

# Ten Nights of Dreams

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

## 1st Night - 100 Years' Vigil

This is what I saw in my dream.

As I sat at her bedside with my arms folded in front of me, the woman, who was lying on her back, told me in a quiet voice that she was going to die. Her long hair was spread out over her pillow, with her delicately contoured oval face resting in the middle. The depths of her white cheeks were flushed with the proper degree of warm color, and the color of her lips was naturally red. She didn't appear to be dying. However, she said clearly in her quiet voice that she would die. I thought too, then, that she might indeed die. So I asked, looking down on her from above, if it were true then that she was going to die. Affirming that she was going to die, she opened her eyes wide. Her large moist eyes, surrounded by long lashes, were of the purest black. Within the pure black of her pupils, my own reflection floated with vivid clarity.

As I gazed through to the depths of her lustrous black eyes, I wondered again if she were really going to die. So I carefully drew my mouth near to her pillow and asked again if she wouldn't live, if she wouldn't be all right. She responded in a quiet voice, with her dark eyes wide open but tired, that she would die, that she must die.

I asked in earnest if she could see my face. She smiled at me and replied that, yes, couldn't I see myself reflected in her eyes? I quietly drew away from her pillow. As I folded my arms again, I wondered if she really must die.

After a while the woman spoke again.

“Please bury me after I die. Dig my grave with a large pearl oyster shell. Set a fragment of star, fallen from the heavens, on my grave as a marker. Then wait by my grave. Wait for me to return.”

I asked her when she would return.

“You know that the sun will rise. And you know that it will set. It will rise again and set again. The red sun will pass from east to west. As it rises from the east to sink in the west, will you wait for me?”

I confirmed with a nod that I would. The woman made her quiet voice a touch stronger.

“Wait for me a hundred years,” she said with a resolute tone. “Stay by my graveside and wait for a hundred years. I promise to return.”

I told her simply that I would wait. As I spoke, my own reflection, that I saw clearly in her black pupils, began to break apart. I realized it was flowing away, like a reflected image in still water upset by movement. Then her eyes fell shut, and a tear dropped from her long lashes to her cheek. -- She was gone.

I went down to the garden and dug her grave with a pearl oyster shell. It was a large shell with smooth, sharp edges. With each scoop of earth, moonbeams struck the back of the shell, making it shimmer. The moist earth was fragrant. After a while the grave was dug. I placed the woman within and gently covered her with the soft earth. With each motion, moonbeams struck the back of the shell.

Next I gathered up a fallen fragment of star, brought it to the grave, and set it lightly over the earth. The fragment of star was round. I thought that its edges must have worn smooth during its long fall through the heavens. As I held it close to set it in place, my arms and chest warmed a bit.

I seated myself on a patch of moss. Thinking of the hundred years' wait to follow, I crossed my arms and gazed at the round gravestone. The sun appeared in the east, just as the woman had said. It was a large, red sun. Again as the woman had said, after some time it sank in the west. It was still red as it went down. I counted one.

After a while, the crimson sun pulled itself back up heavily. Then it silently sank back down. I counted two.

As I continued on in this manner, I lost track of the red suns. Count though I might, I couldn't keep up as more and more red suns passed overhead. A hundred years had not yet come. Finally, gazing at the round stone that was now covered in moss, I began to wonder if the woman hadn't deceived me.

At this moment, a green stem emerged from beneath the stone and extended itself obliquely toward me. It lengthened before my eyes and came to a stop just as it neared my chest. To my surprise, the single slender bud with a slightly inclined neck, resting at the tip of the gently swaying stem, opened its luxuriant petals. A pure white lily was before me. Its aroma moved me to my core. Then a heavy dew descended from far above, and the flower trembled under its own weight. I leaned forward and put my lips to the white petals that dripped with cold dew. As I withdrew my face from the lily, I instinctively gazed up, into the distant heights above, and saw a single star twinkle in the morning sky.

It was then that I knew - a hundred years had passed.

## **2nd Night – The Priest and the Samurai**

This is what I saw in my dream.

I withdrew from the high priest's quarters and followed the corridor back to my own chamber, where the paper lantern glowed dimly. When I stirred the wick, a charred clove dropped onto the red-lacquered table like a small flower. At the same time, the room brightened.

The painting on the fusuma was Buson's brush. A black willow was drawn using bold and faint lines for perspective. A fisherman, shrinking from the cold, wore his bamboo hat aslant as he walked along the top of an embankment. In the alcove hung a scroll with Monju Bosatsu, the deity of wisdom, riding over the sea on a cloud. From the shadows, the burnt remains of incense still scented the room. The large temple was

silent, with not a sound of human stirring. As I glanced upward, the flickering circle cast by the lantern onto the black ceiling seemed almost alive.

