

She poured the hot water, and a bittersweet smell wafted up from the bowl. 'Sit up, Takeo,' she said.

She was whisking the tea into a green foam. She passed the bowl to Lord Otori. He took it in both hands, turned it three times, drank from it, wiped the lip with his thumb, and handed it with a bow back to her. She filled it again and passed it to me. I carefully did everything the lord had done, lifted it to my lips, and drank the frothy liquid. Its taste was bitter, but it was clearing to the head. It steadied me a little. We never had anything like this in Mino: our tea was made from twigs and mountain herbs.

I wiped the place I had drunk from and handed it back to Lady Maruyama, bowing clumsily. I was afraid Lord Otori would notice and be ashamed of me, but when I glanced at him his eyes were fixed on the lady.

She then drank herself. The three of us sat in silence. There was a feeling in the room of something sacred, as though we had just taken part in the ritual meal of the Hidden. A wave of longing swept over me for my home, my family, my old life, but although my eyes grew hot I did not allow myself to weep. I would learn to endure.

On my palm I could still feel the trace of Lady Maruyama's fingers.

The inn was far larger and more luxurious than any of the other places we had stayed during our swift journey through the mountains, and the food we ate that night was unlike anything I had ever tasted. We had eel in a spicy sauce, and sweet fish from the local streams, many servings of rice, whiter than anything in Mino, where if we ate rice three times a year we were lucky. I drank rice wine for the first time. Lord Otori was in high spirits – 'floating' as my mother used to say – his silence and grief

dispelled, and the wine worked its cheerful magic on me too.

When we had finished eating he told me to go to bed; he was going to walk outside a while to clear his head. The maids came and prepared the room. I lay down and listened to the sounds of the night. The eel, or the wine, had made me restless and I could hear too much. Every distant noise made me start awake. I could hear the dogs of the town bark from time to time, one starting, the others joining in. After a while I felt I could recognize each one's distinctive voice. I thought about dogs, how they sleep with their ears twitching and how only some noises disturb them. I would have to learn to be like them or I would never sleep again.

When I heard the temple bells toll at midnight, I got up and went to the privy. The sound of my own piss was like a waterfall. I poured water over my hands from the cistern in the courtyard and stood for a moment, listening.

It was a still, mild night, coming up to the full moon of the eighth month. The inn was silent: everyone was in bed and asleep. Frogs were croaking from the river and the rice fields, and once or twice I heard an owl hoot. As I stepped quietly on to the veranda I heard Lord Otori's voice. For a moment I thought he must have returned to the room and was speaking to me, but a woman's voice answered him. It was Lady Maruyama.

I knew I should not listen. It was a whispered conversation that no one could hear but me. I went into the room, slid the door shut, and lay down on the mattress, willing myself to fall asleep. But my ears had a longing for sound that I could not deny, and every word dropped clearly into them.