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Round-trip over the Ocean

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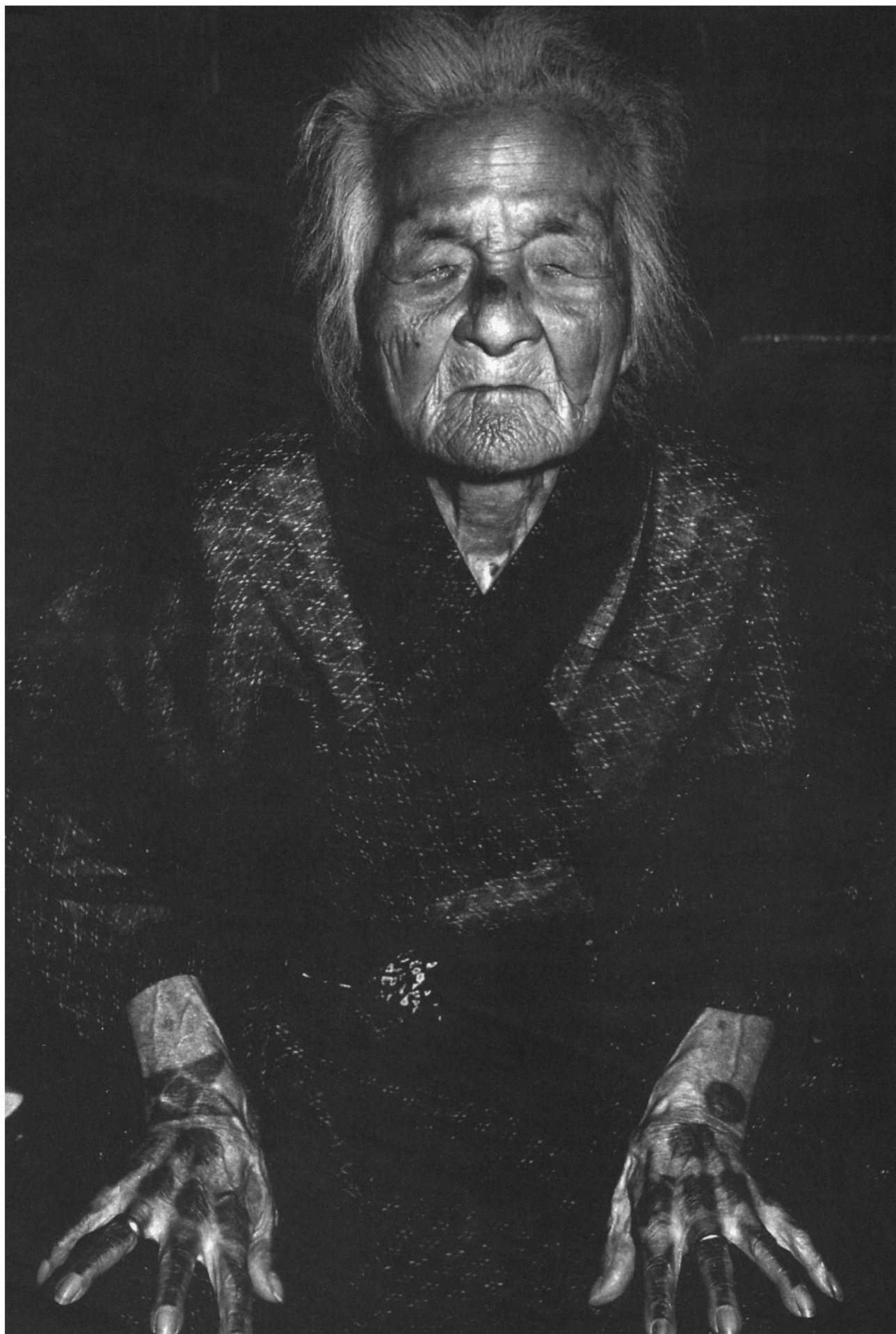
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Round-trip over the Ocean

A commotion of light stirred at their backs, as if someone were creeping across the water toward them. She spun around in alarm. Suspended over the misty cape of T. Island, the setting sun glowed like a red ball of fire. Fragments of broken light flew at her eyes and scattered in all directions. As she blinked rapidly, a blanket of vermillion unfurled toward them and converged with the color of the sea.

From a distance, the surface of the ocean appeared to be a gently undulating blue carpet; viewed up close from the boat, it was a heaving expanse of high crests. Crashing through towering waves one after another, the boat struggled through the heavy seas.

It was 6:20 in the afternoon. The small fishing boat, midway between two islands—one receding behind them, one drawing closer—continued to plunge ahead across the ocean. An hour and ten minutes had passed since the roofless boat, under the gaze of the heavens, had departed from the northern port of T. Island with its three passengers: Akiko; Kinzō, who was ill; and Old Man Kāre, the helmsman. They had timed their departure so they wouldn't be seen leaving T. Island and so they could avoid the intense glare of the sun. More important, they wanted to arrive at O. Island under the cover of falling darkness.

The stench of fuel oil and leftover fish turned Akiko's stomach, and the spray of seawater made her feel clammy. The vibration of the boat and the endless drone of the motor made her nauseated. Just then, Kinzō began shaking violently. Since departing, he had stared at the bottom of the boat and sat rigidly, as if nailed to his seat. But with every jolt or shimmy of the boat, he glanced over at Akiko with inflamed eyes. His contorted face was splotched black and blue. Akiko unzipped her bag, pulled out a bath towel, and draped it over his shoulders.

"Are you in pain, Dad?" Fighting back the nausea that brought tears to her eyes, Akiko reached out to rub Kinzō's back. But he brushed her hand away and resumed staring at the bottom of the boat. She took a deep breath and turned her gaze to where he was looking. Sitting diagonally from each other, they awkwardly avoided eye contact.

"Kinzō, hang in there a bit longer," said Old Man Kāre, gripping the helm at the rear of the boat. "Look! There's Nishino Beach!"

*Higa Yasuo:
People of
Compassion*

*Old woman
showing
hajichi
marks*

The place the old man motioned towards with his chin looked like a crushed, cream-colored jug lying on its side. It was the sandy beach on O. Island's northern coast. That was where the boat was headed.

Ten days earlier, Kinzō had proposed that, as the last remaining child of his family, he himself would retrieve his deceased mother's mortuary tablet, which had been left behind in the abandoned house, cared for by a stranger. It had remained there without any grieving family member for seventeen years. His words had sounded like a pronouncement rather than a proposal.