With one knee drawn up, I peeled back the seating cushion with my left hand and thrust my right underneath. Just as expected, it was there in its place. Reassured, I straightened the cushion and seated myself solidly on top.

“Aren’t you a samurai? If you are a samurai, then there should be no reason that you can’t awaken your mind,” the priest had said. “The years rush on, and still you’re in the dark. How can you truly be samurai?” he taunted me further. “You’re the dregs of humanity,” he told me. “Ah ha! Do I anger you?” he laughed as he spoke. “If my words are unjust, then bring me evidence of your awakening.” With that, he showed his contempt by abruptly turning away.

I’ll show him. There’s a clock in the alcove of the hall adjacent my chamber. Before it strikes the next hour, I’ll awaken my mind. After I do, I’ll return to his quarters this very evening. Then, in exchange for my awakening, I’ll take that priest’s head. Until I succeed, I can’t take his life. I must succeed. I am a samurai.

If I can’t awaken my mind then I’ll die by the sword. A samurai does not live in shame. I’ll die a noble death.

As I strengthened my resolve, my hand dove reflexively back beneath the cushion. It drew forth a dagger, sheathed in red lacquer. Gripping the hilt firmly, I cast away the sheath. The cold blade shone in the darkness. Something dreadful seemed to flow from the grip with a hissing sound. It flowed to the tip, converging into a single point of intense bloodlust. I watched with chagrin as the sharp blade melted down flat like the head of a tack. When only the tapered tip remained, the urge to stab became overwhelming. All the blood of my body flowed to my right wrist, and the hilt felt sticky in my grasp. My lips trembled.

I returned the dagger to its sheath and placed it at my right side. Then I assumed the lotus position. -- Jōshū had preached nothingness. What was nothingness? Damn that Jōshū anyway! I ground my teeth.

I clenched my molars tightly, and hot gasps of breath escaped my nostrils. My temples cramped and ached. I widened my eyes to twice their normal size.

I could see the hanging scroll. I could see the lantern. I could see the tatami mats. I could picture that priest’s bald round head. I could hear his ridicule as he opened his big mouth. Insolent priest! I have to take that head off his shoulders. I must awaken my mind. Nothingness. Nothingness. I chanted at the root of my tongue. I chanted nothingness, but I still smelled that incense. It still aroused my senses.

I tightened my hands into fists and struck my own head as hard as I could. I ground my molars till they grated. Sweat poured from my armpits. My back grew stiff like a rod. My knees suddenly ached. Let my knees snap if they want. But I was in great pain. It was agonizing. Nothingness didn’t arrive. When I thought it was near, pain pushed it away. I became angry. I grew resentful. I felt defeated, an utter failure. I burst into tears. I wanted to hurl my body against a large rock, reduce its bones and flesh to tattered pieces.

Even so, I persevered and sat motionless. I filled my breast with a heartrending bitterness and suffered on. That bitterness raced through my body, seized my muscles, and strained to shove them out through my pores. Every outlet, however, was blocked, and the cruelest of stalemates ensued.

At some point I lost my senses. The lantern and Buson's painting, the tatami mats, the staggered shelves, were there and not there, visible and invisible. Nevertheless, nothingness eluded me. All I was doing was going through the motions. Abruptly, from the neighboring hall, the clock struck its first chime.

I gasped in surprise. My right hand was immediately at my dagger. The clock chimed a second time.

### **3rd Night – Child of Stone**

This is what I saw in my dream.

I'm carrying a six-year-old child on my back. I believe it is my own child. At some point I'm aware that, curiously, the child is blind and its head is shaved. I ask how long it's been blind, and it says for a long time. The voice is clearly that of a child, but the words are those of an adult. It shows me no deference in its speech.

On either side of us are green fields of new rice. Our path is narrow. Occasionally, a snowy heron flashes in the twilight.

"We're in the fields, aren't we," I hear from behind.

"How can you tell?" I turn my head and ask.

"Don't you hear the herons' cries?" comes the answer.

There follow several cries of a heron.

Though it's my own child, I feel afraid. As long as I carry this burden, I imagine myself in peril. I look ahead, wondering if there isn't some place I can abandon it, and I see a deep, dark forest. I decide that that's the place. In the same moment, I hear a quiet laugh from behind.

"Why do you laugh?"

The child doesn't answer, but instead asks, "Father, am I heavy?"

"You're not heavy," I reply.

"I soon will be," it answers.

With my eyes toward the forest, I walk on in silence. My progress is slow, as the path meanders this way and that. After a while I come to a fork. I stop just short of it and rest.

