



# Digital Geishas and Talking Frogs

THE BEST 21ST CENTURY SHORT STORIES FROM JAPAN

**Edited by Helen Mitsios**

Foreword by Pico Iyer

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With a foreword by Pico Iyer

**This collection of short stories features the most up-to-date and exciting writing from the most popular and celebrated authors in Japan today. These wildly imaginative and boundary-bursting stories reveal fascinating and unexpected personal responses to the changes raging through today's Japan. Along with some of the world's most renowned Japanese authors, *Digital Geishas and Talking Frogs* includes many writers making their English-language debut.**

“Great stories rewire your brain, and in these tales you can feel your mind shifting as often as Mizue changes trains at the Shinagawa station in ‘My Slightly Crooked Brooch...’ The contemporary short stories in this collection, at times subversive, astonishing and heart-rending, are brimming with originality and genius.”

—David Dalton, author of *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol*

“Here are stories that arrive from our global future, made from shards of many local, personal pasts. In the age of anime, amazingly, Japanese literature thrives.”

—Paul Anderer, Professor of Japanese, Columbia University



## About the Editor

Helen Mitsios is the editor of *New Japanese Voices: The Best Contemporary Fiction from Japan*, which was twice listed as a *New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice*. She has recently co-authored the memoir *Waltzing with the Enemy: A Mother and Daughter Confront the Aftermath of the Holocaust*.

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SAMPLE

Edited by Helen Mitsios



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Boston

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Most of all, my gratitude extends to Tony Winters, my *samurai, sensei*, and husband.

SAMPLE

# Foreword

It was hard to believe twenty years had gone by. I was on the phone having almost the same conversation with the same person on the same subject. Two decades had passed since I first edited *New Japanese Voices: The Best Contemporary Fiction from Japan*, and now my good friend, Keiko Imai, founder and director of Shonan Universal Design Institute in Tokyo, had just asked me, “Why don’t you put together a new version of the book? One for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” I answered, “Let me think about it.” And in her indomitable manner she responded, “No need. Just do it.”

Once my decision to put together a “sequel” to the first collection was made, one event led quickly to another. I had just written a book review on Natsuo Kirino’s novel *Real World* for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and knew she hadn’t published a short story in English translation. When I asked her if she would contribute a story to my new collection, she said yes. I also contacted Haruki Murakami. He had been the first person to agree to contribute to my first collection when I met him years ago in the seating area of a swank hotel lobby overlooking Central Park East. He said yes again. I phoned Masahiko Shimada, who happened to be on an extended professional assignment here in Manhattan, where he was staying with his wife (within convenient walking distance of Lincoln Center so they could watch their beloved operas). He too, said yes.

And so this new collection was underway. But as the stories, each so fresh and unusual, crossed my desk one after the other, I began to feel less like an editor than an anxious host trying to create the perfect guest list for an engaging dinner party. I hoped the whole would be greater than the parts. I hoped that each guest would find commonality with the others yet be distinctive enough to hold his or her own. Perhaps one would spin a yarn, share a secret or even misbehave. They did not disappoint.

The writers in this collection are master storytellers, and I am honored to share their work with you. Several writers have seen their stories translated into English before; others make their debut in English translation

here. Many of them have won the highest literary accolades such as the Akutagawa Prize, the Mishima Prize, the Kawabata Prize, and the Tanizaki Prize, as well as other awards and distinctions. In Japan their fiction is read and admired by millions. Now, thanks to a distinguished group of translators, these stories can be enjoyed in English.

Though some of these literary works defy genre, all recognize the importance of their subjects' inner lives. The stories often address the dilemma of characters who find themselves lost in a complex world of accelerated change. In Japan, a Confucian reverence for ancient traditions rubs shoulders with a desire to experience all the boundless wonders our 21<sup>st</sup>-century technological world has to offer. The philosopher's tenets live on: a respect for social harmony, the here and now, man's relationship to his fellow man, and most importantly a proper balance in all things. The latter is reflected in a Confucian maxim: "If you do not want to spill the wine, do not fill the glass to the brim." However, as these characters negotiate their way between the traditional and new, and the sense of isolation that accompanies the use of technologies designed, almost ironically, to bring us closer together—wine is most definitely spilt.