His wife had glared at him at first. "In your condition? You're being unreasonable." But in the end, she was no match for the headstrong invalid who ignored all objections to his plan for a twenty-four-hour round-trip between the islands.

"Once you get an idea, you're pigheaded to the end. You've got your mother's stubbornness." Akiko's mother frowned and heaved a sigh. Then she turned to Akiko as if pleading for help and said, "Well, perhaps if you'd go with him..."

It had been two and a half years since Akiko had quit the part-time job at the post office she'd taken to keep busy and earn some spending money. Now, confined to a daily schedule consisting entirely of taking care of Kinzō and doing a few odd chores, Akiko couldn't think of any reason for refusing her mother's request. Kinzō's taciturn nature had gotten worse over the past several years, and his stubbornness—which could not be blamed simply on his invalid condition—was oppressive to everyone around him.

Long ago, after the family's affairs had been settled, Kinzō had resolved never to set eyes on anyone from O. Island again. That was why he had come up with the idea of going to Old Man Kāre—who had relocated from O. Island to T. Island and now fished occasionally—to charter his boat for a quick trip to the island and back. Kinzō wanted at all costs to avoid the regular boat service and the risk of encountering someone from O. Island. The plan—conceived by an ailing man who had been cut off from society for over ten years—seemed ridiculous. What had persuaded Akiko to go was her growing suspicion that her father harbored a secret obsession that somehow concerned her, though she was doing nothing more than spending her days in idleness.

Kinzō had hardly said a word since they had cast off—as if he feared that opening his mouth even a crack would allow his intense pent-up pain to spew out.

The ocean spray blew higher as the wind rose and turned against them.

"Old Man Kāre, you said we were almost there. How much farther until we get to Nishino Beach? We've been able to see it for a while now."

Akiko glanced back at Old Man Kāre. He was gaunt, but also tanned and sturdy. Perhaps out of habit, the old man never sat down. He stood hunched over the helm.

"Oh, I don't know. We should be there in twenty, thirty minutes."

He again motioned with his chin towards Nishino Beach. His face was tinged red from the reflection of the sun. For some time now, he had been gazing at a single point on O. Island, which seemed to be neither getting closer nor receding into the distance. It occurred to Akiko that his blank face had remained emotionless and unchanging all this time. With this thought, a nostalgic image swelled up in her breast like the sea foam surging around the boat.

She was suddenly overcome with emotion. In her mind, the distance they were now crossing between O. Island and T. Island was like the distance across the U. River, which flowed in a northeasterly direction down the center of O. Island, separating the old village from the new one.

Many years ago, Old Man Kāre had ferried villagers across the U. River. Even then, he had stood hunched over the helm. Though short, he had long legs and a shriveled upper body, giving him the appearance of a hunchback. He had lived in a hut on the bank of the river and had avoided intimate contact with people on both sides, preferring to spend his days simply watching the current. No one knows how it began, but the islanders fell into the habit of calling him Old Man Kāre, playing on the local word for river, *kāra*.

Each year, when the scorching subtropical heat began to abate, the old village on one side of the river held a festival to mark the change of the season. Austere on the first day and lively on the second, the festival featured all sorts of events. As a child from the new village, where traditional festivals were rarely held, Akiko would cross the river with her friends to see the boat races that marked the festival's climax. Every year during the celebrations, the cheerful sounds of the old village would drift across the river into the silent monotony of the newer community of migrants.

"Old Man Kāre! Get the ferry moving!" the children would call out in front of his hut. Silently, a sluggish, hunchbacked man would appear. It shouldn't have taken ten minutes to cross to the opposite bank, but the boat meandered with the river's current and seemed to drift about for ages. Each time the old man raised his long bamboo pole from the riverbed, it traced a semi-circle through the air, raining beads of spray on his passengers' heads. When the bottom of the boat scraped against the shallows upon arrival, Old Man Kāre gave no signal that they had reached the opposite shore. Holding the bamboo pole, he waited patiently until the clamorous children disembarked, their skirts and trousers pulled up and their shoes tucked under their arms.

"Old Man Kāre, see you on the way home!"

Akiko and her companions were always the first to arrive. Without waiting for the later groups, they dashed off along the road that led to the old village. Old Man Kāre would slowly maneuver the boat around and then head back. Glancing behind her as she ran, Akiko could make out the figure of a

hunchbacked man, his shadow trailing on the river's surface behind the swaying boat.

According to rumors, Old Man Kāre's hunchback was not congenital; it was due to his having worked for such a long time in the coal mines, starting when he was very young.

The boat suddenly made a wide turn. While Akiko's gaze had been directed inward, the ocean had grown dark. Nishino Beach now loomed before them. The helmsman steered away from the beach and anchored in the shadow of a towering rock that jutted out towards the offing.

"Can you go ashore first to make sure there's no one near the beach?" asked Kinzō. His voice sounded as tense as ever. He was still determined to avoid being seen by any of the islanders. Old Man Kāre nodded, turned off the motor, and secured the anchor line. Then he climbed out of the boat. Chest deep in the water, he waded along the rock face to the beach, then plunged into the thick shrubbery. The retreating silhouette of the old man's short, crooked body was sucked into the gloom.

The boat bobbed up and down beneath the rock. The dazzling sun had vanished. The sunset had faded, and the island seemed as insubstantial as a blurry black-and-white movie. Their view blocked by the rock, the only thing Akiko and Kinzō could be sure of was the cramped space inside the boat, where they sat facing each other. Even that space swayed insecurely. The expanse of surrounding water, immersed in the falling darkness, had gathered into a black mass.

Akiko slowly looked up and peered into the dark. She leaned forward, trying to get a glimpse of the old village—so close and yet out of reach.

Just beyond the thicket into which Old Man Kāre had disappeared, several hundred meters down the meandering road through the bush, stood the house where Akiko's family had once lived. Akiko's grandmother had reluctantly agreed to abandon the house and move with her family to town on the main island. But after leaving O. Island she had said, "I just can't survive in this place," and had returned to the house after only a month. She lived by herself and, less than two years later, died of complications resulting from a common cold.

