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MY MOTHER used to threaten to tear me into eight pieces if I knocked over the water bucket, or pretended not to hear her calling me to come home as the dusk thickened and the cicadas' shrilling increased. I would hear her voice, rough and fierce, echoing through the lonely valley. 'Where's that wretched boy? I'll tear him apart when he gets back.'

But when I did get back, muddy from sliding down the hillside, bruised from fighting, once bleeding great spouts of blood from a stone wound to the head (I still have the scar, like a silvered thumbnail), there would be the fire, and the smell of soup, and my mother's arms not tearing me apart but trying to hold me, clean my face, or straighten my hair, while I twisted like a lizard to get away from her. She was strong from endless hard work, and not old: she'd given birth to me before she was seventeen, and when she held me I could see we had the same skin, although in other ways we were not much alike, she having broad, placid features, while mine, I'd been told (for we had no mirrors in the remote mountain village of Mino), were finer, like a hawk's. The wrestling usually ended with her winning, her prize being the hug I could not escape from. And her voice would whisper in my ears the words of blessing of the Hidden, while my