And speaking of wine, the table has been set for our dinner party. I'd like to invite you now to join me and meet our most illustrious guests—and feast at a table of literary delights.

Helen Mitsios  
New York, New York

# Introduction

“People like to put us down,” The Who screamed while I was growing up in England, “just because we get around.” Not long thereafter—in “Won’t Get Fooled Again”—they were snarling, “Meet the old boss, same as the new boss.” The Empire was gone, they knew, and all that was left to them were empty bottles and peeling alleyways, in which to pick fights with other restless teenagers. In time a full-throated revolution would arrive with the punks, desecrating the Union Jack and portraits of the Queen, but until that absolute rebellion all that was possible was a shouting in the void.


I think of that, sometimes, when I read and reread some of the stories in this collection, rich with the numbed and occasionally desperate sound of a child whose Confucian father has been thrown out of the house—and allowed few visiting rights—and whose American-style mother doesn’t know quite what to do with the post-nuclear mess. “I don’t care,” “I’m not taking it,” “I want something else, but I don’t know what it is” are the cries of the kids left behind; and just underneath their words you can hear the plaintiveness of a generation that has buried the old order but not yet found its way to a new, and so finds itself adrift, in a kind of limbo, somewhere between one of the oldest societies on earth (in terms of demographics and invisible traditions) and the youngest (in terms of mix-and-match fashions and high-tech conveniences).

The celebrated “Big Three” of postwar Japanese fiction were all after-midnight elegists of a kind, so concerned that Japan might lose its soul (and become just a suburb of the West) that they retreated to old corners and ideas, determined to hang on to what they deemed “authentically” Japanese. But the writers of the new century in Japan—Generation X.2, you could say—are notably contrary, even Oedipal in their determination to show how far they live from the verities of Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata and Junichiro Tanizaki. They are the children of U.S. army bases and parents who grew up in the rubble of the old; they are the grandchildren of the soldiers who lost the war and came to wonder why

they'd been fighting it in the first place. If their elders—as described in the first story here—longed to be permanently “entranced,” they strive to be permanently unenchanted.

How perfect, then, that this anthology, so artfully put together by Helen Mitsios, begins with a story about the unsettled daughter of a famous author (based, we gather, on Tanizaki). The very inheritance that is the source of her public fascination is also the center of her private sense of exile and abandonment; the much-admired novelist that all the world is so eager to hear about was cold to her and selfish and ready to jettison even his daughter in the pursuit of his art. While not yet out of her teens, she is already flinging one of his precious letters to her into a fire. But even as she does so, she knows that his blood flows through her and that his face peers out through her own. Her very act of destruction, in fact, suggests how much he has passed his “evil spark” down to her.

“I hate writers,” she cries, and in those three words we hear the rallying-cry and the starting point for the unapologetic stories that follow.

 If I had to come up with a secret title for this anthology, in fact, I think it might be *Absent Fathers and Lost Kids* (or even *Lost Fathers and Absent Kids*). It's startling how many of the pieces that follow Natsuo Kirino's opening tale turn upon fathers who are gone, and not only in the haunting tale of childhood wishfulness called “The No Fathers Club.” In another story here, two very different young characters have fathers who are dead—and a third ends up stabbing the father who abused her when young; in another, a middle-aged man dwindles, quite literally, into an absence, and in yet another an older man is imagined as a mummy, strangled and wrapped up naked in a plastic bag.

Traditionally, and even on my arrival here in 1987, Japan has defined itself through its mothers and the air of reassurance, public warmth and nurturing that suffuses its shops and streets; one psychoanalyst even wrote a famous book on its “Anatomy of Dependence.” But the Japan of the new century, for all the dutiful mothers at its center, seems dominated by fathers who have abdicated their responsibilities, leaving children with more time than love and more money than direction.