“There should be a stone marker,” the young one says.

There is. A square stone column stands at the fork, waist high and twenty centimeters on a side. Written on its surface is ‘left to Higakubo’ and ‘right to Hottahara.’ It’s dark, but the red lettering is clearly visible. It’s a brilliant red, like the underside of a fire-belly newt.

“We’d best go left,” the young one directs me. As I look to the left, I see the forest, casting a dark shadow over our heads from high above. I hesitate for a moment.

“You needn’t be afraid,” the young one tells me. Seeing no better alternative, I set out toward the forest.

As I follow the single path to the base of the trees, I’m pondering in my mind how a blind one can know so much. “Being blind is the worst of disabilities,” I hear from behind.

“You’ll be fine if I carry you.”

“It’s good of you to carry me, but it’s terrible how folks despise me. How even a parent would despise me.”

I’m feeling ill at ease. I quicken my pace toward the forest, to rid myself of this burden.

“I little further and you’ll know. -- It was a night just like this.” The voice from behind is talking more to itself than to me.

“Know what?” I ask in a voice that betrays my unease.

“But you know already, don’t you?” The child replies as though mocking me. Then I begin to think that I do know something. However, it’s still unclear. I think that it was indeed a night like this. I think that the answer awaits me just ahead. I dread what it might be. I must lose this burden and flee from this place. I quicken my pace still more.

Rain has been falling for a while. The path has grown darker. My mind is frantic now. Still, the small one clings to my back, and the small one knows every detail of my past, present, and future. The truth is exposed as through a shining mirror, with nothing hidden from the light. This is my own child. The child is blind. I’m at my wits’ end.

“We’re here. We’re here. Right at the base of that cedar tree.”

Through the rain, the voice of the young one rings crystal clear. I stop, transfixed. We’re already in the forest. Several meters ahead stands the dark silhouette of a cedar tree, just as the young one said.

“Father, it happened at the base of that tree, didn’t it?”

“Yes, it did.” I answer despite myself.

“It was the 5th year of Bunka, a year of the dragon.”

I remembered now that it was indeed the 5th year of Bunka, and it was indeed a year of the dragon.

“A hundred years have passed since the day you took my life.”

As soon as I hear these words, I’m suddenly aware that I killed a blind man, at the base of this cedar tree, on a dark night like this, in the 5th year of Bunka, a year of the dragon, a hundred years before. In the instant I realize I’ve killed a man, the child on my back is heavy as a stone Jizō.

#### **4th Night – The Old Man with the Snake**

The large room was earthen-floored and refreshingly cool. A table had been set in its middle, with small stools around it. The table top glistened with a shiny black finish. An old man sat by himself at one corner, with a square serving tray before him, drinking saké with a side dish of boiled vegetables.

The old man’s face was bright red from the saké. And the skin of his face was taut and shiny, with not a wrinkle to be found. Only his white beard, which grew with great vigor, betrayed his advanced age. A young child myself, I wondered what this old man’s age might be.

The lady of the place returned from the backyard spout with a bucket of water and was wiping her hands on her apron. “May I ask how old you are, good sir?”

The old man downed a mouthful of vegetables and replied in an easy manner, “Can’t say that I remember.”

The lady thrust her dried hands into her narrow sash and stood for a moment, observing the man’s face in profile. The man took a big gulp of saké from a vessel the size of a rice bowl, then released a long breath through his white beard.

This time the lady asked him, “From where do you hail?”

“From behind the navel.”

The lady asked again, her hands still thrust into her narrow sash, “And where are you headed?”

The old man gulped down more warm saké from his large vessel and, releasing another breath as before, said, “Off yonder.”

“Directly?” asked the lady. As she spoke, his breath flowed through the shōji, passed beneath the willow tree, and continued on directly toward the river bank.

I followed the old man as he stepped outside. He had a small bottle gourd tied to his waist and a square box under his arm that hung from a strap round his shoulder. He wore close-fitting workmens’ trousers and a sleeveless shirt, both of light blue. His sandal socks were yellow, and looked as though made from skin or hide.

The old man proceeded directly to the willow tree, where several children were playing. With a gleam in his eyes, he produced a small blue towel from his waist pocket. He twisted it into a long and slender form, resembling a paper string. Then he placed it on the ground in the middle of the clearing. Next, he scratched a large circle in the dirt around it. Finally, he took out a brass candy seller's whistle from the box that hung from his shoulder.

"Now my towel becomes a snake. Watch closely. Watch closely." He repeated his words.

The children stared intently at the towel. I stared too.

