DEATH IN MIDSUMMER

La mort ...nous affecte plus profondement sous le regne
pompeux de l'ere.
Baudelaire; Les Paradis Artificiels

A. BEACH, near the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula, is still unspoiled for sea bathing. The sea bottom is pitted and uneven, it is true, and the surf is a little rough; but the water is clean, the slope out to sea is gentle, and conditions are on the whole good for swimming. Largely because it is so out of the way, A. Beach has none of the noise and dirt of resorts nearer Tokyo. It is a two-hour bus ride from Ito.

Almost the only inn is the Eirakuso, which also has cottages to rent. There are only one or two of the shabby refreshment stands that clutter most beaches in summer. The sand is rich and white, and halfway down the beach a rock, surmounted by pines, crouches over the sea almost as if it were the work of a landscape gardener. At high tide it lies half under water.

And the view is beautiful. When the west wind blows the mists from the sea, the islands off shore come in sight, Oshima near at hand and Toshima farther off, and between them a little triangular island called Utoneshima. Beyond the headland of Nanago lies Cape Sakai, a part of the same mountain mass, throwing its roots deep into the sea; and beyond that the cape known as the Dragon Palace of Yatsu, and Cape Tsumeki, on the southern tip of which a lighthouse beam revolves each night.

In her room at the Eilakuso Tomoko Ikuta was taking a nap. She was the mother of three children, though one would never have suspected it to look at the sleeping figure. The knees showed under the one-piece dress, just a little short, of light salmon-pink linen. The plump arms, the unworn face, and the slightly curled lips gave off a girl-like freshness. Perspiration had come out on the forehead and in the hollows beside the nose. Flies buzzed dully, and the air was like the inside of a heated metal dome. The salmon linen rose and fell so slightly that it seemed the embodiment of the heavy, windless afternoon.

Most of the other guests were down on the beach. Tomoko's room was on the second floor. Below her window was a white swing for children. There were chairs on the lawn, nearly a half acre wide, as well as tables and a peg for quoits. The quoits lay scattered over the lawn. No one was in sight, and the buzzing of an occasional bee was drowned out by the waves beyond the hedge. The pines came immediately up to the hedge, and gave way beyond to the sand and the surf. A stream passed under the inn. It formed a pool before spilling into the ocean, and fourteen or fifteen geese would splash and honk most indelicately as they fed there every afternoon.

Tomoko had two sons, Kiyoo and Katsuo, who were six and three, and a daughter, Keiko, who was five. All three were down on the beach with Yasue, Tomoko's sister-in-law. Tomoko felt no qualms about asking Yasue to take care of the children while she had a nap herself.

Yasue was an old maid. In need of help after Kiyoo was born, Tomoko had consulted with her husband and decided to invite Yasue in from the provinces. There was no real reason why Yasue had gone unmarried. She was not particularly alluring, indeed, but then neither was she homely. She had

declined proposal after proposal, until she was past the age for marrying. Much taken with the idea of following her brother to Tokyo, she leaped at Tomoko's invitation. Her family had plans for marrying her off to a provincial notable.

Yasue was far from quick, but she was very good-natured. She addressed Tomoko, younger than she, as an older sister, and was always careful to defer to her. The Kanazawa accent had almost disappeared. Besides helping with the children and the housework, Yasue went to sewing school and made clothes for herself, of course, and for Tomoko and the children too. She would take out her notebook and sketch new fashions in downtown store windows, and sometimes she would find a shop girl glaring at her and even reprimanding her.

She was down on the beach in a stylish green bathing suit. This alone she had not made - it was from a department store. Very proud of her fair north-country skin, she showed hardly a trace of sunburn. She always hurried from the water back to her umbrella. The children were at the edge of the water building a sand castle, and Yasue amused herself by dripping the watery sand on her white leg. The sand, immediately dry, fell into a dark pattern, sparkling with tiny shell fragments. Yasue hastily brushed at it, as if from a sudden fear that it would not wash off. A half-transparent little insect jumped from the sand and scurried away.

Stretching her legs and leaning back on her hands, Yasue looked out to sea. Great cloud masses boiled up, immense in their quiet majesty. They seemed to drink up all the noise below, even the sound of the sea.

It was the height of summer, and there was anger in the rays of the sun.

The children were tired of the sand castle. They ran off kicking up the water in the shallows. Startled from the safe little private world into which she had slipped, Yasue ran after them.
But they did nothing dangerous. They were afraid of the roar of the waves. There was a gentle eddy beyond the line where the waves fell back. Kiyoo and Keiko, hand in hand, stood waist-deep in the water, their eyes sparkling as they braced against the water and felt the sand at the soles of their feet. "Like someone's pulling," said Kiyoo to his sister. Yasue came up beside them and warned them not to go in any deeper. She pointed at Katsuo. They shouldn't leave him there alone, they should go up and play with him. But they paid no attention to her. They stood hand in hand, smiling happily at each other. They had a secret all their own, the feel of the sand as it pulled away from their feet.

Yasue was afraid of the sun. She looked at her shoulder and her breasts, and she thought of the snow in Kanazawa. She gave herself a little pinch high on the breast. She smiled at the warmth. The nails were a little long and there was dark sand under them-she would have to cut them when she got back to her room.

She no longer saw Kiyoo and Keiko. They must have gone back up on the beach.

But Katsuo was alone. His face was strangely twisted, and he was pointing toward her.

Her heart beat violently. She looked into the water at her feet. It was receding again, and in the foam some two yards away a little brown body was rolling over and over. She caught a glimpse of Kiyoo's dark-blue swimming trunks.

Her heart beat still more violently. She moved toward the body as if she were fighting her way

out of a corner. A wave came farther in than usual, loomed over her, broke before her eyes. It struck her square in the breast. She fell back into the water. She had had a heart attack.

Katsuo began crying, and a youth ran up from near by. Several others ran out through the shallows. The water leaped up around their naked black bodies.

Two or three saw the fall. They thought nothing about it. She would get up again. But at such times there is always a premonition, and as they ran up it half seemed to them that there had been something wrong with that fall.