The family had hastened back to the island and, in a daze, had gathered around the grandmother's discolored corpse. By then, nearly all of the postmortem arrangements, apart from the burial, had been taken care of by the villagers. This was partly done out of spite: those who had remained on the island wanted to show their disapproval of the family that had left. Reluctant to interfere with the burial rituals, the family could only stand aside. The death of the grandmother, who had boasted of her excellent health at age sixty-six, had taken everyone completely by surprise. At the funeral service, the grandmother seemed to be merely pretending to be

dead in order to chastise her children and grandchildren for abandoning the island and her. The family members had hung their heads in embarrassment. Shortly after the first anniversary of her death, Kinzō had been stricken by a strange collagen disease with no known cure.

The growing darkness made Akiko and Kinzō increasingly anxious. Akiko felt that if she didn't speak to her father, or do something, they would both vanish into the blackness. She reached out to adjust the towel on his shoulders. The boat lurched to one side and Akiko feared they might capsize. She grabbed the side of the boat to steady herself, and bracing her feet on the bottom of the boat, she clutched Kinzō's arm. Pitched towards Kinzō, she lost her balance, then fell back against the opposite railing. The boat lurched back to its original position.

"Akiko!" On his hands and knees, Kinzō called out, moaning in pain.

Akiko tightened her grip. "What? What should I do?" she asked.

Instead of answering, Kinzō pried her hand from his arm. The weak, insubstantial feel of the soft flesh of Kinzō's hand, like that of a woman's, lingered in Akiko's mind. Kinzō gave her a look of stern rejection, as if to say he had never intended to call out to her.

"Old Man Kāre's taking a long time," he said, biting down on his frowning lip. "Maybe he ran into someone."

Her father was so stubborn! There was no approaching him. Realizing she was reacting to him the same way her mother always had, Akiko heaved a sigh. But a moment later, she recognized that she had inherited part of her father's nature, and she smiled to herself at the irony.

Akiko was in her late twenties and had no particular accomplishments to speak of. Whenever she tried to act decisively in a group, she always felt uneasy and out of place. As she struggled to avoid conflict with other people, she became obsessed by a secret desire to be alone and to avoid all contact. Akiko's behavior was viewed by her parents as somehow entangled with the dark circumstances of the family's relocation and the last wishes of her grandmother.

Akiko raised her head and turned in the dark toward Kinzō, who was muttering.

"Listen, Dad," Akiko ventured, knowing full well that her words would be repulsed. "When we get to the village, shouldn't we at least tell old Hatsu Nakamori that we've come? No matter how hard we try to keep it a secret, word will eventually get out that we were on the island."

As Akiko had expected, Kinzō gave her a menacing look.

Paying no heed, Akiko continued. "She cared for Grandma to the end. Since we're removing Grandma's mortuary tablet, I don't think it's very polite to not even say hello. Especially since this is our first visit in over fifteen years."

Infuriated, Kinzō flung away the towel draped over his shoulders. Akiko

stammered, then fell silent. At wits' end, she silently retrieved the towel from where it had snagged on the boat's railing.

Before they had started out, Akiko's mother had in fact contacted Hatsu Nakamori. Akiko's mother had been on friendly terms with her since the time the family had lived on the island. Hatsu had agreed to look after Akiko's grandmother after the stubborn woman abruptly returned to the island and began living on her own. To somehow bring Kinzō in contact with Hatsu during the journey was one of the duties Akiko's mother had entrusted to Akiko. Kinzō had not been to the island since the first anniversary of his mother's death; neither had anyone else in the family, including Akiko's two married, older sisters. Ever since Kinzō had fallen ill, the family had had little choice but to honor the strictures he had imposed on himself in an apparent attempt to deal with his feelings of guilt.

Also standing in the way of this journey's mission was Akiko's grandmother's dying wish: that her remains, or mortuary tablet, never be removed from the island. Out of a desire to protect the death-bed wish that had been entrusted to her, Hatsu had pledged that "promises made to the dead must be kept no matter what, or the living can never rest easy." For seventeen years, Hatsu had overseen the annual memorial services for Akiko's grandmother. Now, she must be well over seventy years old.

The grandmother's dying wish made living in town on the main island extremely uncomfortable for them. As long as they avoided returning to the old island, there seemed to be no escaping their situation and shame. Moving back, however, was out of the question, as they had no way to make a living there. Since they had no choice but to continue living where they were, they badly needed to come up with some kind of solution—even after all the time that had passed.

"If I say I'm not seeing anyone from the island, I'm not seeing anyone from the island!" spit out Kinzō, as if to emphasize the determination he continued to express from his sickbed. The words seemed to be a spell he cast on himself to help him persevere.

Old Man Kāre still had not returned, and Akiko began to worry. It wasn't just her shaky emotional state that made his delay so distressing: it was already past eight o'clock, and there was not a glimmer of light in the cloudy September sky. The place where they were anchored was now in complete darkness.

Though they had left town just that morning, Akiko, unaccustomed to being away from home, felt that several days had passed and that she and Kinzō had been bobbing up and down on the water for ages. Would they ever be able to set foot on the island? Or would they just drift out to sea? As long as Kinzō insisted on avoiding the villagers, and as long as Old Man Kāre remained gone, the young woman and the invalid—both ignorant of how to operate a boat—could do nothing but stay put, swaying side to side on the pitch-dark sea. Akiko began to feel disgusted at herself for having so

imprudently and casually agreed to Kinzō's plan. Nevertheless, since she was already here and O. Island lay before them, there was no turning back.

The boat was shaking. She looked over at Kinzō and noticed that he was shuddering; a hissing came from his clenched teeth.

"Dad, are you cold?"

Kinzō shook his head. But suddenly his trembling grew worse and he fell down, writhing. He began striking the bottom of the boat with his fists. A chill ran down Akiko's spine. As she had feared, he was having a seizure.

Kinzō had undertaken the voyage without permission from his doctor. He brought with him an entire week's supply of pills, a dose of which he'd been instructed to take every eight hours. Out of stubbornness, Kinzō took the pills every six hours. What's more, he took with each dose one more pill than was prescribed. His seizures were a withdrawal symptom that occurred when the effect of the steroid medication—taken to suppress the pain and retard the progression of the incurable disease—wore off. He had taken a dose three hours earlier, in the harbor village of T. Island just as they were casting off, so the medication should not yet have worn off. However, for Kinzō—who had spent the last ten years coping with his illness at home or staying at the hospital—the stress of an airplane flight, a taxi ride, and then a voyage on a small fishing boat to the island must have been an intense strain. Although it was early for another dose, Akiko took out Kinzō's medicine. She pressed three Prednisone pills into his trembling hand, and he gulped them down without water. As he continued to writhe in agony from the convulsions, the boat tilted so far over that the sides nearly slipped below the surface of the water.