"Watch closely. Watch closely. Are you watching?" As he spoke, the old man blew his whistle and began to step round the circle. My gaze never shifted from the towel. However, the towel remained still.

The old man's whistle continued to sound. He walked his circle again and again. He circled lightly, on the tips of his straw sandals, showing great deference to the towel. The scene was frightful, yet at the same time amusing.

After a while, the old man's whistling abruptly stopped. He opened the lid of the box that hung from his shoulder, picked up the towel by its neck, and flung it in.

"Now it becomes a snake, inside my box. Soon you will see. Soon you will see." So saying, the old man walked directly off. He passed beneath the willow tree and down a narrow path. I wanted to see the snake, so I followed him down the path. As he walked along, he occasionally repeated, "Soon you will see," or, "A snake it will be."

By the time he reached the river bank, his words had formed a song. "Soon you will see, A snake it will be, Have no doubt, The whistle will sound."

There was neither bridge nor boat, so I thought the old man would rest here, and I thought he would show me the snake in his box. Instead, he continued directly into the water with a splash. At first the water reached his knees, then gradually his waist. Even as his chest sank from view, he walked directly on, singing, "Deeper still, The end of the day, Direct is the way." As he sang, his beard, then his face, then his head, then his bandana, disappeared from view.

I thought he might show me his snake when he emerged on the opposite bank. I stood where the reeds rustled, waiting at length, but the old man did not reappear.

### **5th Night – Racing Against the Dawn**

This is what I saw in my dream.

It was an ancient time, perhaps as far back as the age of the gods. I had engaged in battle and had the misfortune of defeat. Captured alive, I was led forth and presented before the victorious general.

The people in those times were tall, and all the men had long beards. They wore leather belts, from which hung rod-like swords. Their bows looked like thick lengths of unworked wisteria vine, neither lacquered nor polished, extremely simple in appearance.

The general's right hand gripped the middle of his bow, one end of which was thrust against the grass. He sat on what looked like a saké jug laid sideways. His face was distinguished by thick eyebrows that joined in the middle above his nose. There were, of course, no razors in existence.

As his captive, I was not offered a chair. I seated myself on the grass, legs crossed. On my feet were straw boots. Straw boots in that age were cut high, coming almost to the knee caps. The straw was left unwoven at the top edges and turned down like tassels. The loose ends rustled as one walked, providing an ornamental effect.

The general scrutinized my face in the firelight and asked if I would live or die. It was a formality of the time to ask this question of any captive. To answer 'live' meant capitulation. To answer 'die' meant refusal to submit. I answered directly that I would die. The general cast aside the bow he'd been resting on the grass and drew out the rod-like sword that hung from his waist. The campfire, buffeted by the wind, blew against the shaft. I opened my hand like a maple leaf, palm out toward the general, and raised it above my eyes. This meant 'wait.' The general snapped his heavy sword back into its scabbard.

Even in that age, there was romance. I said that before dying I would like to look, one last time, on the woman I loved. The general replied that he would wait until the cock crowed at the break of day. I had until then to summon my woman. If she didn't arrive before the cock crowed, I would have to face death without her.

The general sat and gazed into the fire. I sat on the grass, straw boots crossed in front of me, and waited for my woman. The night grew deeper.

From time to time the fire settled. Each time it settled the flames, as though flustered, would surge up toward the general. Under his dark eyebrows, the general's eyes glistened. Someone would arrive to replenish the fire with fresh branches. After a while, the flames would roar in response. It was a courageous sound that pushed back the darkness.

At this same time, my woman was leading her white horse from the oak tree out back where it was tethered. She stroked its mane three times and leapt lightly onto its high back. She rode bareback, with neither saddle nor stirrups. She kicked the horse's flanks with her long white legs, and it took off galloping at full speed. Someone replenished the campfire, and its flames cast a faint light against the distant sky. The horse set its sights on this light as it flew through the darkness. Breath flowed from its nostrils like pillars of fire. Even still, the woman's slender legs spurred it faster, never letting up. The horse ran so quickly that its hooves clacked in the air. The woman's hair steamed out behind her in the darkness. Fast though she rode, our fire remained distant.

As she rode on, the crowing of a cock suddenly sounded from the darkened roadside. She arched backward and eased up on the reins. The horse stopped short, chiseling its front hooves into the hard surface of stone.

The crowing of the cock sounded a second time.

The woman gasped and released the taught reins. The horse buckled both knees, tumbling forward with its rider. Beyond the stone was a deep canyon.

The stone still bears those hoof marks. It was Amanojaku who mimicked the cock's crow. As long as those marks remain in the stone, Amanojaku will remain my sworn enemy.

