

## *A Fall Evening in 1972*

A desolate fall evening. Everything is dying or becoming hard and calloused. Or grey and black. Dead leaves scrape hesitantly along abandoned roads; the wind ushering them off into darkness. The bitter wind isolates and grates, creating a bracing solitude for the lonely figure who plods gently along underneath a waning moon. For her, the darkness seems like a numbing grave.

Toshiko was alone, cold. Walking home from work, her face did not express happiness or unhappiness. It was only possible to deduce that she was animate and that she had an ultimate destination. But she felt the fall evening, the denouement which emanated from her surroundings. She had been living in the twilight of fall for twenty years now. It was a way of life that sloughed about in the pit of her heart. Her face had become impassive to the familiar angst.

The path home trickled through a rough dirt alley bordered by concrete walls rising on either side. Occasionally, she would slip into the glare of a house light only to pass once more into darkness. She marked her progress by these stations.

In the center of one such light was the light twinkling of piano keys. It was a juvenile tune, played sprightly. She hesitated to listen to the one outside her circle. Smiling, her face cracked painfully in the grip of Frost's nails. The misery of such pain, of being trapped between the walls, enhanced the loneliness which lay deep in her breast.

How she once loved, laughed, and participated in life so long ago was now incomprehensible to her. She paused in an effort to recollect those times but there was

only the diminishing sound of music to console her.

She turned from the bleak alley onto a street filled with traffic. People were bustling on the sidewalks lined with brightly lit bars. She turned her head and gazed into a darkened window. A sense of estrangement rose within her. The only way she knew that she had lived these past twenty years was through her reflection; her skin had wrinkled, and her hair turned gray. The passage of time, now glaringly displayed before her, was a remote, if not completely lost remembrance.

Her hair began to blow in selfish disarray as she walked down the broad avenue. The strands didn't seem to know her. They held on only because they were attached. She tamped them down and hugged herself. The evening cold began to envelop her, but she learned so long ago that life is no rose garden and there are things to bear. Yes, there are things to bear.

The men on the street, the men who sold the pleasures of the bar with their arrogant women, stood silent and looked away as she slowly passed by. Maybe the world bowed its head as well. She felt this way as her eyes followed the cracks on the smudged sidewalk. The thought of the mini-skirted *jo-sans* made her feel too sympathetic to be realistic and it hurt. It hurt very much.

Entering the alley which led to her home, she felt relief in the dark and musty atmosphere which blanketed her between the two walls on each side. The ventilated strip of concrete under her feet gurgled intermittently and gave off the stench of passing sewage.

She raised her eyes and saw a row of old wooden houses hovering over the walls. Their pale frosted windows were smeared with grime, dispersing the sparse moonlight in

baleful hues. She wondered about the existence of tree-lined suburbs in America and the vast highways which stitched them together.

Upon reaching her home, she slid open the shaky, front door and stepped into the cluttered anteroom. The noise of distant cars swirled and reverberated throughout the house and reached her ears as empty whispers. She benignly slipped off her shoes and slid the reluctant door closed.

She looked into the mirror and saw the reflection of a bare lightbulb swinging in the corner behind her. Her hair dangled into her eyes and teased her cheeks.

Memories cannot hold your hand or smile back at you. Nor can they stand behind you, put their hands on your hips and whisper words of your loveliness. You know you're past that.

Turning away from the mirror, she faced the inside of her small home. Where did she fit within the clutter? Who has she been living for all this time? Where would she be tomorrow?

She walked up to her bed and sat down. It was crammed into the corner of a single room that served as a combination living, dining and bedroom. She drew up her knees and wept, solitary as a flower in the desert. She didn't know why she was crying, pouring out so much anguish in spasms of grief.

After the passage of twenty empty years, she began to perceive its empty vastness, just like a sea gull on its first flight soaring beyond the land's edge to face the endless ocean's blue and white furrows. There was no past for her, only a sea of endless time from which she had just emerged.

And the world, what of the world? It was reduced to a single room that smelled of damp wood. And what of God? His visage stared out from the mirror, looking into your eyes, and watched your searching for meaning. Words came without a sound, saying your body was the only one left in the world; it was the center of the cosmos, and you were destined for a lonely existence. She knew this.

Yesterday, she had spent sixty-five dollars on a dress; a very fresh, stylish dress that exhorted warmth, luxury, and sophistication. Why had she purchased it? To wear in this small, dank room? What other place was there? Perhaps at the American base where she worked? But that place was only a daydream. She was a foreigner there. Not that they reminded her, but she left each day with a lingering sense of alienation.

Each day, she tried hard, very hard to speak English well, to be congenial to the men and women who came up to her counter at the PX. She wore American dresses, western hair styles and, twenty years ago, adopted an American lover to learn American love; to sacrifice herself totally and unselfishly to these people who gave her such a good job after the war.

He left four months after they met and wrote for another two before the letters stopped. Everyone told her that life still held many surprises, and besides, she was very pretty and would find another man. But after her loss, a stream of water began to wash over her, threatening to drown any hope left in her.

That was a long time ago. Lying down in bed, she could feel the passage of each cold, wet tear as they trickled down her cheeks each evening before she fell asleep. Twenty years ago, she had tried to kill herself. Many Japanese do. That's no excuse.

However, it did provide some respite. She was not scared or excited when it happened. It was like taking a nap, like a misty veil coming down to envelop her until she fell into a blissful sleep.

Until her eyes were thrust open and drops of reality came in, causing a cascade of burning pain.

And then there was nothing. Only these fall evenings with dead leaves skittering aimlessly down the back alleys. Where did all the dead leaves come from? There must be a few live ones around, but where? Where?

And where did the dead leaves go?

Everyone thought I would be all right, but they should have known better. There was no way back. But maybe they did know. Tears distort everyone's vision; pitiful hopes warp the fabric of reality.

Her crying ceased.

The ticking of the orange, plastic clock increased in volume as the screams and ravings inside her mind subsided. She looked over at the clock. Halt past eleven ... half past a life she never knew.

She cried again because she had to get up early. She couldn't miss tomorrow, even though it was only yesterday.