Weeks and months had passed when Kinzō had been assailed day and night with nearly every known symptom: splotches and swelling all over his body that, like burns, appeared suddenly but healed gradually; headaches and shivers that made him writhe on the floor; vomiting; ringing in the ears; fever; and numbness. Over the past year, the symptoms had abated to the extent that he was able to consider making this trip to the island.

Once a seizure had begun, Kinzō had no choice but to endure it until the medicine started to take effect. Worried about the tilting of the boat, Akiko occasionally remembered to rub Kinzō's back.

Just then she heard something swooshing in the water. Startled, she sat up and saw the black shadow of Old Man Kāre, his arms flapping like wings as he waded towards them through the dark shallows.

"Oh! Old Man Kāre's back!" Overcome with relief, Akiko impulsively reached down and pulled Kinzō up from his prone position.

When at last she stepped onto the beach, Akiko was delighted by the feeling of sand between her toes. She, Kinzō, and Old Man Kāre walked until they reached a group of small boats that had been pulled up to the shrubbery at the high-water line. She scanned the area with the flashlight that Old Man Kāre had given her. Barely visible through the darkness, the narrow

trunks of a cluster of *mokumaō* trees towered before her, their branches swaying in the ocean breeze. The scenery seemed to have remained unchanged for the past twenty years. Her heart was stirred with emotion.

Akiko could now appreciate the meticulous schedule of Kinzō's seemingly ludicrous plan. If they had arrived at midday, with the sun shining overhead, the island probably wouldn't have looked this way. Had the landscape been blazing white under the merciless sun, she would have had to avert her eyes and would have felt disoriented and confused.

They followed a gently meandering road that led towards the center of the village. At a point where the white sand began to change to soil, they came upon a plot of land about two hundred meters square enclosed by a hedge of Ryūkyū hibiscus. Inside the hedge stood a traditional home shoddily constructed of rough-hewn boards. Through the open doorway, they could see a Buddhist altar. To the right of the entryway was the guestroom, which had an alcove; to the left were the living room and the kitchen; and at the back were the sleeping quarters. The interior walls did not reach all the way to the ceiling's soot-covered beams, so it was possible to hear what was going on throughout the home. Always dark and shadowy, even when the sun was high, the dwelling crowded the family into a small space, as all the village houses did.

O. Island was relatively large compared to the surrounding islands. The broad U. River divided the island in two. On the west side was the old village, which had been protected by the river from the spread of an infectious malaria that had decimated the village on the east side. When the malaria had subsided, newcomers had resettled the site of the village that had been ravaged.

Over the past dozen years, the island had grown increasingly poorer and more desolate. The principal cause was an earlier boom in real estate. Tourist companies had speculated in the island's most scenic property, driving up land prices. Islanders who owned land jumped at the opportunity to sell, using the cash to begin new lives on other islands. However, after a temporary spurt in new construction, land values had dropped and the island had again become poor. Kinzō had been among the first to sell his land and move away. Shaking off the censorious looks of the old villagers who stayed behind in poverty, Kinzō forced Akiko's bitterly objecting grandmother to accompany the family to town on the main island. That had been twenty years ago.

Kinzō's slow pace forced Old Man Kāre and Akiko to stop many times. Kinzō would catch his breath, then lean on Old Man Kāre, take another dozen steps or so, and stop again. Carrying the bags and lighting the way ahead of them, Akiko had to turn around each time and put down the bags.

"Old Man Kāre, can I sit down for a while?" Kinzō freed himself from the old man's arms and, exhausted, sunk to the weedy ground. His legs, withered as tree branches, were splayed, and he hung his head. Old Man Kāre squatted close behind him.

"Listen, Kinzō," he said, sounding like an innocent schoolboy. "It's only my opinion, but about your plan to return to T. Island today: I wish you'd reconsider."

Kinzō's body quivered. His head spun around, and his face stopped inches from Old Man Kāre's.

"What do I need to reconsider? If it's my health that concerns you, you've got nothing to worry about. It's not a big deal."

"Your health's a big deal, I'd say."

"You promised me," Kinzō said in a half-supplicating tone. "You said we could get back in a day. Isn't that why I hired you?"

Old Man Kāre nodded slowly, then spoke in a low voice. "I've been crossing rivers and the ocean for years, so for me, it'd be easy to head back to T. Island right now. I know how determined you are. But listen, Kinzō. If you want to take Grandma Makato's mortuary tablet from that house, that's up to you. But to just carry it off without having a memorial service or anything? I don't know about that."

Kinzō's eyes seemed to gaze inward, as if Old Man Kāre's words were sinking deep into his heart.

Holding a memorial service to move someone's mortuary tablet, even a makeshift ceremony, required following certain procedures. If Kinzō absolutely refused to spend the night in the village, then it was necessary to dispense with the time-consuming formal procedures and make an informal ceremony as brief as possible. Akiko's mother had already asked Hatsu Nakamori to make arrangements for a ceremony—though it was not clear how elaborate it should be. Hatsu had agreed to meet them at the deserted house around eight o'clock. Along the way, Akiko was supposed to persuade Kinzō of the necessity of a ceremony.

"After all this time, I know it's unfair to bring up the feelings of the dead, especially when the living have got things they have to do. But I hope that you, as the remaining child, would consider Grandma Makato's feelings."

At this point, Old Man Kāre turned his shriveled face towards Akiko, then looked back at Kinzō.

"Think about what you're doing from Akiko's perspective as a grandchild," he said. "I'm sure she wants to do what she can."

As far as Akiko was concerned, this strong speech from the normally reticent Old Man Kāre was a miracle. It was a relief to her to realize that she might count on the old man to do the persuading.

"We didn't prepare for any memorial service. We can take care of that sort of thing when we get back to town." Kinzō spit out the words in disgust. But his confidence was obviously shaken, and his voice trembled.

"Of course you could. But Grandma Makato's spirit wants to be here on the island. Surely, you know that more than anyone. Just because you carry off the mortuary tablet doesn't mean her spirit will follow. You should observe the proper rites, and also pray for her forgiveness."

Old Man Kāre's words stung Kinzō's heart. In response, his body began

to tremble again. He pressed his fists into the ground and stiffened his shoulders.