Yasue was carried up to the scorching sand. Her eyes were open and her teeth clenched, and she seemed to be gazing in horror at something planted squarely in front of her. One of the men felt her pulse. There was none.

"She's staying at the Eirakuso." Someone recognized her.

The manager of the inn must be called. A boy from the village, determined not to let anyone steal this proud work from him, ran over the hot sand at top speed.

The manager came. He was about forty. He had on shorts and a sagging T -shirt, and, worn through here and there, a woolen band over his stomach. He argued that Yasue should be given first aid at the inn. Someone objected. Without waiting for the argument to be settled, two young men picked Yasue up and started to carry her off. The wet sand where she had lain showed the outlines of a human form.

Katsuo followed wailing after them. Someone noticed and picked him up.

Tomoko was aroused from her nap. The manager, well trained for his work, shook her gently. She lifted her head and asked what was wrong.

"The lady named Yasue ..."

"Has something happened to Yasue?"

"We've given her first aid, and the doctor will be here in no time.”

Tomoko jumped up and hurried out with the manager. Yasue lay on the lawn beside the swing, and a near-naked man knelt straddling her. He was giving her artificial respiration. To one side was a heap of straw and broken-up orange crates, and two men were doing their best to start a fire. The flames would immediately give way to smoke. The wood was still wet from a storm the night before. A third man fanned away the smoke as it curled toward Yasue's face.

Her head thrown back, Yasue looked for all the world as if she were breathing. In the sunlight that filtered through the trees, sweat glistened on the dark back of the man astride her. The white legs, stretched out on the grass, were plump and chalky. They seemed apathetic, quite divorced from the struggle going on above.

Tomoko knelt in the grass.

"Yasue! Yasue!"

Would they save Yasue? Why had it happened? What could she say to her husband? Weeping and incoherent, she jumped from question to question. Presently she turned sharply to the men around her. Where were the children?

"Look. Your mother's here." A middle-aged fisherman held a frightened Katsuo in his arms.

Tomoko glanced at the boy, and nodded her thanks to the fisherman.

The doctor came and continued the artificial respiration. Her cheeks burning in the firelight, Tomoko hardly knew what she was thinking. An ant crawled across Yasue's face. Tomoko crushed it and flicked it away. Another ant crawled from the shaking hair up toward the ear. Tomoko crushed it too. Crushing ants became her job.

The artificial respiration went on for four hours. There were finally signs that rigor mortis was setting in, and the doctor gave up. The body was covered with a sheet and carried to the second Boor. The room was dark. A man left the body and ran ahead to switch on the light.

Exhausted, Tomoko felt a sort of sweet emptiness come over her. She was not sad. She thought of the children.

"The children?"

"Down in the play room with Gengo."

"All three of them?"

"All three?" The men looked at each other.

Tomoko pushed them aside and ran downstairs. The fisherman, Gengo, in a cotton kimono, sat on the sofa going over a picture book with Katsuo, who had on an adult's shirt over his swimming trunks. Katsuo's mind was on something else. He was not looking at the book.

As Tomoko came in, the guests who knew of the tragedy stopped fanning themselves and looked at her.

She almost threw herself on Katsuo.

"Kiyoo and Keiko?" she asked harshly.

Katsuo looked up at her timidly. "Kiyoo ...Keiko ...all bubbles." He began sobbing.

Tomoko ran down to the beach in her bare feet. The pine needles stabbed at her as she went through the grove. The tide had come in, and she had to climb over the rock to the bathing beach. The sand stretched out white below her. She could see far into the dusk. One umbrella, checkered yellow and white, had been left behind. It was her own.

The others overtook her on the beach. She was running recklessly through the surf. When they tried to stop her, she brushed them irritably away.

"Don't you see? There are two children out there."

Many had not heard what Gengo had had to say. They thought Tomoko was mad.

It hardly seemed possible that no one had thought of the other two children in the whole four hours they were looking after Yasue. The people at the inn were used to seeing the three children together. And however upset their mother might be, It was strange that no warning came to her of the death of her two children.

Sometimes, however, such an incident sets in motion a sort of group psychology that lets only the same simple thoughts come to everyone. It is not easy to stand outside. It is not easy to register a dissent. Aroused from her afternoon nap, Tomoko had simply taken over what the others passed on to her, and had not thought to question.

All that night there were bonfires some yards apart up and down the beach. Every thirty

minutes the young men would dive to look for the bodies. Tomoko was on the beach with them. She could not sleep, partly no doubt because she had slept too long that afternoon.

On the advice of the constabulary, the nets were not set out the following morning.

The sun came up over the headland to the left of the beach, and the morning breeze struck Tomoko's face. She had dreaded the daylight. It seemed to her that with the daylight the whole of the truth must come out, and the tragedy would for the first time become real.

"Don't you think you should get some rest?" said one of the older men. 'We'll call you if we find anything. You can leave everything to us."

"Please do, please do," said the inn manager, red-eyed from lack of sleep. "You've had enough bad luck. What will your husband do if you take sick yourself?"

Tomoko was afraid to see her husband. Seeing him would be like meeting a trial judge. But she would have to see him. The time was coming near-yet another disaster was coming near, it seemed to her.

Presently she summoned up her courage to send a telegram. It gave her an excuse to leave the beach. She had begun to feel that the direction of all the divers had been turned over to her.
She looked back as she walked off. The sea was quiet. A silvery light flashed in near the shore. Fish were jumping. They seemed quite intoxicated with delight. It was unfair that Tomoko should be so unhappy.

Her husband, Masaru Ikuta, was thirty-five. A graduate of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, he had gone to work for an American company before the war. His English was good, and he knew his business - he was abler than his silent manner suggested. Now the manager of the Japanese office of an American automobile company, he had the use of a company automobile, half as advertising, and he made 150,000 yen a month. He also had ways of appropriating certain secret funds for himself, and Tomoko and Yasue, with a maid to take care of the children, lived in comfort and security. There was no pressing need to cut the family down by three.
Tomoko sent a telegram because she did not want to talk to Masaru over the telephone. As was the custom in the suburbs, the post office telephoned the message when it arrived, and the call came just as Masaru was about to leave for work. Thinking it a routine business call, he calmly picked up the telephone.
"We have a rush telegram from A. Beach," said the woman in the post office. Masaru began to feel uneasy. "I'll read it to you. Are you ready? 'YASUE DEAD. KIYOO AND KEIKO MISSING. TOMOKO. "'

"Would you read it again, please?"