## **6th Night – Rendering Niō**

I heard that Unkei was carving Niō guardians at the main gate of Gokokuji, so while out on my walk I stopped to see. A large crowd had already gathered before me, with many voicing opinions on the work.

About ten meters in front of the gate stood a large red pine. Its trunk was at an angle, and it screened the tiling of the gate's roof before extending further into the clear sky. The greenery of the pine and the red lacquer of the gate complemented each other magnificently. On top of that, the positioning of the pine was superb. It cut across the left edge of the gate obliquely, neither blocking nor offending one's view. Further up it broadened out and spread above the roof in a manner that seemed ancient, like something from the Kamakura period.

All of us watching, though, were Meiji era folk like myself. Rickshaw drivers were present in great numbers. No doubt they were idling time between fares.

"Immense piece of work," someone remarked.

"Much greater effort than carving a human," another added.

Among all this a man said, "Is it really a Niō? I didn't know they still carved Niō. I guess it is. I thought Niō were only from times long past."

Another man joined in. "He looks so powerful. No other word for it. As far back as you go, there's no one stronger than a Niō. He could even overpower Prince Yamato-Takeru." This man tucked his skirt up in the back and wore no hat. He was clearly a simpleton.

Unkei wielded his mallet and chisel, oblivious to the chatter of the onlookers. He never even glanced back. Perched up high, he toiled away to carve out the Niō's features.

On Unkei's head was a small piece of black-lacquered headgear. He wore a *suō* or some such garment, and its large sleeves were fastened behind his back. His attire, all-in-all, was entirely outdated. He seemed fully incongruous with the throngs that milled about below him. I wondered myself how Unkei could still be living in this day and age. Thinking it was indeed curious, I remained there watching, transfixed.

Unkei, for his part, gave no indication of anything odd or amiss as he carved on with all his might. One young man, who'd been gazing up and observing Unkei's manner, turned to me and began praising him. "Look at that Unkei. To him we don't exist. The only things in his world are himself and the Niō. He's brilliant!"

I found the young man's words interesting. As I turned to look at him he continued. "Look how he handles his mallet and chisel. He's completely at one with his work."

Unkei was now moving sideways, carving out thick eyebrows as he went. Each time he shifted his chisel blade up, down came his mallet to meet it. He worked the hard wood one cut at a time, chips flying to the rhythm of his mallet. Before my eyes, the flared wing of an angry nostril emerged into view. He applied his blade without the slightest hesitation, always knowing exactly where to cut.

"He wields his chisel with ease. Eyebrows, or a nose, take shape to his mind's eye." I was so impressed that I voiced my admiration, to no one in particular.

The young man heard me and replied, "He's not really shaping those features with his chisel. He's using the force of his mallet and chisel to reveal eyebrows, or a nose, that already lie buried in the wood. It's just like excavating a rock from the soil. That's why he never errs."

This was the first time I'd ever heard carving described in this light. It occurred to me that anyone, then, should be able to carve. I suddenly decided to carve my own Niō. I left the scene and hurried home.

I took a hammer and chisel from my tool box and went out back. A recent storm had toppled an oak tree, so a pile of firewood, that I'd had the sawyer cut up for me, was conveniently at hand.

I chose the biggest piece and began carving with great vigor. To my disappointment, I found no Niō inside. In the next piece too, unfortunately, there was no sign of a Niō. Nor in the third piece. I carved through every piece in the pile, but none was hiding a Niō. I realized, finally, that no Niō lies buried in Meiji wood. I also understood now the reason why Unkei was still living.

## **7th Night – Voyage to Somewhere**

I found myself on a large ship.

The ship plied forward relentlessly, day after day and night after night, billowing black smoke as it cut through the waves. The roar was tremendous. Yet I had no idea where this ship was headed. I only knew that the sun would appear like a hot iron from beneath the waves, rise up over the tall mast to hang there a moment, then quickly race ahead to quench itself again in the depths. Each time it did this, the blue waves in the distance would boil up ruddy brown. And the ship, unleashing its tremendous roar, would go chasing after in vain.

I once got hold of a crewman and asked, "Is this ship headed west?"

He looked at me suspiciously for a while. “Why?” he finally asked in return.

“It seems to follow the setting sun.”

The crewman laughed loudly. Then, going on his way, he bantered, “Does the sun setting west end up in the east? Could it be true? Does the sun rising east sleep in the west? Could it be true? My body on the waves, rudder for a pillow, on I drift, on I drift.”

Moving to the bow, I came upon a large group of sailors heaving in a thick halyard.