Again and again we see lost souls here, of both sexes, who cannot tell if they're dreaming or awake; one man who decides to abandon his death-in-life would rather waste away than return to an existence in which his only real connection is with an unmet female announcer on an FM radio station. In more than one story we see older men with underage girls; one teenage object of desire is not only trafficking in her own body, but in those of her friends as well. Even when she finds a boy she likes, she tries to woo him by telling him she'll sell her body for him. "You'll get to wear cool suits," she promises, "and I'll let you ride in a Porsche."

When guidance comes in this anthology, it comes only from a six-foot-tall frog; many characters in these tales are weirdly passive, just killing time until a tsunami, a pregnancy or two dangerously seductive girls appear on the horizon to shake them out of their stupor. "Despite my youth," the narrator in one story says, "I always felt I was living out the rest of my days." In another, a young narrator confesses, "There's nothing for us to do today, and no plans for tomorrow either." It's no surprise that Haruki Murakami has become all but the global laureate of suburbia, dislocation and what is described in a story here (though not by him) as "aimless plenty." His characters are jet-lagged even when the flights they take are internal. An "absolutely ordinary guy" in his story here, as in many of his stories—"no wife, no kids, both parents dead"—more or less floats through life, not doing much good (or much harm), unsure if he's running in place or just, like a worn-out instrument, running down.



Lest all this sound too gloomy, I should stress that Japan today, on its surface, is as seamless, fashionable, fast-moving, reliable and attentive as when I first arrived; go into a convenience store and the apparently dissociated kids of this anthology will gently cup your palm as they hand you back your change and seem at least as shy, courteous and helpful as their grandmothers did. Indeed, the writers featured in this collection have exercised extraordinary resolve and clarity in simply giving their tales of a modern floating world such structure and definition. In a story such as "My Slightly Crooked Brooch," we get a vision of everyday human emotions in a sleek modern landscape that has all the polish and absolute confidence of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century classic.

Even more important, the central perspective behind and inside many of these tales is that of a woman, often a girl. The “Big Three” loved to dwell on the beauty of pretty young things, and all the ways such idealized creatures could be used by older, backwards-looking men to symbolize purity or innocence. In this collection, the objectified young women get their own back, and point out how tiresome it is to be fussed over by creepy older guys, and how much, in fact, they’re in control of the men who think they’ve “conquered” them. Hitomi Kanehara, whose story “Delilah” is included here, won one of Japan’s most prestigious literary prizes, the Akutagawa, while she was just twenty, having dropped out of high school and written a novel while in San Francisco; Natsuo Kirino and Yoko Ogawa are both winning ever larger international followings with tales that are the opposite of reassuring and often as direct and unflinching as two of Kirino’s titles: *Out* and *Grotesque*.

The landscape through which their characters move is, of course, one of anonymous streets and red-light bars, of look-alike “family-style” restaurants and places drably called the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space or the Tokyo Station Gallery. Their people think nothing by now of going to Finnish movies or relaxing on a beach with the stories of the Shanghai-born British master of dystopia, J.G. Ballard. Their problem is not—as we lazily imagine of Japan—having too much work, but too little; their predicament is not that of having too great a sense of national pride, but rather too weak a sense of affiliation. Pinball wizards and quadrophonics, they drift through days that are as weightless as a video game, with everything (including themselves) about to dissolve with the next click.

When the precursor to this volume came out, twenty years ago—*New Japanese Voices: The Best Contemporary Fiction from Japan*—it was already apparent that the writers of the new Japan had no interest in apostrophizing geisha (unless they were anime figures—or being impersonated for a day by platinum-haired girls with Hello Kitty bags); and the home-made nationalism upheld by the likes of Mishima had been seriously thrown into question by several national defeats.

But what has happened since is that Japan has found that a hybrid identity composed of disparate aspects of the outside world fits about as well as the “almost illegal miniskirt” and the crazily oversized Utah Jazz

t-shirt we see in one story here. All the iPhones and hand-held devices and portable TVs of the past twenty years have not begun to offer a lasting solution to loneliness and confusion and doubt.