It sounded the same the second time: "YASUE DEAD. KIYOO AND KEIKO MISSING. TOMOKO." Masaru was angry. It was as though, for no reason he could think of, he had suddenly received notice of his dismissal.

He immediately telephoned the office and said he would not be in. He thought he might drive to A. Beach. But the road was long and dangerous, and he had no confidence that he could drive it,

upset as he was. As a matter of fact he had recently had an accident. He decided to take a train to Ito, and a taxi from there.

The process by which the unforeseen event works its way into a man's consciousness is a strange and subtle one. Masaru. who set out without even knowing the nature of the incident, was careful to take a good supply of money with him. Incidents required money.

He took a taxi to Tokyo station. He felt nothing he could really call emotion. He felt rather what a detective might feel on his way to the scene of a crime. Plunged less in speculation than in deduction, he quivered with curiosity to know more about the incident that involved him so deeply.

She could have telephoned. She was afraid to talk to me. With a husband's intuition, he sensed the truth. But in any case the first problem is to go see for myself.

He looked out the window as they came near the heart of the city. The sun of the midsummer morning was even more blinding because of the white-shirted crowds. The trees along the road cast deep shadows directly downward, and at the entrance to a hotel the gaudy red-and-white awning was taut, as if the sunlight were a heavy metal. The newly dug earth where the street was being repaired was already dry and dusty.

The world around him was quite as it had always been. Nothing had happened, and if he tried he could believe that nothing had happened even to him. A childish annoyance came over him. In an unknown place, an incident with which he had had nothing to do had cut him off from the world. Among all these passengers none was so unfortunate as he. The thought seemed to put him on a level above or a level below the ordinary Masaru, he did not know which. He was someone special. Someone apart.

No doubt a man with a large birthmark on his back sometimes feels the urge to call out: "Listen, everyone. You don't know it, but I have a big, purple birthmark on my back."

And Masaru wanted to shout at the other passengers: "Listen, everybody. You don't know it, but I have just lost my sister and two of my three children."

His courage left him. If only the children were safe. ..He began trying to think of other ways to interpret the telegram. Possibly Tomoko, distraught over Yasue's death, had assumed that the children were dead when they had only lost their way. Might not a second telegram be waiting at the house even now? Masaru was quite taken up with his own feelings, as if the incident itself were less important than his reaction to it. He regretted that he had not called the Eirakuso immediately.

The plaza in front of Ito station was brilliant in the midsummer sun. Beside the taxi stand was a little office, no bigger than a police box. The sunlight inside it was merciless, and the edges of the dispatch sheets on the walls were brown and curled.

"How much to A. Beach?"

"Two thousand yen." The man wore a driver's cap, and had a towel around his neck. "If you're in no hurry, you can save money going by bus. It leaves in five minutes," he added, either out of kindness or because the trip seemed too much of an effort.

"I'm in a hurry. Someone in my family has just died there." "Oh? You're related to the people who drowned at A. Beach? That's too bad. Two children and a woman all at once, they say."

Masaru felt dizzy under the blazing sun. He did not say another word to the driver until the taxi reached A. Beach.

There was no particularly distinguished scenery along the way. At first the taxi climbed up one dusty mountain and down the next, and the sea was rarely in sight. When they passed another car along a narrow stretch of road, branches slapped at the half-open window like startled birds, and dropped dirt and sand rudely on Masaru's carefully pressed trousers.

Masaru could not decide how to face his wife. He was not sure that there was such a thing as a "natural approach" when none of the emotions he had ready seemed to fit. Perhaps the unnatural was in fact natural.

The taxi pulled through the darkened old gate of the Eirakuso. As it came up the driveway, the manager ran out with a clattering of wooden sandals. Masaru automatically reached for his wallet.

"I'm Ikuta."

"A terrible thing," said the manager, bowing deeply. After paying the driver, Masaru thanked the manager and gave him a thousand-yen bill.

Tomoko and Katsuo were in a room adjoining the room where Yasue's coffin lay. The body was packed in dry ice ordered from Ito, and would be cremated now that Masaru had arrived.

Masaru stepped ahead of the manager and opened the door. Tomoko, who had lain down for a nap, jumped up at the sound. She had not been asleep.

Her hair was tangled and she had on a wrinkled cotton kimono. Like a convicted criminal, she pulled the kimono together and knelt meekly before him. Her motions were astonishingly quick, as though she had planned them in advance. She stole a glance at her husband and collapsed in tears.

He did not want the manager to see him lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. That would be worse than having the most intimate bedroom secrets spied on. Masaru took off his coat and looked for a place to hang it.

Tomoko noticed. Taking a blue hanger from the lintel, she hung up the sweaty coat for him. Masaru sat down beside Katsuo, who had been awakened by his mother's weeping and lay looking up at them. The child, on his knee, was as unresisting as a doll. How can children be so small? he wondered. It was almost as if he were holding a toy.

Tomoko knelt weeping in a corner of the room.

"It was all my fault," she said. Those were the words Masaru most wanted to hear.

Behind them, the manager too was in tears. "I know it's no business of mine, sir, but please don't blame Mrs. Ikuta. It happened while she was taking a nap, and through no fault of hers."

Masaru felt as if he had heard or read of all this somewhere.

"I understand, I understand."

Obeying the rules, he stood up with the child in his arms, and, going over to his wife, laid his hand gently on her shoulder. The gesture came easily.

Tomoko wept even more bitterly.

The two bodies were found the next day. The constabulary, diving all up and down the beach, finally found them under the headland. Sea bugs had nibbled at them, and there were two or three

bugs up each little nostril.