"What the hell do you expect an invalid like me to do? I don't want people to see me like this. All I want is to get back to town without being seen. That's my only wish. If we have the memorial service here, we'll have to call a *yuta* shaman. And there's no way one of them would want to help me after all this time."

"There's old Hatsu Nakamori," said Old Man Kāre. "She can't do anything large scale, but if it's a simple ceremony, she can recite the basic prayers. At least, that's what she said."

Kinzō's hardened face turned from Old Man Kāre to Akiko and then back again. His suspicious, exhausted eyes turned downward, and he lapsed into silence. There was a long pause. Kinzō showed no sign of responding, so Old Man Kāre draped Kinzō's arm over his shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

"Well, Kinzō. Your house is just ahead."

In pain and without the energy to resist, Kinzō allowed himself to be dragged along. He didn't have the strength to even keep his head steady, so it bobbed up and down with each step.

In a gap in the darkness, Akiko recognized the shape of her old home. She quickened her pace. She passed through the opening in the hedge of Ryūkyū hibiscus and saw light coming through the open front door, like a sweet odor. In the faint light, she placed her hand on the door jamb and lingered in the entryway. Just then, she noticed someone moving inside. She recoiled in surprise when a plump old woman appeared before her.

"Aki-*chan*!" The round-faced old woman, squinting through moist eyes, was Hatsu Nakamori. When she glanced over Akiko's shoulder and spotted Kinzō being dragged along by Old Man Kāre, her expression suddenly clouded over, and she covered her cheeks with her wrinkled hands.

Inside, the abandoned house was covered in cobwebs and strewn with trash. Even so, the frame showed no signs of warping. Visible in the ceiling, the roof tiles were so solid as to appear new. Except for the rubbish and missing sections of wallboard, the house had more or less retained its original appearance. The altar room near the entrance was the only room to have been kept clean. Hatsu appeared to have taken special care of the mortuary tablet, which stood in the middle of the Buddhist altar. The only light in the house came from the candles placed on the altar and throughout the small room. On a low table were a traditional multitiered box and a lacquer tray decorated with offerings of fruit and various cakes, all of which created a strangely cheerful atmosphere.

Hatsu pulled Kinzō in front of the altar and had Akiko sit beside him. Old Man Kāre knelt down on the floor behind them.

Smoke from the incense, blown by the draft seeping through the tattered wallboards, drifted over the group and flowed outside. Hatsu sat on her

haunches, her old body curled into a ball. She lowered her folded hands onto her knees and bowed deeply, her body trembling. Slowly, she straightened up and began speaking in a solemn voice to the mortuary tablet.

*O most precious!
Most honorable gods and ancestral spirits, we summon thee!
On this blessed and holy day, we summon thee!*

*O most precious!
Your child and granddaughter entreat you!
With offerings of food and fragrant incense!
And offerings of sacred sake...*

She repeated her chant several times, and it seemed that it would probably go on for a long time. When she began the third repetition, her face was sweaty. Intoxicated by her chanting, she glanced over at Kinzō.

"Kinzō," she said, "relax and don't be so tense. Grandma forgives you." Hatsu was apparently already communing with his mother's spirit, and Kinzō did as he was told.

Hatsu's chanting had been mumbled at first, but gradually became more confident and clear, filling the room. Soon her upper body began to sway excitedly, and her hair came untied.

Akiko could hear the rhythm of the ocean outside: the roar of breaking waves, the hushed pause as they receded, followed by another roar. The sound, in company with Hatsu's chanting, stirred a memory in her. A yearning began to overwhelm her and gradually intensified. With her eyes lowered, she surrendered to the sounds and sensations. When she closed her eyes, she heard a swooshing that sounded less like crashing waves than like trees falling in a forest. The prolonged sounds faded away into the distance, then drew closer, and finally crashed loudly. When she listened more intently, the sounds seemed to be calling to her from outside.

Her legs were numb from sitting in a formal *seiza* posture. Nevertheless, before she realized it, Akiko was standing outside the house. The white smoke of the incense had been wafting over her, and now she was saturated with its smell.

She crossed the yard and found a path leading from the house to the beach. Once, there had been four or five other houses scattered along this path, far from the village. Now, there were no signs of them. By the dim light of the moon, Akiko plunged into the heavy undergrowth of shrubs and small trees.

Suddenly, she could see nothing but a huge shadow in her path. When she looked up, she saw a tangle of black trees, their twisted branches spiraling high above her, the entire mass blocking her way. She was in a thicket of *yama-bashō* banana trees; their layers of broad leaves were pressed together in an impassable mass.

Akiko realized that she was in a zone of profound silence. Immediately she knew she was experiencing something that had lain dormant and now had risen to the surface as a result of the unexpectedly strong spiritual power of Hatsu, an amateur *yuta*. A bluish-white space opened up before the thicket, and in it was an apparition of a young-looking Grandmother Makato sitting on the ground next to a girl. Makato was peeling bark from cut sections of *bashō* trees. At her side, a four-or five-year-old girl with a disconcertingly small face followed the movements of Makato's hands. Whenever Makato glanced over at the girl, the woman's stern expression broke into a smile and her eyes twinkled.

Aki, don't make fun of me like your parents and others do. You need to listen carefully to what I say.

Speaking in rhythm with the movement of her hands, Makato chose each word carefully. The girl nodded at everything she was told. Did she understand the implication of Makato's words? Akiko drew closer to the apparitions in order to speak to the girl, but their forms faded into the brush and disappeared.

Every year in early summer, Makato would plunge into this thicket of *yama-bashō* trees to cut down saplings just before they bore fruit. The sounds that Akiko had heard, she realized, were the trees falling one by one. After the trunks were peeled, they could be split into fine strands, boiled in a wood-ash solution, then washed and dried to produce dark, yellowish fibers for weaving. Makato would cut down these *yama-bashō* saplings in a determined attempt to make a living with her weaving in the deserted village.

Her biggest obstacle was that the fibers used to make high-quality *bashō-fu* cloth didn't come from plants like these, growing in the wild. Only the fiber of a cultivated variety, the *ito-bashō*, yielded soft fibers and fine thread. The stiff fibers of *yama-bashō* plants tended to break, no matter how carefully they were handled. Such fibers were completely unsuited for weaving. This fact notwithstanding, Makato continued for many years to weave with thread made from *yama-bashō*, since it was all she had. Eventually, however, her efforts came to an end. A pile of unspun fiber probably sat on the dirt floor in a corner of the shed.