I felt terribly discouraged. I didn’t know when I’d set foot on land again. I had no way of knowing where the ship was headed. All I knew was that it plied on, billowing black smoke as it cut through the waves. The blue waves seemed to stretch forth forever. Sometimes they were tinged with purple. The ship itself was encased in a pure white foam that spouted in its wake. I felt terribly discouraged. I wondered if I should rather throw myself overboard and perish.

There were many fellow passengers. Most seemed to be Westerners, but they had all types of faces. Once, on an overcast day with rough seas, a woman leaned on the railing and wept inconsolably. Her handkerchief, which she used to dry her eyes, was white. She wore a dress of printed cotton. When I saw her, I realized I was not the only one with sorrows.

One evening I went up on deck and was gazing alone at the stars. A Western man approached and asked if I knew anything of astronomy. I was thinking to escape my emptiness by ending it all. Astronomy was of no interest whatsoever. I didn’t answer. He proceeded anyway to tell me about the seven stars at the crown of Taurus that make up the Big Dipper. Then he said that the stars and the sea were all works of God. Finally, he asked if I believed in God. I looked to the sky and didn’t answer.

On one occasion I entered a salon. A young woman in a stylish dress had her back to me and was playing the piano. A tall and handsome man stood next to her and sang. His mouth looked incredibly large. The two of them, however, were oblivious to anything but themselves. They seemed unaware, even, that they were on a ship.

My feeling of emptiness grew greater with each passing day. Finally, I decided to end it all. One evening, in an hour when none were about, I mustered my courage and jumped. However, in that instant when my feet left the deck, when my connection with the ship was severed, life felt suddenly precious. But it was too late. Like it or not, I was falling toward the sea. It was a tall ship, and though no longer on board, my feet had not hit the water. However, there was nothing to grab hold of, so the water was coming. Drawing up my legs was of no avail. The color of the water was black.

The ship billowed its black smoke, as always, and steamed on. I knew with certainty now, for the first time, that it’s best to stay on board, even when one can’t know where the ship is going. Having attained this certainty, of no use to me now, I dropped silently, with infinite fear and regret, toward the dark waves.

## 8th Night – The Barber Shop

As I stepped across the threshold of the barber shop, a group of men, all wearing white, called out to welcome me.

I stood in the middle of the floor and surveyed the room. It was square, with windows in two walls and mirrors hung on the others. I counted six mirrors in total.

I seated myself before one of the mirrors. The chair wheezed in response to my weight. It was a chair well crafted for comfort. I saw my own face reflected finely in the mirror. Behind my face was the reflection of a window. Also visible, at an angle, was the latticework that partitioned off the counting room. There was no one behind the lattice. The passersby outside the window were clearly visible from the waist up.

Shōtarō passed by with a woman. Shōtarō wore a Panama hat that he must have procured at some point. And since when did he have a woman? I didn't know. They seemed quite satisfied with each other. I tried to get a better look at the woman, but they passed out of view.

The tofu vendor went by, blowing his bugle. With the bugle pressed to his lips, it looked like his cheeks were swollen from bee stings. They still looked swollen as he moved out of sight. I was concerned for him, imagining that his cheeks might look bee stung forever.

A geisha appeared. She had not yet made herself up. With a loose Shimada knot, her hair looked disheveled. She seemed only half awake. The color of her skin was wretchedly poor. She bowed and said something by way of greeting, but the other party was not visible in the mirror.

A large man in white appeared behind me with shears and a comb. He gave me a close look. I twisted my thin mustache and asked if anything could be done with it. The man didn't answer, but tapped my head lightly with the amber comb that he held in his hand.

“How about my hair then, can you do something with it?” I asked him.

The man in white didn't answer but began to work his shears with a snipping sound.

I continued my careful watch, intent on observing everything that transpired in the mirror. However, as each snip of the shears brought black hair flying, I finally yielded and closed my eyes. The man in white asked me, “Did the good master see the goldfish seller out front?”

I told him I hadn't. The man in white said nothing further, but worked his shears industriously.

Someone yelled, “Look out!” in a loud voice. I opened my eyes and saw, beneath the sleeve of the man in white, a bicycle wheel. I saw the shafts of a rickshaw. Then the man in white clamped my head in both hands and tilted it sideways. The bicycle and the rickshaw were no longer visible. The snipping of the shears continued.

Finally, the man in white came to my side and began trimming around my ear. Hair no longer assaulted my eyes, so I could safely keep them open. A voice sang out with, “Awa mochi ya, mochi ya-a, mochi ya.” A small mallet struck its mortar in purposeful rhythm as he pounded mochi. I hadn’t seen an awa mochi vendor since my childhood. I longed to catch a glimpse, but the mochi vendor didn’t appear in the mirror. Only the sound of his mallet reached me.