Such incidents of course go far beyond the dictates of custom, and yet at no time are people more bound to follow custom. Tomoko and Masaru forgot none of the responses and the return gifts custom demanded.

A death is always a problem in administration. They were frantically busy administering. One might say that Masaru in particular, as head of the family, had almost no time for sorrow. As for Katsuo, it seemed to him that one festival day succeeded another, with the adults all playing parts. In any case, they steered their way through the whole complex affair. The funeral offerings came to a considerable sum. Funeral offerings are always larger when the head of the family, who can still provide, is a survivor than when it is his funeral.

Both Masaru and Tomoko were somehow braced for what had to be done. Tomoko did not understand how this almost insane grief and this careful attention to detail could exist side by side. And it was surprising too that she could eat so heavily without even noticing the taste.

What she dreaded most was having to see Masaru's parents. They arrived from Kanazawa in time for the funeral. "It was all my fault," she forced herself to say again, and by way of compensation she turned to her own parents.

"But who should they feel sorriest for? Haven't I just lost two children? There they all are, accusing me. They put the whole blame on me, and I have to apologize to them. They all look at me as if I were the absent-minded maid who dropped the baby in the river. But wasn't it Yasue? Yasue is lucky she's dead. Why can't they see who's been hurt? I'm a mother who has just lost two children."

"You're being unfair. Who is accusing you? Wasn't his mother in tears when she said she felt sorrier for you than anyone.?”

"She was just saying so."

Tomoko was thoroughly dissatisfied. She felt like one demoted and condemned to obscurity, one whose real merit went unnoticed. It seemed to her that such intense sorrows should bring special privileges with them, extraordinary privileges. Some of the dissatisfaction was with herself, apologizing thus abjectly to her mother-in-law. It was to her mother that she went running when her irritation, like an itching rash allover her body, got the better of her.

She did not know it, but she was actually in despair at the poverty of human emotions. Was it not irrational that there was nothing to do except weep when ten people died, just as one wept for but a single person?

Tomoko wondered why she did not collapse. It seemed strange that she did not collapse, standing there in mourning for more than an hour in the midsummer heat. Sometimes she felt a little faint, and what saved her each time was a fresh start of horror at death. "I1m a stronger person than I thought," she said, turning a tearful face to her mother.

Talking with his parents of Yasue, Masaru shed tears for the sister who had thus died an old maid, and Tomoko felt a touch of resentment toward him too.

"Who is more important to him, Yasue or the children?" she wanted to ask.

There was no doubt that she was tense and ready. She could not sleep on the night of the

wake, even though she knew she should. And yet she had not even a suggestion of a headache. Her mind was clear and taut.

Callers would worry over her, and sometimes she answered them roughly: "You needn't think about me. It makes no difference whether I am alive or dead."

Thoughts of suicide and insanity left her. Katsuo would be for a time the best reason why she should go on living. But sometimes she thought that it was only a failure of courage, or perhaps passion gone limp, whatever it was that made her think, as she looked at Katsuo being read to by the mourning women, how good it was that she had not killed herself. On such nights she would lie in her husband's arms and, turning eyes as wide as a rabbit's on the circle of light from the bed lamp, repeat over and over again, like one pleading a case: "I was wrong. It was my fault. I should have known from the start that it was a mistake to leave the three children with Yasue.

The voice was as hollow as a voice testing a mountain echo.

Masaru knew what this obsessive sense of responsibility meant. She was waiting for some sort of punishment. She was greedy for it, one might say.

After the fourteenth-day services, life returned to normal. People urged them to go off somewhere for a rest, but mountain and seashore both terrified Tomoko. She was convinced that misfortunes never came alone.

One evening late in summer, Tomoko went into the city with Katsuo. She was to meet her husband for dinner when he finished work.

There was nothing Katsuo could not have. Both his mother and his father were almost uncomfortably gentle. They handled him as they would a glass doll, and it was a great undertaking even to see him across a street. His mother would glare at the automobiles and trucks stopped for a light, and dash across with his hand clutched in hers.

The last of the swimming suits in the store windows assailed her. She had to turn her eyes from a green bathing suit like Yasue's. Afterward she wondered whether the mannequin had had a head. It seemed that it had not-and again that it had, and a face exactly like Yasue's dead face, the eyes closed in the wet, tangled hair. All the mannequins became drowned corpses.

If only summer would end. The very word "summer" carried with it festering thoughts of death. And in the evening sun she felt a festering warmth.

Since it was still a little early, she took Katsuo into a department store. It was only a half-hour or so before closing time. Katsuo wanted to look at toys, and they went up to the third floor. They hurried past the beach playthings. Mothers were frantically going through a heap of marked-down bathing suits for children. One woman held a pair of dark-blue trunks high to the window, and the afternoon sun reflected from the buckle. Enthusiastically looking for a shroud, thought Tomoko.

When he had bought his blocks, Katsuo wanted to go up to the roof. The roof playground was cool. A fairly strong breeze from the harbor flapped at the awnings.

Tomoko looked through the wire netting at Kachidoki Bridge beyond the city, and at the Tsukishima docks and the cargo ships anchored in the bay.

Taking his hand from hers, Katsuo went over to the monkey cage. Tomoko stood over him.

Possibly because of the wind, the monkey smell was strong. The monkey gazed at them with wrinkled forehead. As it moved from one branch to another, a hand carefully pressed to its hips, Tomoko could see at the side of the oldish little face a dirty ear with red veins showing through. She had never looked so carefully at an animal before.

Beside the cage was a pond. The fountain in the middle was turned off. There were beds of portulaca around the brick rim, on which a child about Katsuo's age was teetering precariously. His parents were nowhere in sight.

I hope he falls in. I hope he falls in and drowns.

Tomoko watched the uncertain legs. The child did not fall. When he had been once around, he noticed Tomoko's gaze and laughed proudly. Tomoko did not laugh. It was as if the child were making fun of her.

She took Katsuo by the hand and hurried down from the roof.

At dinner, Tomoko spoke after rather too long a silence: "Aren't you quiet, though. And you don't seem the least bit sad."

Startled, Masaru looked to see whether anyone had heard. "You don't see? I'm only trying to cheer you up."