Akiko wandered farther into the thicket. Although this time of year was usually hot and humid, she felt wrapped in coolness. The thicket seemed both to welcome her and to expand, making a rustling sound.

Originally, the *bashō* trees were not dense enough to form a thicket. In the wild, *yama-bashō* spring up across the plain in clumps of two or three plants. Akiko's grandmother had created a thicket in the belief that she needed many trees to produce enough thread to weave cloth. Sometimes Akiko had helped her strip off the lower leaves on the *bashō* plants when they had grown to a height of about five feet. It was only many years later that Akiko found out her grandmother's fruitless efforts had dumbfounded her parents and older sisters and had made the old woman the laughing-stock of the village. Akiko's memory of her grandmother—who was ignored

by everyone except the uncomprehending young grandchild—came back to her.

Akiko stood near the thicket for some time. When she looked up, she saw the dense thicket rustling even more. Frightened, she wanted to fall back on her haunches right there. But she had the feeling that if she did so, she'd never be able to escape. So she turned to leave.

Reentering the old house, Akiko was struck by the strong smell of incense. Piles of salt and incense sticks had been placed in two corners of the doorway as guideposts for her grandmother's spirit. Inside, Kinzō had gotten up from the altar, and he and Old Man Kāre were eating while Hatsu chatted with them. Hatsu smiled at Akiko when she entered. Her genial round face looked possessed and fatigued.

Akiko sat down opposite Kinzō. Old Man Kāre sat to the left and Hatsu to the right. The candles behind them cast their faces in shadow. The configuration suggested a scene of solemn ceremony, and made the disrepair of the house seem oddly appropriate.

Hatsu had finished the first stage of her ministrations. She stood up and took the mortuary tablet down from the altar as the others turned to watch her. She carefully spread out a somber purple *furoshiki* wrapping cloth, picked up the mortuary tablet, and placed it on the cloth as if she were handling a newborn baby. Just as she was about to wrap the tablet in the *furoshiki*, Akiko reached out and took it in her hand. Seeing that it was just a thirty-centimeter-long piece of dark-colored wood, she turned it over and read what was written on the other side:

SECULAR NAME: MAKATO NAKAMA

DIED: OCTOBER 2, 1965

AGE: 67

Reading the date on the tablet, Akiko reflected on the passing of time. Suddenly, the quiet was broken by Kinzō, who rose and began folding up the sheet he had been sitting on. The tension in his face had returned, spreading apprehension throughout the room.

"Oh my! Wait, Kinzō, wait! If you leave at this hour in such a small boat, the waves are going to be rough," Hatsu said. She tried everything to cajole him into staying, but he was done listening to her and the others. Akiko reluctantly stood up to accompany him.

"Kinzō, if this is really what you want to do, that's your choice," Old Man Kāre said calmly. "But as long as we leave before the villagers wake up, it won't matter if we wait a little longer."

Kinzō stopped his faltering preparations to leave.

"If you rest here for a while, and we leave while it's still dark, you'll be able to avoid meeting any villagers, just as you wished. And that will give Grandma Makato more time to lament her departure from the island."

Trapped between the old man admonishing him and Hatsu nodding her

support, Kinzō stood in confused isolation. Pain and exhaustion seemed to have weakened his resolve.

“Well, if I can avoid meeting any of the islanders,” he said in a resigned tone of voice.

It was resolved that Kinzō and Akiko would spend the rest of the night in the abandoned home, consoling the spirit of Akiko’s grandmother. With relief, Hatsu carried in the bedding that she had prepared in advance. She checked the items one by one; still, she had misgivings about leaving the invalid Kinzō and his daughter alone in the old house. She dawdled and stood for a time in the doorway. Realizing she couldn’t stay forever, she squeezed Akiko’s hand and then plunged into the darkness and headed back to the village. Old Man Kāre returned to the boat, promising to pick them up at the appointed time.

Akiko lay down next to Kinzō and gave herself over to the sound of near and distant winds outside. Meanwhile, Kinzō had fallen asleep from his medication. Akiko’s nerves had caused cramping in her arms, legs, and back, but she gradually began to relax and her eyelids grew heavy with drowsiness. Her mind, however, remained alert. She turned onto her back and stared up at the rough-hewn ceiling, sensing the heavy darkness enveloping the silent house. Abruptly, she was jolted by a bottomless darkness that seemed to crawl across the ground and threaten to assault her. She glanced over at Kinzō. Seeing that he was asleep, she quietly slipped out from under the bedding and stepped outside.

She walked noiselessly past the vague, indistinct shapes of trees and brush and headed to Nishino Beach. The sounds and smells on the wind led her to the shoreline. The surface of the ocean at low tide dully reflected the light of the nearly invisible moon, and the dim glow faded from the inlet’s beach as if in retreat. Old Man Kāre’s boat, anchored beneath the rock face, sat motionless and small, like a child’s toy floating in a puddle. In this desolate and somehow oppressive environment, Akiko had the feeling that something inside her was boiling to the surface. Unstoppable, it suddenly tore through her.

“Old Man Kāre!” Alarmed by the sound of her own cry, she called again even louder. The old man’s silhouette appeared on the boat. She waded into the sea. She struggled through the swirling water, her feet slipping on the slime of sand, pebbles, and rocks. When she reached the boat, the old man pulled her up. Her soaked jeans and undergarments clung to her skin. The old man blinked at Akiko in astonishment and smiled self-consciously.

“How thoughtless of me. How could I expect a young woman like you to have a good night’s sleep in a place like that?”

In his own way, the old man tried to rationalize the strangeness of the situation. He shook out the khaki blanket that smelled of fish and that he had used to cover himself. Awkwardly, he draped it over Akiko, who was wet through and through.

As if something had just occurred to him, the old man hauled in the anchor and started the boat's engine.

"Akiko, it'd be too bad if you left without seeing any other part of the island. If we circle around the three capes on the east side, we'll reach the U. River. How about we make a run?"

Akiko nodded in agreement, and the old man cautiously steered the boat away from the rock face and into the deeper water. The boat cut through the waves, disturbing the stillness and solitude. The wind stirred up the strong smells of the ocean. Akiko reached over the gunwale and touched the surface of the water. She felt against her palm the heavy resistance and flow. The water's sharp chill reawakened her exhausted nerves.

