yoshiki, and all.” Saying this, Ofumi recalled the time when, after filling the restaurant for three days by hiring Nara-maru for 1,000 yen, her husband Fukuzō had made the rounds of the tea houses drinking, everyone flattering him as “the Master of the Sanukiya.” She was tickled anew that at that time, her uncle Gentarō had gone around with Fukuzō, not quite a chaperone and not quite a hanger-on, and tasted the delights of the tea-houses for the first time in his life.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said Gentarō with a laugh, finally taking up the cup and drinking about half of the now-cold sake.

After serving small portions of salted sea-cucumber entrails, sea urchin, and other favorites of Ofumi’s on small serving plates, and other elegant dishes in small bowls, the waitress withdrew for the time being. Pouring for herself, Ofumi drank three or four more cups, and also filled Gentarō’s cup to the brim from a second hot sake bottle.

“Okaji has some inkling that you drink, but she probably hasn’t said anything because you need to blow off steam, what with the restaurant so busy and Fukuzō and all, but you’d do well not to get too drunk.” Devouring only the food and not drinking, Gentarō spoke gently.

“Get off it, Uncle. If you’ve got complaints, tell me when we’re not drinking. Listening to bellyaching when I’m drinking ruins the sake’s flavor. Anyway, Uncle, it’s not like you know nothing of spending money extravagantly. Next time let’s go to Horie. Around here, people know us, but up in Horie we’ll hire some pretty ones.”

Still not touching the food, Ofumi drank four or five more cups, and in the end had the waitress bring in a glass and fill it with sake, which she gulped down.

Now saying nothing, Gentarō was eating the sushi Ofumi had ordered for him.

8

When Ofumi and Gentarō left the restaurant, it was well after midnight. The music hall show had ended long before, and the narrow alley was silent, as if resting after its labors of the day.

“It was when I was about six, I was running ahead of old Granny, who’s dead now, came to about where that Otafuku statue is and knocked my head on something, hurt like hell. I’d knocked my head right on a samurai’s sword-hilt. I was worried the samurai’d be angry, I was even more scared than I was hurt. I can remember that samurai’s laughing face even now. See, my head was right at the height of a sword-hilt, I knocked my head on one once more after that.”

Making the tipsy Ofumi laugh with this story he had recalled of times past, Gentarō preceded Ofumi up the nearly deserted Sennichi-mae toward Dōtombori.

“You’re pretty old, too, Uncle. After all, you’ve seen real two-sword carrying samurai, not just the ones in plays,” laughed Ofumi, following closely after her uncle, and not appearing particularly drunk.

“If I go home now, Mom’ll be able to tell I’ve been drinking from the smell, I think I’ll walk a little more. Uncle, let’s say goodbye here,” said Ofumi. She turned a corner to the west, with Gentarō hurrying along behind her: the two had turned from the Ebisu Bridge into Sōemon-cho.

At the Tondaya, and the Itami-sachi, and the Yamatoya, only sleepy lights were burning, and even the cheer of this neighborhood was dampened. The only people they met were the occasional made-up woman being accompanied home, and these gave the impression of being foxes or other spirits.

“I’m thinking of making a quick trip to Tokyo – not tonight, mind – if I go by the night train and come back by night train the next night, I should be able to keep it a secret from Mom, right? ...I want to go there and hash things out with Fukuzō. ...won’t do any good just leaving him there, you know. My health won’t hold up, overseeing all those employees and running that business. It’s just one day, so can you watch the till while I’m gone, Uncle?”

Now appearing completely sober, Ofumi spoke forlornly.

Gentarō could think of nothing to say but, “I don’t think it’s such a great idea for you to see Fukuzō right now...”

9

After seeing off her uncle, who caught the all-night tram at the end of the Nippon-bashi Bridge to return to his house full of children in Uemachi, Ofumi stopped by a *kamaboko* fish-cake seller that was still open on the Dōtombori, bought one yen's worth of pike conger skin, and had the sleepy shop-boy wrap it for mailing. Carrying the package, she hurried home.

It appeared her mother Okaji was not yet asleep in the three-mat room, so Ofumi furtively pushed the package of pike conger skin into a shelf under the till. Going to the lavatory on the ground floor, she turned the switch of the electric light and discerned the forms of a man and woman in the sudden brightness.

“So it's Tomekichi and Otsuru again. Get out now! I'll pay your wages for this month. Trash like you set a bad example for the entire household.”

Raising her voice loudly enough to wake all the employees, a muscle in Ofumi's forehead was twitching in annoyance.

“What're you shouting about at this hour? Whatever it is, it can wait 'til tomorrow,” said Okaji, coming out shivering in her nightclothes. The two employees took this opportunity to escape to their respective sleeping places.

Still grumbling to herself, Ofumi locked the front door and, as always, shoved the key deep in her breast. Giving the package of pike conger skin she had put under the till a brief caress, she began preparing for bed herself.