"There's no need to do that."

"So you say. But what about the effect on Katsuo?"

"I don't deserve to be a mother, anyway."

And so the dinner was ruined.

Masaru tended more and more to retreat before his wife's sorrow. A man has work to do. He can distract himself with his work. Meanwhile Tomoko nursed the sorrow. Masaru had to face this monotonous sorrow when he came home, and so he began coming home later at night.

Tomoko called a maid who had worked for her long before and gave away all of Kiyoo's and Keiko's clothes and toys. The maid had children about the same ages.

One morning Tomoko awoke a little later than usual. Masaru, who had been drinking again the night before, lay curled up on his side of the double bed. There was still a dank smell of liquor. The springs squeaked as he turned over in his sleep. Now that Katsuo was alone, she let him sleep in their second-floor bedroom, though she knew of course that it would be better not to. Through the white mosquito net over their own bed and the net over Katsuo's she looked at the child's sleeping face. He always wore a sort of pout when he slept.

Tomoko reached out of the mosquito net for the curtain cord. The roughness of the stiff cord in its hempen cover was pleasant against her sweaty hand. The curtain parted a little. The light struck the sandalwood tree from below, so that the shadows piled on each other, and the wide clusters of leaves were even softer than usual. Sparrows were chirping noisily. Every morning they would wake up and start chattering to one another, and apparently they would then form a line and run up and down the eaves trough. The confused patter of little feet would go from one end of the trough to the other and back again. Tomoko smiled as she listened.

It was a blessed morning. She had to feel that it was, for no reason at all. She lay quietly with

her head still on the pillow. A feeling of happiness diffused itself through her whole body. Suddenly she gasped. She knew why she was so happy. Last night for the first time she had not dreamed of the children. Every night she had dreamed of them, and last night she had not. She had had instead some pleasant, foolish little dream.

She had forgotten so soon, then-her heartlessness struck her as fearful. She wept tears of apology to the children's spirits. Masaru opened his eyes and looked at her. But he saw a sort of peace in the weeping, and not the usual anguish.

"You thought of them again?" "Yes." It seemed too much trouble to tell the truth. But now that she had told a lie, she was annoyed that her husband did not weep with her. If she had seen tears in his eyes, she might have been able to believe her lie.

The forty-ninth-day services were over. Masaru bought a lot in the Tama Cemetery. These were the first deaths in his branch of the family, and the first graves. Yasue was charged with watching over the children on the Far Shore too: by conference with the main family, her ashes were to be buried in the same lot.

Tomoko's fears came to seem groundless as the sadness only grew deeper. She went with Masaru and Katsuo to see the new cemetery lot. Already it was early autumn.

It was a beautiful day. The heat was leaving the high, clear sky.

Memory sometimes makes hours run side by side for us, or pile one on another. It played this strange trick on Tomoko twice in the course of the day. Perhaps, with the sky and the sunlight almost too clear, the edges of her subconscious too were somehow made half transparent.

Two months before the drownings, there had been that automobile accident. Masaru had not been hurt, of course, but after the drownings Tomoko never rode with him in the car when she took Katsuo out. Today Masaru too had to go by train.

They changed at M. for the little branch line to the cemetery. Masaru got off the train first with Katsuo. Held back in the crowd, Tomoko was able to get off only a second or two before the door closed. She heard a shrill whistle as the door slid shut behind her, and, almost screaming, she turned and tried to force it open again. She thought she had left Kiyoo and Keiko inside.

Masaru led her off by the arm. She looked at him defiantly, as if he were a detective arresting her. Coming to herself an instant later, she tried to explain what had happened-she must explain somehow. But the explanation only made Masaru uncomfortable. He thought she was acting.

Young Katsuo was delighted at the old-fashioned locomotive that took them to the cemetery. It had a high smokestack, and it was wonderfully tall, as though on stilts. The wooden sill on which the engineer leaned his elbow might have been made of coal. The locomotive groaned and sighed and gnashed its teeth, and finally started off through the unexciting suburban market gardens.

Tomoko, who had never been to the Tama Cemetery before, was astonished at its brightness. So wide a space, then, was given to the dead? The green lawns, the wide tree-lined avenues, the blue sky above, clear far into the distance. The city of the dead was cleaner and better ordered than the city of the living. She and her husband had had no cause to learn of cemeteries, but it did not seem

unfortunate that they had now become qualified visitors. While neither of them especially thought about the matter, it seemed that the period of mourning, an unrelieved parade of the dark and the sinister, had brought them a sort of security, something stable, easy, pleasant even. They had become conditioned to death, and, as when people are conditioned to depravity, they had come to feel that life held nothing they need fear.

The lot was on the far side of the cemetery. Perspiring freely as they walked in from the gate, they looked curiously at Admiral T's grave, and laughed at a large, tasteless tombstone decorated with mirrors.

Tomoko listened to the subdued humming of the autumn cicadas, and smelled the incense and the cool, shady grass. "What a nice place. They'll have room to play, and they won't be bored. I can't help thinking it will be good for them. Strange, isn't it?"

Katsuo was thirsty. There was a high brown tower at the crossroads. The circular steps at the base were stained from the leaking fountain in the center. Several children, tired of chasing dragonflies, were noisily drinking water and squirting water at each other. Now and then a spray of water traced a thin rainbow through the air.

Katsuo was a child of action. He wanted a drink, and there was no help for it. Taking advantage of the fact that his mother was not holding his hand, he ran toward the steps. Where was he going? she called sharply. For a drink of water, he answered over his shoulder. She ran after him and took both his arms firmly from behind. "That hurt," he protested. He was frightened. Some terrible creature had pounced upon him from behind.

Tomoko knelt in the coarse gravel and turned him toward her. He looked at his father, gazing in astonishment from beside a hedge some distance off.

"You are not to drink that water. We have some here." She began to unscrew the lid of the thermos bottle on her knee.

They reached their bit of property. It was in a newly opened section of the cemetery, behind rows of tombstones. Frail young box trees were planted here and there, after a definite pattern, one could see if one looked carefully. The ashes had not yet been moved from the family temple, and there was no grave marker. There was only a roped-off bit of level land.