I was trying my utmost to see past the edge of the mirror. Suddenly, I noticed a woman seated behind the counting room lattice. She was a heavy-set woman, with a dark complexion and thick eyebrows. Her hair was fastened behind in the Edo style, and she wore a simple lined kimono with black satin neckpiece. One knee was drawn up, and she was counting bank notes. They looked like ten-yen notes. Her eyes were turned down and her thin lips were pursed as she counted the notes intently and with great speed. No matter how many she counted, it seemed there were always more. The pile on her lap couldn’t be more than a hundred, but count as she would, a hundred remained.

I was gazing vacantly at the woman’s face and the ten-yen notes. Then the man in white spoke loudly at my side. “I’ll wash your hair now.” Taking the opportunity, I rose from the chair and immediately turned toward the counting room lattice. There was nothing behind it, neither woman nor bank notes.

I settled my bill and stepped out front. To the left of the entrance were five oval basins laid out in a row. In them were numerous goldfish of all types. Some were red and some were mottled. Some were slender and some were plump. Behind the basins was the goldfish seller. He sat motionless, chin in his hands, his gaze fixed on the fish before him. He paid no heed to the boisterous motions of the street. I stood for a while and watched the goldfish seller. All the while I watched him, however, he didn’t stir.

### **9th Night – A Mother’s Story**

Somehow, the world had become unsettled. The outbreak of war seemed imminent. It was as though an unbridled horse, having fled a burning barn, were rampaging endlessly round the grounds, while footmen gave chase in boisterous confusion. Inside the house, though, was stillness and quiet.

In the house were a young mother and her two-year-old child. The father had gone away. The father had gone in the middle of a moonless night. Seated on the bedding, he’d put on his straw sandals and tied a black bandana about his head. Then he’d left out the side door. As he’d departed, a wedge of light from the paper lantern held by the mother had pierced the darkness, illuminating an old cypress that grew inside the hedge.

The father had not since returned. Every day, the mother would ask her young child, “Where is your father?” The child said nothing. After a while, though, the child learned to say, “Away.” When she asked, “When will your father be home?” the child answered, “Away,” and smiled. The mother smiled back. Then she would always say, “Father will be home soon.” The child, however, only remembered, “Soon.” Sometimes, when she asked, “Where is your father?” the child replied, “Soon.”

At dusk, when the town is quiet, the mother re-tightens the sash of her kimono and slips a dagger, sheathed in shark skin, into its folds. Then she secures the child to her back with a narrow strap of cloth and leaves quietly out the side door. She always wears her sandals. The child, listening to the sound of her sandals, sometimes falls asleep on the mother's back.

Along the earthen walls of the residential district, a gentle slope descends toward the west. At the bottom of the slope is a large ginkgo tree. From the ginkgo tree, turning to the right, a stone torii gate stands in the distance. The path to the gate leads through rice fields on one side and bamboo grass on the other. Within the gate is a thick grove of cedar. Paving stones extend from the gate, thirty meters or so, to the steps of an old shrine. At the bottom of the steps, the cord of a large bell hangs over a weathered gray offertory box. In daylight, one can read 'Hachimangū' on a plaque by the bell. Of particular interest is the character for 'Hachi,' which is drawn in a stylized form with two doves face to face. There are various other plaques as well. Many include a gold target, pierced by a clansman's arrow, along with the name of the marksman. Others pay tribute to the sword.

As she enters through the torii gate, an owl always hoots from the top of a cedar. Her worn sandals slap against the stones. The sound of the sandals ends at the shrine, where she rings the bell and kneels down, clapping her hands together in prayer. At this point, the owl on most nights falls silent. The mother prays with all her heart for the safety of her husband. Her husband is a samurai, and she believes passionately that Hachiman, the god of archery and war, must certainly be moved by her worthy petition.

The child often wakes at the sounding of the bell, sees the surrounding darkness, and starts to cry. The mother, who is whispering a prayer, sways her back gently to pacify the child. Sometimes she succeeds, and the crying stops. Sometimes the crying only intensifies. In either case, the mother continues her prayer.

After praying for her husband's welfare, the mother loosens the narrow strap and lets the child slip from her back. As the child slips down, she pulls it around to her front and embraces it with both arms. She climbs the steps to the shrine, where she brushes her own cheek against the child's and says, "You're a good child. Wait here for a while." She unwinds the strap, ties one end to the child, and fastens the other end to the balustrade of the shrine. Then she descends the steps to pace a hundred times over the paving stones, offering up a prayer with each round.