The boat followed a course as close to the coast as the ebbing tide would allow. By the time they had rounded the first cape, Akiko's eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, her field of vision had begun to expand, and she could see farther inland.

Three villages were spread out along the coast between Nishino Beach and the U. River. Started by people who had come after the war, when the economy in the area had been most unstable, the villages had been built on the sites of previously abandoned ones and were barely managing to sustain themselves. The inhabitants were mostly people who had fled during the fighting and had found their way back. Some had migrated from elsewhere.

A cleft in the blackened landscape revealed a glimmer of light that looked especially desolate to Akiko. She thought it must be from the village built by workers in the coal mines.

"Is that S. Village over there?"

Old Man Kāre looked to where Akiko was pointing and slowly nodded. He had lived there long ago, before moving to a hut next to the river.

"There are people living there even now, aren't there?" Akiko murmured, not expecting an answer from the old man.

"The faces have changed, but they're still scraping by."

Akiko nodded—not so much to the old man's words as to the moisture in his eyes. The old man's gaze was riveted on the village. Suddenly he shook his head, as if freeing his thoughts from an old memory. He sucked in his cheeks and moved his wrinkled lips as if trying to find the right words. "I used to work in the mines with a guy from that village," he finally said. "He's dead now."

Old Man Kāre looked gloomily at Akiko. "Besides him, I had one old friend who died like a real fool just before I left the island. So he's gone, too."

Surprised at the intensity and bitterness of the old man's words, Akiko stared at him for some time. Then the old man licked his lips and began telling his story.

"There was a young guy named Matsuo. He was a couple dozen years younger than me. Unlike me, he had a family—five kids in all. He didn't have any skills other than working in the coal mines. During all his years on

the island, I never saw him plowing fields or going out to sea. And yet he was always talking big..."

Vague memories of the Matsuo family began coming back to Akiko.

Each village had had what was called a cooperative shop, a nonprofit co-op that sold everyday necessities on credit. The Matsuo family also had a shop, but unlike the co-ops it was privately owned and they were attempting to make a profit. The shop sold goods that the Matsuos had bought wholesale. This was many years after the collapse of the coal-mining industry, which had been started by investors from mainland Japan. Most of the miners had been day laborers, and when the mines failed, they left the island. Newcomers to the village mingled with the few mine workers who had remained. Akiko vaguely recalled that the newcomers started to gain power by sticking together. They shunned the stragglers from the mines. In the midst of the complex relationships among the villagers, Matsuo had to find work outside the network of businesses and farms controlled by the newcomers. But Akiko couldn't remember anything that connected Matsuo to Old Man Kāre.

"He stayed on the island because the girl he married was from here. Apparently, at first he wanted to leave, but then the kids were born one after another, and he had no choice but to stay. Of course, his wife was the one who struggled bringing up the five kids. And then, when his oldest kid left the island, right about this time of year, he hanged himself."

The old man's mouth clamped shut as if to sever all connection with Matsuo. He looked down at the surface of the water. Moved by his story, Akiko too gazed at the ocean. Suddenly, she pictured Kinzō's contorted face during the rough journey to the island. She tried to block out the image that rose up in her mind.

At that moment, there was a dull thump from under the boat. The next moment, the boat lurched up and came crashing back down into the water. The old man lost control, and the boat took off in a zigzag pattern, with no signs of steadying. Akiko noticed that the tide had ebbed considerably and that patterns of ripples stretched in all directions. A coral reef had emerged as the sea near the coastline had become more shallow. The boat had apparently scraped against a reef. Embarrassed by his carelessness, the old man quickly steered the boat into deeper waters. Soon, a second cape came into view, and the dim light of S. Village faded into the darkness.

Akiko looked out to sea and stared wide-eyed at what she saw. The reef surrounding the island rose above the surface like a marine creature. Before her eyes, the ocean appeared to be drying up, revealing a vast expanse of reef that seemed connected to the land. In the past she had watched from the shore as the tide ebbed, but viewing it in reverse—while on the water—made her acutely aware that the island was connected to the bowels of the earth, far below the sea.

"Oh! So this is how quickly the tides can move in and out!" Akiko exclaimed with a sigh.

"At times like this, you can't relax when you're steering. You carelessly take the wrong route, and you end up running aground."

Gripping the rudder more firmly, the old man concentrated on their course. Akiko looked again into the outward flow of the tide. She could see only the reef pushing its way through the dark surface.

When the tide was out, the shallows covered an extensive area and could have been mistaken for land. The boat took a course just outside the large reef. Before long, they passed a small, uninhabited island and then the second cape. There had once been a small village of newcomers near the mountains. But because she couldn't see even a faint light, she wasn't sure it still existed.

Akiko could see a beach, white and forlorn against the black contours of the island, rising in the narrow stretch of land between the inlet and the forest. She couldn't tell whether or not any villages were there.

From her new perspective, looking towards the island from out at sea, Akiko realized that its shape was the opposite of what she had imagined. While she had been living in town, she had believed that if she returned to O. Island, it would be the same as it had always been. Now, however, the island's shape—so stable in her memory—had been altered, and she was thrown into a state of uncertainty. She felt as if she were seeing a shadow of the island instead of the place she had been so sure of. She thought of having been at Nishino Beach several hours ago, when powerful emotions had arisen in her by touching the trees, hearing Hatsu's chanted prayers, and seeing Makato and the little girl in the banana grove—and she wondered whether these were only illusions inside the night shadows.

Akiko continued watching the hazy image of the island as it flowed by. She then focused on the spot where land and sea blended together, but felt only the movement of the boat. Though she stared, the island's shape seemed to become even more unclear.

When the sea began to lighten in the approaching dawn, she saw a wave at the bow rise up—a dull flash of blackish green. The fathomless depths had given her a glimpse of the abyss that at any time could swallow the tiny boat. The boat passed close to the border between the shallows of the reef and the ocean's immense depths. Large whirlpools were forming in this zone, where the outgoing tide sucked at the reef, spouting and gushing. She was suddenly seized with the desire to locate the precise place where the reef and the deep water created a fissure. Without realizing it, she was leaning far over the gunwale.

"That's dangerous, Akiko! Could you sit up, please? There's nothing around here to look at. Nothing but water—as far as the eye can see." The old man's warning pulled Akiko back from the seductions of the deep.

Old Man Kāre stared at the ocean directly ahead of them. The tide continued to ebb, and Akiko understood that if he were careless for even a minute, they'd run aground on the reef and be immobilized on the ocean until the tide turned.