"And all three of them will be here together," said Masaru. The remark did little to Tomoko. How, she wondered, could facts be so completely improbable? For one child to drown in the ocean-that could happen, and no doubt anyone would accept it as a fact. But for three people to drown; that was ridiculous. And yet ten thousand was different again. There was something ridiculous about the excessive, and yet there was nothing ridiculous about a great natural catastrophe, or war. One death was somehow grave and solemn, as were a million deaths. The slightly excessive was different.

"Three of them! What nonsense! Three of them," she said. It was too large a number for one family, too small a number for society. And there were none of the social implications of death in battle or death at one's post. Selfish in her womanly way, she turned over and over again the riddle of this number. Masaru, the social being, had in the course of time come to note that it was convenient to see the matter as society saw it: they were in fact lucky that there were no social implications.

Back at the station, Tomoko fell victim again to that doubling up of time. They had to wait twenty minutes for the train. Katsuo wanted one of the toy badgers on sale in front of the station. The badgers, dangling from sticks, were of cotton wadding scorched a badger color, to which were added eyes, ears, and tails.

"You can still buy these badgers!" exclaimed Tomoko.

"And children seem to like them as much as ever."

"I had one when I was a child."

Tomoko bought a badger from the old woman at the stall and gave it to Katsuo. And a moment later she caught herself looking around at the other stalls. She would have to buy some- thing for Kiyoo and Keiko, who had been left at home.

"What is it?" asked Masaru.

"I wonder what's the matter with me. I was thinking I had to buy something for the others." Tomoko raised her plump white arms and rubbed roughly with clenched fists at her eyes and temples. Her nostrils trembled as though she were about to weep.

"Go ahead and buy something. Buy something for them." Masaru's tone was tense and almost pleading. 'We can put it on the altar."

"No. They have to be alive." Tomoko pressed her handkerchief to her nose. She was living, the others were dead. That was the great evil. How cruel it was to have to be alive.

She looked around her again: at the red flags hanging from the bars and restaurants in front of the station, at the gleaming white sections of granite piled high before the tombstone shops, at the yellowing paper-paneled doors on the second floors, at the roof tiles, at the blue sky, now darkening toward evening clear as porcelain. It was all so clear, so well defined. In the very cruelty of life was a deep peace, as of falling into a faint.

Autumn wore on, and the life of the family became day by day more tranquil. Not of course that grief was quite discarded. As Masaru saw his wife growing calmer, however, the joys of home and affection for Katsuo began to bring him back early from work; and even if, after Katsuo was in bed, the talk turned to what they both wanted not to talk of, they were able to find a sort of consolation in it.

The process by which so fearful an event could melt back into everyday life brought on a new sort of fear, mixed with shame, as if they had committed a crime that was finally to go undetected. The knowledge, always with them, that three people were missing from the family seemed at times to give a strange sense of fulfillment.

No one went mad, no one committed suicide. No one was even ill. The terrible event had passed and left scarcely a shadow. Tomoko came to feel bored. It was as if she were waiting for something.

They had long forbidden themselves plays and concerts, but Tomoko presently found excuses: such pleasures were in fact meant to comfort the grieving. A famous violinist from America was on a concert tour, and they had tickets. Katsuo was forced to stay at home, partly at least because Tomoko wanted to drive to the concert with her husband.

She was a long time getting ready. It took long to redo hair that had for months been left

untended. Her face in the mirror, when she was ready, was enough to bring back memories of long-forgotten pleasures. How to describe the pleasure of quite losing oneself in a mirror? She had forgotten what a delight a mirror could be-no doubt grief, with its stubborn insistence on the self, drew one away from such ecstasies.

She tried on kimono after kimono, finally choosing a lavish purple one and a brocade obi. Masaru, waiting behind the wheel of the car, was astonished at his beautiful wife.

People turned to look at her all up and down the lobby. Masaru was immensely pleased. It seemed to Tomoko herself, however, that no matter how beautiful people thought her, something would be lacking. There had been a time when she would have gone home quite satisfied after having attracted so much attention. This gnawing dissatisfaction, she told herself, must be the product of a liveliness and gaiety that only emphasized how far from healed her grief was. But as a matter of fact it was only a recurrence of the vague dissatisfaction she had felt at not being treated as became a woman of sorrows.

The music had its effect on her, and she walked through the lobby with a sad expression on her face. She spoke to a friend. The expression seemed quite to suit the words of consolation the friend murmured. The friend introduced the young man with her. The young man knew nothing of Tomoko's sorrows and said nothing by way of consolation. His talk was of the most ordinary, including one or two lightly critical remarks about the music.

What a rude young man, thought Tomoko, looking at the shining head as it moved off through the crowd. He said nothing. And he must have seen how sad I was.

The young man was tall and stood out in the crowd. As he turned to one side, Tomoko saw the eyebrows and the laughing eyes, and a lock of hair straying down over the forehead. Only the top of the woman's head was visible. Tomoko felt a stab of jealousy. Had she hoped to have from the young man something besides consolation, then-had she wanted other, rather special words? Her whole moral being quaked at the thought. She had to tell herself that this new suspicion was quite at odds with reason. She who had never once been dissatisfied with her husband.

"Are you thirsty?" asked Masaru, who had been speaking to a friend. "There's an orangeade stand over there."

People were sucking the orange liquid from tilted bottles. Tomoko looked over with the puzzled squint one so often sees on the nearsighted. She was not in the least thirsty. She remembered the day she had kept Katsuo from the fountain and had made him drink boiled water instead. Katsuo was not the only one in danger. There must be all sorts of little germs milling about in the orangeade.

She went slightly insane in her pursuit of pleasure. There was something vengeful in this feeling that she must have pleasure.

Not of course that she was tempted to be unfaithful to her husband. Wherever she went, she was with him or wanted to be.

Her conscience dwelt rather on the dead. Back from some amusement, she would look at the sleeping face of Katsuo, who had been put to bed early by the maid, and as she thought of the two dead children she would be quite overcome with remorse. Indeed the pursuit of pleasure became a

sure way to stir up a pang of conscience.

