

They spoke of their love for each other, their few meetings, their plans for the future. Much of what they said was guarded and brief, and much of it I did not understand then. I learned that Lady Maruyama was on her way to the capital to see her daughter, and that she feared Iida would again insist on marriage. His own wife was unwell and not expected to live. The only son she had borne him, also sickly, was a disappointment to him.

'You will marry no one but me,' he whispered, and she replied, 'It is my only desire. You know it.' He then swore to her he would never take a wife, nor lie with any woman unless it were she, and he spoke of some strategy he had, but did not spell it out. I heard my own name and conceived that it involved me in some way. I realized there was a long-existing enmity between him and Iida that went all the way back to the battle of Yaegahara.

'We will die on the same day,' he said. 'I cannot live in a world that does not include you.'

Then the whispering turned to other sounds, those of passion between a man and a woman. I put my fingers in my ears. I knew about desire, had satisfied my own with the other boys of my village, or with girls in the brothel, but I knew nothing of love. Whatever I heard, I vowed to myself I would never speak of it. I would keep these secrets as close as the Hidden keep theirs. I was thankful I had no voice.

I did not see the lady again. We left early the next morning, an hour or so after sunrise. It was already warm; monks were sprinkling water in the temple cloisters and the air smelt of dust. The maids at the inn had brought us tea, rice, and soup before we left, one of them stifling a yawn as she set the dishes before me, and then apolo-

gizing to me and laughing. It was the girl who had patted me on the arm the day before, and when we left she came out to cry, 'Good luck, little lord! Good journey! Don't forget us here!'

I wished I was staying another night. The lord laughed at it, teasing me and saying he would have to protect me from the girls in Hagi. He could hardly have slept the previous night, yet his high spirits were still evident. He strode along the highway with more energy than usual. I thought we would take the post road to Yamagata, but instead we went through the town, following a river smaller than the wide one that flowed alongside the main road. We crossed it where it ran fast and narrow between boulders, and headed once more up the side of a mountain.

We had brought food with us from the inn for the day's walk, for once we were beyond the small villages along the river we saw no one. It was a narrow, lonely path, and a steep climb. When we reached the top we stopped and ate. It was late afternoon, and the sun sent slanting shadows across the plain below us. Beyond it, towards the east, lay range after range of mountains turning indigo and steel grey.

'That is where the capital is,' Lord Otori said, following my gaze.

I thought he meant Inuyama, and was puzzled.

He saw it and went on, 'No, the real capital, of the whole country – where the Emperor lives. Way beyond the farthest mountain range. Inuyama lies to the south-east.' He pointed back in the direction we had come. 'It's because we are so far from the capital and the Emperor is so weak, that war lords like Iida can do as they please.' His mood was turning sombre again. 'And below us is the