Rounding the third cape, the old man cut the engine and the boat slowed. The cold wind slackened. Akiko's drenched pants had begun to dry.

The boat headed up the river. Trees grew along the banks so that the winds subsided even more. The seductive odor of rainwater drifted in the air. The trees and undergrowth grew denser on both banks as they continued into the depths. The river narrowed and the shadows of leaves floated on the dark surface of the water that carried the boat along. Akiko wondered, as if searching through the wreckage of a dream upon waking, if she had ever passed through trees lining a river like this one. The idea of having once before been lured from the ocean into a waterway that cut through a narrowing and deepening conduit—and of drifting without end—began to dominate her thinking. It was as if she were recalling an experience from long ago, or as if the image had descended upon her from a distant source and was coming to life within her.

Akiko was suddenly overwhelmed by a desire to get at the truth of Kinzō's obsessive behavior. She needed to see what he—with his unwavering self-discipline and with his obligations to Makato's last words—was trying now to excise from the island.

Before she realized it, the boat had drifted to a standstill. The calm, glimmering surface of her thoughts was disturbed, and the riddle of her father's behavior disappeared beneath it. Fish jumped out of the river, and ripples spread along the water and towards the thicket of trees. The old man, who had been fixated on the scene in front of them, suddenly spoke.

"He hanged himself in this forest," he muttered, "right over there. He was hanging from the branch of a tall *akagi* tree."

Though the old man had spoken in a whisper, the black clump of towering trees seemed to stop swaying in response to his words.

"I was the one who found him. I was also the one who brought him here."

Stunned, Akiko was quiet.

"Matsuo was in an unusually good mood that day, and he asked me to ferry him up the river. He was friendly, like when we used to work in the coal mines together. So I didn't doubt him when, on the spur of the moment, he said he wanted to set boar traps. When I came back to pick him up at the appointed time, I waited. But he never showed up. He couldn't have. By then he was already hanging from the *akagi* tree."

The old man looked steadily into the forest as he spoke. He was no doubt looking at the very tree from which Matsuo had been hanging. Akiko had the feeling that the old man's story held the key to the riddle with which she had been struggling.

"If we don't head back soon, we won't be able to keep our promise to Kinzō to leave before dawn." The old man's tone of voice had changed, and his words rang out and echoed off the water.

The broad reef that had been exposed was now hidden below the waves. Early morning light drifted over the surface. Dawn had not yet broken, but the deep purple sky could lighten in an instant. Akiko began to regret having left Kinzō alone in the abandoned house.

The return course began to swell with the rising tide. Waves surged on the horizon, but the winds were less forceful than on the ride out. The boat picked up speed and headed west.

As soon as they reached Nishino Beach, Akiko dashed across the sand and hurried to the abandoned house. She flew into the yard, breathing hard, then threw open the front door. Kinzō was prepared to leave and was waiting for them with a surprisingly calm expression. Oh! It must've all been an illusion! An upwelling of relief nearly brought Akiko to her knees. Kinzō looked as if he had been sitting in the same position since the evening: cross-legged, his hands on his lap, clutching Makato's mortuary tablet. Without demanding any explanation from Akiko as to where she had been, he stood up as if to leave at once.

"It'll be light soon," he said, then walked out of the door ahead of her. Akiko hurried after him, carrying their bags. Kinzō strolled through the darkness with his head held high. He was as unsteady and feeble as always, but composure and confidence seemed to have returned to his step. Akiko watched him with a puzzled expression.

It was 5:40 in the morning. The boat moved out of the shadow of the rock and headed into the offing. The densely confined darkness that hung over the island began to dissolve between the water and air and then to fade into the distance. When the boat picked up speed, a thin wall of water rose up on each side. As if passing through a transparent veil, the boat ferried its passengers away from the island.

Kinzō, holding Makato's mortuary tablet, sat with half-closed eyes. He looked as if he were still clutching something that could never be relinquished, as if his emotions had been truly conveyed to Makato in Hatsu's ceremony. Akiko, however, couldn't determine his exact thoughts from his quiet, somber demeanor. Whatever he was thinking, the strange composure that had returned to his expression made her deeply uneasy.

Even if Kinzō managed to carry Makato's mortuary tablet back to their home in town, he still faced a moribund, overmedicated life, plagued by pain and illness. He was returning to town only to be thrown back into an existence somewhere between living and dying—the same state he had been in for the past dozen years. Akiko tossed her head as if to shake off the dawning awareness of why Kinzō had made this voyage. It didn't matter anymore. If they arrived on T. Island in time to board a flight to the

mainland, they would be at home in the early afternoon. Her depressing obligation would then be over. More than anything, she wanted to regain her sense of tranquility as soon as possible.

Then something rose up in Akiko that she did not expect and that could not be shrugged off, swirling around her like a whirlpool. She stared straight at Kinzō. The image of him with his eyes closed peacefully, sitting with Makato's mortuary tablet in his hands, caused her to see through her father's scheming determination. She stared at Makato's mortuary tablet, clenched in his hands as though to prove he had been granted permission to carry out his mission.

Looking towards the horizon, Akiko could see no sign of the sunrise, though the ocean was a faint, bluish white. The boat had crossed the border between the coral reef and the deep sea. The ocean ahead was turning gray, indicating the boat was entering the deeper waters. Akiko stood up and twisted around towards the stern. Swaying there in the gathering signs of dawn, she comprehended the abyss of water surrounding the island and saw that the island was a black mass stretching from the surface of the sea into the bowels of the earth.

The next moment, she reached out and seized Makato's mortuary tablet from Kinzō's hands and, just as quickly, hurled it through the air over the abyss. The wooden tablet traced a high arc, alighted on the quiet surface of the sea, and then vanished amidst the waves.

Unable to rise and powerless at first to grasp what had happened, Kinzō merely stared in the direction that the tablet had been thrown. Reaching out to him, Akiko spoke in a tense voice that was compelled by a will not her own.

"This is how Grandma feels," she said. "More than any memorial service, this is what she wanted."

Coming to himself, Kinzō clutched the side of the boat. The mortuary tablet had completely vanished, but again and again he beckoned for it to return. Akiko wrapped her arms around him from behind, for fear he might jump into the sea.

The boat tilted violently. Listing far to its side, the gunwales nearly touching the water, it headed to T. Island.

Translation by Sminkey Takuma