Tomoko remarked suddenly that she wanted to take up sewing. This was not the first time Masaru had found it hard to follow the twists and jumps in a woman's thinking.

Tomoko began her sewing. Her pursuit of pleasure became less strenuous. She quietly looked about her, meaning to be come the complete family woman. She felt that she was "looking life square in the face."

There were clear traces of neglect in her reappraised surroundings. She felt as if she had come back from a long trip. She would spend a whole day washing and a whole day putting things in order. The middle-aged maid had all her work snatched away from her.

Tomoko came on a pair of Kiyoo's shoes, and a little pair of light-blue felt slippers that had belonged to Keiko. Such relics would plunge her into meditation, and make her weep pleasant tears; but they all seemed tainted with bad luck. She called a friend who was immersed in charities, and, feeling most elevated, gave everything to an orphanage, even clothes that might fit Katsuo.

As she sat at her sewing machine, Katsuo accumulated a wardrobe. She thought of making herself some fashionable new hats, but she had no time for that. At the machine, she forgot her sorrows. The hum and the mechanical movements cut off that other erratic melody, her emotional ups and downs.

Why had she not tried this mechanical cutting off of the emotions earlier? But then of course it came at a time when her heart no longer put up the resistance it would once have. One day she pricked her finger, and a drop of blood oozed out. She was frightened. Pain was associated with death.

But the fear was followed by a different emotion: if such a trivial accident should indeed bring death that would be an answer to a prayer. She spent more and more time at the machine. It was the safest of machines, however. It did not even touch her.

Even now, she was dissatisfied, waiting for something. Masaru would turn away from this vague seeking, and they would go for a whole day without speaking to each other.

Winter approached. The tomb was ready, and the ashes were buried.

In the loneliness of winter, one thinks longingly of summer. Memories of summer threw an even sharper shadow across their lives. And yet the memories had come to seem like some- thing out of a storybook. There was no avoiding the fact that, around the winter fire, everything took on an air of fiction.

In midwinter, there were signs that Tomoko was pregnant. For the first time, forgetfulness came as a natural right. Never before had they been quite so careful-it seemed strange that the child might be born safely, and only natural that they should lose it.

Everything was going well. A line was drawn between them and old memories. Borrowing strength from the child she was carrying, Tomoko for the first time had the courage to admit that the pain was gone. She had only to recognize that fact.

Tomoko tried to understand. It is difficult to understand while an incident is before one's eyes, however. Understanding comes later. One analyzes the emotions, and deduces, and ex- plains to oneself. On looking back, Tomoko could not but feel dissatisfied with her inadequate emotions. There

could be no doubt that the dissatisfaction would stay longer, a drag on her heart, than the sorrow itself. But there could be no going back for another try.

She refused to admit any incorrectness in her responses. She was a mother. And at the same time she could not leave off doubting.

While true forgetfulness had not yet come, something covered Tomoko's sorrow as a thin coating of ice covers a lake. Occasionally it would break, but overnight it would form again.

Forgetfulness began to show its real strength when they were not watching for it. It filtered in. It found the tiniest opening, and filtered in. It attacked the organism like an in- visible germ, it worked slowly but steadily. Tomoko was going through unconscious motions as when one resists a dream. She was most uneasy, resisting forgetfulness.

She told herself that forgetfulness came through the strength of the child inside her. But it was only helped by the child. The outlines of the incident were slowly giving way, dimming, blurring, weathering, disintegrating.

There had appeared in the summer sky a fearsome marble image, white and stark. It had dissolved into a cloud-the arms had dropped off, the head was gone, the long sword in the hand had fallen. The expression on the stone face had been enough to raise the hair, but slowly it had blurred and softened.

One day she switched off a radio drama about a mother who had lost a child. She was a little astonished at the promptness with which she thus disposed of the burden of memory. A mother awaiting her fourth child, she felt, had a moral obligation to resist the almost dissolute pleasure of losing herself in grief. Tomoko had changed in these last few months.

For the sake of the child, she must hold off dark waves of emotion. She must keep her inward balance. She was far more pleased with the dictates of mental hygiene than she could be with insidious forgetfulness. Above all, she felt free. With all the injunctions, she felt free. Forgetfulness was of Course demonstrating its power. Tomoko was astonished at how easily managed her heart was.

She lost the habit of remembering, and it no longer seemed strange that the tears failed to come at memorial services or visits to the cemetery. She believed that she had become magnanimous, that she could forgive anything. When for instance spring came and she took Katsuo walking in a near-by park, she was no longer able to feel, even if she tried, the spite that would have swept over her immediately after the tragedy had she come upon children playing in the sand. Because she had forgiven them, all these children were living in peace. So it seemed to her.

While forgetfulness came to Masaru sooner than to his wife, that was no sign of coldness on his part. It was rather Masaru who had wallowed in sentimental grief. A man even in his fickleness is generally more sentimental than a woman. Unable to stretch out the emotion, and conscious of the fact that grief was not particularly stubborn in following him about, Masaru suddenly felt alone, and he allowed himself a trifling infidelity. He quickly tired of it. Tomoko became pregnant. He hurried back to her like a child hurrying to its mother.

The tragedy left them as a castaway leaves a sinking ship. Soon they were able to view it as it must have seemed to people who noticed it in a comer of the newspapers that day. Tomoko and

Masaru even wondered if they had had a part in it. Had they not been but the spectators who happened to be nearest? All who had actually participated in the incident had died, and would participate forever. For us to have a part in a historical incident, our very existence must somehow be at stake. And what had Masaru and his wife had at stake? In the first place, had they had time to put anything at stake?

The incident shone far away, a lighthouse on a distant headland. It bashed on and off, like the revolving light on Cape Tsumeki, south of A. Beach. Rather than an injury it became a moral lesson, and it changed from a concrete fact to a metaphor. It was no longer the property of the Ikuta family, it was public. As the lighthouse shines on beach wastes, and on waves baring their white fangs at lonely rocks all through the night, and on the groves around it, so the incident shone on the complex everyday life around them. People should read the lesson. An old, simple lesson that parents may be expected to have engraved on their minds: You have to watch children constantly when you take them to the beach. People drown where you would never think it possible.