A new generation of “freeters” wanders through a labyrinth of part-time, go-nowhere jobs and “hooks up” with new partners every hour; one boy here is called “Joe” and in another story one of his contemporaries complains of being asked by a girl from Saitama to call her “Jennifer.” To a striking degree the people in these pieces are defined not by what they have, but by what they lack: it only makes sense that one protagonist is shown literally eliminating himself, and a fractured account of a tsunami emphasizes for us that everything that was here two minutes ago is now gone. And it’s no coincidence, I suspect, that one piece ends with a young tough beating up a friend’s abusive father—and replacing his “shiny black leather shoes” with Air Jordans.

As I write this, the quiet ancient capital where I live, Nara, is celebrating its 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary all around me. I turn on the TV, and see a Japanese couple getting married, apparently with delight, by a robot; I open the newspaper and read of agencies in Tokyo that rent out actresses to visit old couples on Sunday mornings and call, “Hi, Mom! Hi, Pop! How are you?” because the couple’s own daughters are no longer ready to perform their filial duties. At the same time, the misty pavilions, the local gift for listening and the public cheerfulness of the place are often as impressive and humbling as they ever were. My Japanese father-in-law lives in a traditional wooden house down the street from a fox shrine and recalls his wartime years in Manchuria and Siberia; my Japanese mother-in-law has never set foot outside Japan. But my Japanese wife—a contemporary of the writers in this collection—resolved at an early age that she would look beyond the boundaries of her forebears (hence my place in her life) and her daughter now lives in Spain with a Spanish-Ecuadorian fiancé. I can only wonder what “Japan” will mean when the next generation of the family, no doubt delightedly mixed-up, comes upon the scene.

“Where is the terminus of the Tokyo Loop Line?” one character asks himself in this book. It’s a resonant question that reverberates on

many levels, of course, and the “Loop Line” might almost be a modern, industrial parody of the natural cycles that have traditionally kept things in place in Japan—an old Confucian idea lost in American translation. Things go round, yes, but for some Japanese in this young century a loop suggests the ceaseless, pointless rotation of a treadmill.

The joy of this anthology is that so many writers, often with a keen sense of the world outside Japan, can still muster the courage, eloquence and energy to ask where courage, eloquence and energy have gone in the society around them. The Who, after all, were shouting out, “I hope I die before I get old” almost half a century ago—and yet here they still are, senior citizens now, their time kept by Ringo Starr’s son on drums, shouting out their cry of impatience in our midst, even though they know now that it can never come true. If anything, their power, intensity and popularity have grown even greater as their singer and songwriter near their seventies.

I know this, as it happens, because I saw them in concert not so long ago, in a 16,000-seat arena in the shadow of Osaka Castle. As the fans around me—all Japanese—shouted out the angry slogans of their youth, they might as well have been saying that they, like the band, were not about to fade away or give up “talkin’ ‘bout my generation.” Loyal, leather-jacketed and clearly thrilled to be in the company of the disaffected foreigners who had given them their life’s soundtrack, they looked to me a little like the writers of the stories in this memorable collection.

Pico Iyer  
Nara, Japan

# Digital Geishas and Talking Frogs

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## Natsuo Kirino

Natsuo Kirino quickly established a reputation in her country as one of a rare breed of mystery writers whose work goes well beyond the conventional crime novel. She is a leading figure in the recent boom of female writers of Japanese detective fiction. This fact has been demonstrated by her winning not only the Grand Prix for Crime Fiction in Japan for *Out* in 1998, but one of its major literary awards, the Naoki Prize, for *Soft Cheeks* (which has not yet been published in English), in 1999. Several of her books have also been turned into feature movies. Kirino's work often addresses social issues such as the plight of women in Japanese society, constriction of their domestic lives, and discrimination in the workplace, as well as discrimination against immigrant workers.