The child, fastened to the shrine, crawls about the wide veranda in darkness, as far as the strap allows. These are the times when the mother's task is easiest. If the child cries, though, she feels anxious. She quickens her gait until she's short of breath. If she has to, she breaks off her pacing and ascends the steps to comfort the child. Then she begins anew her hundred rounds.

The father, for whom the mother prays anxiously through many such sleepless nights, has died long ago at the hand of a rōnin.

This sorrowful tale was told to me in a dream by my mother.

## 10th Night – The Demise of Shōtarō

Ken-san came to tell me that Shōtarō, on the evening of the seventh day since the woman lured him away, had suddenly come back. Since returning, he'd immediately fallen ill with a fever and taken to his bed.

Shōtarō was the best looking man about town, and an exceedingly good and honest fellow. However, he did have a certain pet pastime. In the evenings, he would don his Panama hat and sit in the shopfront of the fruit market, gazing at the female passersby and admiring their faces with great pleasure. Beyond this, he had no idiosyncrasies worthy of mention.

When the street was empty of women, he would turn his attention to the fruit. There were various kinds. Peaches, apples, loquats, and bananas were artfully arranged into gift baskets and set out in two rows, ready for immediate purchase. Shōtarō would survey the baskets and praise their appearance. If he ever went into business himself, he said, then it would be as a fruit seller. Despite these words, he seemed content to while away the hours in his Panama hat.

Sometimes, impressed with the superb color of a summer mandarin, he'd voice his approval. However, he'd never yet spent money for a single piece of fruit. And he would never, of course, indulge without paying. He simply admired the colors.

One evening, a woman appeared at the shopfront. She was dressed exquisitely, apparently a person of great import. Shōtarō was quite taken with her colorful kimono. He also found her facial features much to his liking. He removed his prized Panama hat and greeted her politely. She pointed to the largest basket and said she would take it. Shōtarō assisted immediately, picking it up and passing it to her. She struggled to handle it, remarking how heavy it was.

In addition to being a man of leisure, Shōtarō was exceedingly good natured. He offered to carry the basket to the woman's home, and they set out from the market together. No trace of him had been seen since.

Not even Shōtarō would behave so recklessly. His friends and relatives were up in arms, insisting that something was amiss. Then, on the evening of the seventh day of his absence, he suddenly reappeared. A great many visitors called and asked where he'd been. Shōtarō told them he'd taken a train to the mountains.

At any rate, it must have been a long train ride. According to Shōtarō, they disembarked directly onto an open prairie. It was a vast prairie, and all he could see in any direction was green grass. He was walking through the grass with the woman, when suddenly before them was a sheer precipice. The woman asked politely that he jump from its edge. Peering down, he could see the sheer wall, but he couldn't see the bottom. Shōtarō removed his Panama hat and declined in no uncertain terms. The woman told him that if he weren't bold enough to jump then he would be licked by a pig. She asked if this was his preference. The two things Shōtarō hated most were the recitalist Kumoemon and pigs. However, not ready to lose his life on principle, he stood his ground and refrained from jumping. A grunting pig immediately approached. Shōtarō carried a slender walking stick, fashioned from palm wood. Having no other recourse, he struck the pig's snout with his stick. The pig was easily toppled and went squealing over the edge. Just as he breathed a sigh of relief, another pig came to rub him with its big snout. Shōtarō was forced to raise his stick again. He dispatched

this second pig too, and it tumbled, head over hooves, into the void. Then another appeared. This time Shōtarō, with a sense of misgiving, lifted his gaze. From far in the distance, where the green prairie faded from view, came countless thousands of pigs. With snorts and grunts they formed a herd, trotting directly toward the precipice, toward the very spot on which he stood. Shōtarō was shaken to the core. However, there was nothing for it but to act. He dispatched the approaching pigs, one by one, with a light touch of his palm wood stick to their snouts. Curiously, even the slightest tap of stick to snout sent a pig hurtling off the edge. He looked down and saw a procession of upside down pigs descending into the depths. When he saw the sheer number, he was appalled at his own doings. However, the pigs kept coming. Like a dark cloud on legs, obliterating the green prairie, they trotted forth endlessly.

Shōtarō, with a valiance fueled by desperation, beat back their snouts for seven whole days and six whole nights. Finally, however, his energy ran out, his hands fell limp, and he was licked by a pig. He collapsed at the edge of the precipice.

Having conveyed Shōtarō's story thus far, Ken-san added an admonishment, warning against excessive woman watching. I fully agreed. He then added, however, that he hoped to have Shōtarō's Panama hat for his own.

There's little chance of Shōtarō's pulling through. I expect the hat will be Ken-san's.