Not that Masaru and his wife had sacrificed two children and a sister to teach a lesson. The loss of the three had served no other purpose, however; and many a heroic death produces as little. Tomoko's fourth child was a girl, born late in the summer. Their happiness was unbounded. Masaru's parents came from Kanazawa to see the new grandchild, and while they were in Tokyo Masaru took them to the cemetery.

They named the child Momoko. Mother and child did well -Tomoko knew how to take care of a baby. And Katsuo was delighted to have a sister again.

It was the following summer-two years after the drowning, a year after Momoko's birth. Tomoko startled Masaru by saying she wanted to go to A. Beach.

"Didn't you say you would never go there again?" "But I want to."

"Aren't you strange? I don't want to at all, myself."

"Oh? Let's forget about it, then."

She was silent for two or three days. Then she said: "I would like to go.”

"Go by yourself."

“I couldn’t.”

"Why?"

“I’d be afraid”

"Why do you want to go to a place you're afraid of?"

"I want all of us to go. We would have been all right if you'd been along. I want you to go too."

"You can't tell what might happen if you stay too long. And I can't take much time off."

"One night will be enough."

“But it’s such an out of the way place.”

He asked her again what had made her want to go. She only answered that she did not know. Then he remembered one of the rules in the detective stories he was so fond of: the murderer always wants to go back to the scene of the crime, what- ever the risks. Tomoko was taken by a strange

impulse to revisit the place where the children died.

Tomoko asked a third time-with no particular urgency, in the same monotonous way as before-and Masaru determined to take two days off, avoiding the weekend crowds. The Eirakuso was the only inn at A. Beach. They reserved rooms as far as possible from that unhappy room. Tomoko as always refused to drive with her husband when the children were along. The four of them, husband and wife and Katsuo and Momoko, took a taxi from Ito.

It was the height of the summer. Behind the houses along the way were sunflowers, shaggy as lions' manes. The taxi scattered dust on the open, honest faces, but the sunflowers seemed quite undisturbed.

As the sea came in sight to the left, Katsuo gave a squeal of delight; He was five now, and it was two years since he had last been to the coast.

They talked little in the taxi. It was shaking too violently to be the best place for conversation. Momoko now and then said something they understood. Katsuo taught her the word "sea," and she pointed out the other window at the bald red mountain and said: "Sea." To Masaru it was as if Katsuo were teaching the baby an unlucky word.

They arrived at the Eirakuso, and the same manager came out. Masaru tipped him. He remembered only too clearly how his hand had trembled with that other thousand-yen note.
The inn was quiet. It was a bad year. Masaru began remembering things and became irritable. He scolded his wife in front of the children.

"Why the devil did we come here? We only remember things we don't want to. Things we had finally forgotten. There are any number of decent places we could have gone on our first trip with Momoko. And I'm too busy to be taking foolish trips."

"But you agreed to, didn't you?" "You kept at me."

The grass was baking in the afternoon sun. Everything was exactly as two years before. A blue-green-and-red swimming suit was drying on the white swing. Two or three quoits lay around the peg, half hidden in the grass. The lawn was shady where Yasue's body had lain. The sun, leaking through the trees to the bare grass, seemed suddenly to dapple the undulations of Yasue's green bathing suit-it was the way the flecks of light moved with the wind. Masaru did not know that the body had lain there. Only Tomoko had the illusion. Just as for Masaru the incident itself had not happened while he did not know of it, so that patch of grass would be forever only a quiet, shady corner. For him, and still more for the other guests, thought Tomoko.

His wife was silent, and Masaru tired of scolding her. Katsuo went down into the garden and rolled a quoit across the grass. He squatted down and watched intently to see where it would go. It bounced awkwardly through the shadows, took a sudden jump, and fell. Katsuo watched, motionless. He thought it should get up again.

The cicadas were humming. Masaru, now silent, felt the sweat come out around his collar. He remembered his duty as a father. "Let's go down to the beach, Katsuo."

Tomoko carried Momoko. The four of them went through the gate in the hedge and out under the pine trees. The waves came in swiftly and spread shining over the beach.

DEATH IN MIDSUMMER

It was low tide, and they could make their way around the rock to the beach. Taking Katsuo by the hand, Masaru walked across the hot sand in patterns borrowed from the inn.

There was not a single beach umbrella. They could see no more than twenty people the whole length of the bathing beach, which began from just beyond the rock.

They stood silently at the edge of the water.

There were grand clusters of clouds again today, piled one upon another. It seemed strange that a mass so heavy with light could be borne in the air. Above the packed clouds at the horizon, light clouds trailed away as though left behind in the blue by a broom. The clouds below seemed to be enduring something, holding out against something. Excesses of light and shade cloaked in form, a dark, inchoate passion shaped by a will radiant and architectural, as in music.

From beneath the clouds, the sea came toward them, far wider and more changeless than the land. The land never seems to take the sea, even its inlets. Particularly along a wide bow of coast, the sea sweeps in from everywhere.

The waves came up, broke, fell back. Their thunder was like the intense quiet of the summer sun, hardly a noise at all. Rather an earsplitting silence. A lyrical transformation of the waves, not waves, but rather ripples one might call the light, derisive laughter of the waves at themselves-ripples came up to their feet, and retreated again.

Masaru glanced sideways at his wife.

She was gazing out to sea. Her hair blew in the sea breeze, and she seemed undismayed at the sun. Her eyes were moist and almost regal. Her mouth was closed tight. In her arms she held one-year-old Momoko, who wore a little straw hat.

Masaru had seen that face before. Since the tragedy, Tomoko's face had often worn that expression, as if she had forgotten herself, and as if she were waiting for something.

"What are you waiting for?" he wanted to ask lightly.

But the words did not come. He thought he knew without asking.

He clutched tighter at Katsuo's hand.

Translated and abridged by Edward G. Seidensticker