## The Floating Forest

*Translated by Jonathan W. Larwless*

SINCE THREE OR FOUR OF HER HUSBAND'S SEMINAR students were coming over tonight, Aiko Itō was measuring out rice. Young students always drank a lot of alcohol and ate a ton. During the winter, Aiko's strategy was to prepare cheap pot-luck stew and second-rate alcohol, and afterward bring out loads of rice balls. But her husband, Ryūhei, would insist otherwise, saying things like, "Let 'em have the good stuff!" Although he was a professor at a private college, having published next to nothing Ryūhei's salary wasn't nearly enough to be constantly having guests come home for dinner. His love of entertaining house-guests was exactly like his uncle, Shōkichi Akagi. Aiko remembered her own mother, who had remarried with Akagi, complaining that even when they had no money he still called guests over without a second thought, and she was embarrassed when she couldn't put anything out on the table. This brought a wry smile to Aiko's lips.

It was February, and the kitchen, which faced north, was freezing. Their traditional Japanese-style home (with the exception of the single Western-style octagonal drawing room) suited the tastes of the ever-fashionable Ryūhei. He was also similar to Akagi in his insistence upon a particular style of house, clothes, and other small items such as stationary. That same Akagi had collapsed in his house in Shinjuku Ward's Yarai-cho and died a year earlier. To uncle and nephew, so similar in features and interests, went mother and daughter, respectively. This unusual relationship, too, as time went by would likely become a simple, single line, like entangled threads coming undone. Thinking such things, Aiko turned on the small gas stove at her feet and began rinsing eight cups of rice. The water from the tap was cold as ice, and her fingers numbed while sloshing the rice around in it.

"Mom, a visitor. Want me to turn on the stove in the drawing room?"

Her second daughter, Naoko, came to tell her. Naoko, in her third year of junior high, was nearing the time for her high school entrance exams. She seemed to be suffering from lack of sleep and didn't look well. Her study room was directly above the front door, so she usually became aware of visitors before anyone else.

"Oh, I wonder who that could be?"

Aiko wiped her hands on her apron and asked her youngest daughter. Aiko's hands were bright red, so she hurriedly warmed them by the stove.

"He says he's from a publishing house. He says he wants to talk to you."

Naoko answered, eyes sparkling. *Here we go again*, thought Aiko, and after she undid her apron she told Naoko to go ahead and light the gas stove. With numb fingers Aiko picked off a pill or two of wool from her heavy, sand-colored cardigan and straightened the hem of her dark brown wool skirt, which had turned up. Walking along the hall to the front door, she wondered, *how many people does this make?*

It had been half a year since her father passed away. At first newspapers and weekly magazines came to her house looking for interviews one after another, but she didn't respond to any of them. Aiko's real father was the novelist Keiichirō Kitamura. However, while she wouldn't necessarily have called their relationship "estranged," they had not frequently

visited one another since she married Ryūhei Itō before the war. On Kitamura's side, his third wife Sachiko, her sisters, and her other children were nestled in fast. After getting divorced from Aiko's mother, Kitamura remarried twice, and it was the wife from his third marriage, Sachiko, whom he loved most of all, and he loved her until he died.

An elderly man wearing black-rimmed glasses was standing with his back turned to the stained-glass front door. He had a black coat in his hands, and his navy blue suit with white-patterned black tie matched his white hair perfectly. The man met Aiko's eyes with a warm expression.

"Miss Aiko, you most likely do not remember me. My name is Kaname Ishinabe."

Ishinabe held out his card reverently. It read: "The Literary World Press – Publication Director – Kaname Ishinabe." Aiko was familiar with the name Literary World Press, but to what extent Kitamura or Akagi had dealings with them, she couldn't be certain. Aiko tilted her head. She did feel as though she had seen Ishinabe's face before. But she had no recollection of the name. Ishinabe smiled and watched on as Aiko fell silent, attempting to remember. Although he was reserved, there was a calm about him that suggested self-assertiveness. Little wonder that Naoko, who was usually rather absent-minded, thought to ask if she should turn on the stove in the meeting room, thought Aiko.

"Mr. Ishinabe? Well, could it be that we've met before?"

"We have. When I met you, I burned my right hand . . ."

Ishinabe showed her the small remnants of a burn on the back of his right hand. It showed visibly white on his sun-tanned skin. "Ah!" Aiko gave a small cry, then looked up at Ishinabe's face. *Could it be? That man I met more than thirty years ago?* At the time, Aiko had just turned fifteen and Ishinabe was a newspaper reporter. His black hair had turned stark white and his body had become much heavier, but the core of the person hadn't changed. At the very heart of Ishinabe was an almost unbridled curiosity. Perhaps with the passing of years he had learned to hide that strong curiosity smoothly behind a smile.

"Yes, now I remember. It's been a long time."

"Indeed, and the great number of years since we met is entirely my fault. At the time I was a reporter, but I always wanted to try my hand at editing, so I transferred to Bundansha after the war."

"Oh, is that so? My apologies for not knowing. Please, do come in."

To cover up her inner excitement, Aiko bent over and arranged the slippers. Her instincts told her that a formidable opponent had just come. Those many years ago, too, she had lost her temper in the face of the persistent Ishinabe. However, Aiko waited for him to come in without showing the slightest trace of her mind's workings, and then she showed him into the drawing room. Ishinabe had apparently been checking her height as she walked ahead of him, for he spoke from behind.

"You haven't grown much since then, have you?"

"It's true. I'm short."

"Kitamura wasn't very tall either, was he?"

Aiko paid no attention to his words.

A large bookshelf was built into the wall of the drawing room, its shelves full with the works of Kitamura and Akagi. The gas stove that Naoko had lit was rapidly warming the room. Aiko stole a glance quickly to the plaster wall where moisture had gathered. A guest had once warned her: "Humidity is bad for books, you know." As usual, Kitamura's works were simply haphazardly shoved onto the bookshelf. She had been told that the books were all first printings, limited editions, and so on—all books that would make a dilettante dance with joy to see—but having been brought up surrounded by books since the day she was born, Aiko didn't see it as anything special and couldn't appreciate them, and in fact didn't even care to think about it.

However, it seemed as though Ryūhei had a particular idea about books, so the collections of poems and other writings by his own uncle, Akagi, he lined up precisely, beautifully in order by year. Ryūhei's reason for not attempting to rearrange Kitamura's books was probably either due to hesitance because Kitamura was Aiko's real father, or because he didn't care for Kitamura as a person. Aiko guessed that it was the latter. Kitamura was surprisingly cold to those he had lost interest in, so it was only reasonable for the entire house of Akagi, Ryūhei included, to eschew dealings with him. The Akagi family came from a wealthy house in Wakayama, for generations lovers of culture, who excelled in music, and who believed deeply in friendship.

However, in the house of Ryūhei and Aiko Itō, there was no evidence beyond this bookshelf to suggest a profound relation between such men

of letters. Since their oldest son left for Fukuoka to take up his new position, the two of them and their two remaining children, with the exception of the occasional visit by students, maintained a peaceful daily life, punctuated by life's occasional turbulences. It was Aiko's wish, as well as her way of life.

Aiko placed a wooden ashtray, which Ryūhei had bought and brought home from Jakarta, in front of Ishinabe. Informing him, "I'll prepare some refreshments," she left the drawing room momentarily. In the kitchen Naoko was boiling water, having felt it the appropriate action for the situation. She seemed unhappy to see her mother come back.

"Let me bring it out to you."

"I will bring it out."

"Come on, I wanna hear what you guys're talking about."

Naoko whined, her voice filled with disappointment. Aiko knew that her daughter held a great interest in her grandfather, Keiichirō Kitamura. Kitamura, who a few years earlier had been awarded the imperial Order of Culture, had written books since his school days and had left behind innumerable works. Nearly all of his writings were praised as masterpieces, and he also published many works overseas, enough even to have scholars of his literature outside of the country. What child wouldn't feel excitement at knowing they were a direct grandchild of Kitamura, an author known by everyone throughout all of Japan? Furthermore, her father's uncle—no, her grandmother's partner—was Shōkichi Akagi, he, too, was an author who was awarded the Order of Culture as a poet. However, the older children had all become taciturn upon learning the fact that Kitamura and Akagi had battled long over their grandmother's affections, and after they broke away from each other Akagi and their grandmother had remarried and were then estranged from Kitamura. Aiko's oldest son, Shōhei, and her oldest daughter, Kyōko, whether they were overwhelmed by the complicated relationship between Kitamura and Akagi, or that of their grandmother and mother, they never said anything about it, and they feigned indifference toward their grandparents. But Aiko's last child, Naoko, perhaps because she hadn't yet grasped the situation, seemed to be proud of her grandfather beyond belief.

"This is an adult conversation, so you must not come in the room."

Aiko clearly stated, placing the green tea she had very carefully poured

out onto a tray and lifting it up. When she returned to the drawing room, Ishinabe was there with his eyes closed, apparently thinking about something very intensely. He sensed her presence and turned around, bowing his head deeply.

"My apologies for coming unannounced. Please don't trouble yourself."

"No, I am very sorry for what I did back then."

"That's all in the past now. Besides, I think of it as a privilege, so please don't bother yourself with it. I met you then quite randomly, and I was desperate to make you talk."

After gazing at the back of his right hand as if it were an honorary mark, Ishinabe continued.

"I've watched you from afar as you grew up. Now you seem to be happy, and I'm truly relieved to see that. The truth is I saw you at both Akagi and Kitamura's funerals, but I didn't talk to you. Still, the fact that the year after Akagi died Kitamura passed away as well gives me the feeling that there was some kind of connection."

Aiko nodded gracefully. Kitamura didn't attend Akagi's funeral, supposedly due to health, and only sent a telegram. However, immediately after that one of his works was to be made into a movie, so he was on television together with the actresses that were to be in the film. It goes without saying how Aiko's mother, Hideko, or Aiko's husband must have felt at such cold, heartless treatment. That was the kind of person Kitamura was; disregarding the feelings of others, he put preference on the most important thing to him at that moment.

In his later years, Akagi poured great passion into writing school songs, and he didn't write a single novel—no, he became unable to write them. As if to compensate for this, he invited writers to his house and formed a literary salon which came to be called the Akagi Faction. For a second an image of Kitamura's face flitted across her mind, of him raising his voice in high-pitched laughter and saying, "After all, he's a poet, and poets are pure, see? You have to be a villain to write novels!" Kitamura hated exchange among literary persons. Ishinabe, too, assuming he'd been an editor for a while, should be well informed about the arrogance and condescending behavior of Kitamura in his later years in his disregard of Akagi.

No sooner had the conversation stopped than Ishinabe brought his hands to his knees and lowered his head.

"Miss Aiko, the truth is I came today to ask a single favor of you."

"What would that be?"

She had a pretty good idea what he wanted, but she responded as if she couldn't guess. Ishinabe grinned as if he wanted to tell Aiko that he understood her resolution.

"Is there no possible way that you may be persuaded to write your memoirs? Please, I beg of you to do this for me. There is no one else in this world that could draw as heavily on the blood of Kitamura. Besides, you are a woman who has lived her life walking along a checkered destiny. Calling it 'checkered' may be rude, but I don't know of any other woman who's been handed a fate such as yours. And, being the daughter of a writer you must've had to experience some unreasonable things, am I wrong? But, if you'd been just any writer's daughter, you wouldn't have had to go through all that. It was because you were the child of the great Kitamura. So from your perspective, would you be willing to write about Kitamura as your father, Akagi as a second father, and how you perceived your mother? Of course, about yourself as well. Truth be told, I wish to know about your feelings at this moment more than anything else. The year after next I will leave the company due to my age. Before that would you please allow me this one last job? Your memoir—no, even an essay would be fine—if I could but receive that, I would have absolutely no regrets about my work as an editor. I've been thinking about this for a long time. I came here thinking that now, half a year after Kitamura passed away, I could finally visit you. How do you feel about it?"

Ishinabe spoke in one burst, a serious expression on his face. Aiko, only half-listening, forgot even to answer him. A checkered destiny. *That's how people think of me.* She felt as though she'd just been given a new perspective, and she was ruminating over the words.



When Aiko was fifteen, her mother was divorced by Kitamura and then ended up marrying Akagi, and Aiko followed her from Kitamura's house. Even though Aiko pleaded, saying she didn't want to go, somehow in her