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On the Inside (Hei no naka 塙の中 1962)

河野多恵子

Kōno Taeko

Translated by Mary A. Knighton

On June 8, 1945, Sone Masako forgot that it was her nineteenth birthday. Blame it on the air raid from the night before, and all that happened in its wake. But even without that, her birthday probably wouldn't have commanded much of her attention.

After all, another year meant nothing more than the continuous round of daily life from the dormitory to the factory, from the factory to the dormitory—a round of manual labor and bondage, fatigue and hunger.

The factory was originally a private company but now it was operating under the management of the Military Clothing Depot. One hundred and sixty girls from Masako's school alone had been mobilized for work here for the academic year, along with three hundred girls just arrived from other schools. The Student Mobilization Office was in charge of overseeing everything, and Second Lieutenant Sakamoto was at its helm. Former employees too, men and women who used to commute to their company or factory, were now dancing to the tune of the military.

Masako and the other girls sewed clothing for military use, both by hand and by machine, before packaging them into rudimentary bundles. The slightest slowdown in work would mean an easing of their fatigue, and a chance to taste rebellion. Such times made them irritable and restless, and made the work seem ever more tedious and endless, until it became hard to keep a single-minded focus on when the shift might end. They preferred to throw themselves headlong into work. And be worn out.



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I want to go home—all they wanted was to go home. The school where Masako and the other students belonged was only twenty kilometers away in the city, and most of their homes were nearby as well. They could have gone home and come back in a matter of a few hours. But they had almost no opportunity to do so. Although everyone got a day off at New Year's, even then no one received permission to leave the factory to go home. They were too busy praying for victory in the war.

After their school in the city had been bombed in a massive air raid in March and about a third of the girls' family homes had been destroyed, Lieutenant Sakamoto repeatedly said things like, "The best way to get revenge on the enemy nation that burned down your houses is by staying right here and increasing production." He wouldn't let anyone go home.

The Mobilization Office gathered the letters that students wrote to their families and mailed them off in their stead. A family member had to die or become seriously ill before a student might see the other side of the single concrete wall that enclosed their compound of dormitories and factory buildings. Once, several students pleaded to leave in order to see relatives who were in critical condition. Too many. That's when Lieutenant Sakamoto made up the rule that upon return to the factory, students had to bring with them a death certificate or doctor's note for the sick family member as well as some kind of proof from the neighborhood association.

Before long, a student broke the nosepiece on her glasses. Without glasses the girl was all but blind, so the Lieutenant had no choice but to write her a pass to leave the compound to buy new ones. It turned out that she had broken them on purpose. When she got back to the dormitory she confessed this to everyone, adding, "Once I got home, I wolfed down any food in sight." Those who didn't wear glasses were envious, and those who did regretted that they had not come up with this excellent scheme themselves. But no one snitched. Those words—"Once I got home, I wolfed down any food in sight"—echoed in the girls' minds like something out of a dream.

"Let us go home!" "Let us go home!"—Late at night, a group of girls stamped their feet and cried out in front of the doors of the two teachers. Each month two teachers were sent from the school in a system of rotation. The girls that had appeared so suddenly were just as suddenly gone.

During the break one day, a teacher approached the students practically in tears. "I tell you, I really don't know what to do. A whole

bunch of *tanuki*¹ showed up yet again last night, making mischief and causing trouble.” Teachers assigned to mobilization sites were like women who brought along children from a previous marriage to a new one with a tyrannical man. Caught in the middle, they could only listen to their children’s ceaseless demands and complaints, unable to intercede on their behalf. All they could do was sympathize....

The students certainly knew this. But the mysterious nocturnal visitations from the so-called *tanuki* didn’t stop; if anything, they became more disruptive. In the end, the teachers had no choice but to do something about it.

The head of Student Affairs came from the school numerous times to meet with the Lieutenant. Finally, it was decided that every Monday one of the students would be in charge of bringing a status report to the school from the teachers at the factory. “I’m sure you can make good use of this opportunity for your own purposes too,” added the head of Student Affairs to Lieutenant Sakamoto.

In this way a gesture of good will was built on a tacit deceit, and completely changed the relationship between the students and the calendar days in their mobilized factory life. Each girl confirmed her own delivery day on the schedule, and counted the days until she could drop by her home when delivering the reports.

Masako’s day for making the delivery was slated for the second week of July. She frequently wrote about this in her letters home to her family. She hoped that her home would not be burnt down before then, and made sure to write as much. Once or twice a day, like sucking on a hard candy that took forever to consume while it maintained even a little of its sweetness, she counted the days to feel how near, and how far off, that day was.

No wonder she had forgotten that her birthday was tomorrow.

. . .

Even before the alarm bell finished sounding at around 11 p.m. that night, the air raid siren overtook it.

Seeking refuge in the air raid shelter, Masako felt around in her air raid bag. She made sure that the small hard object was still there. She always did this first thing.

It was her final testament. The first time she ever heard the air raid siren at the factory, she had waited trembling in the bomb shelter, bitterly regretting all the while that she had not yet written a final testament to always keep with her.

Of course, if she died the testament too would more than likely be blown to bits or burnt up. Acutely aware of this, she nonetheless set about writing it as soon as she could.

To My Revered Parents

I have been sent to the factory and so if it is bombed I will likely die. That is why I am writing this. I was the oldest among all of us girls, and Father used to say, “If only you had been a boy.” As the war dragged on and I grew up, though, he became glad I was a girl after all. And yet, it looks like even I—a girl—will end up dying for the war....

There, she hesitated.

At that time the enemy planes often came just one at a time. On cold winter nights, a lot of families still didn’t bother to go to the air raid shelters when the alarm went off. One time, a bomb was dropped by a plane overhead and an army guy went to check on the damage. With his high leather boots, he kicked at a charred corpse still wearing nightclothes, cursing as he kicked, “You shirker!”—Masako remembered all that was said about this. How what was being kicked didn’t look or sound like a corpse but rather like a living person gone limp while being tortured and blamed for being dead. What if she were to die with this girlish testament in her grasp...? She cowered at the very thought of her dead body being kicked by those high boots. Her mother and father wouldn’t receive her testament. And once it came to light that she had toyed with unpatriotic language, writing that her father was glad that she was a girl, even he might be implicated and dragged into matters.

Masako began anew, this time writing a model testament, one that might be expected of mobilized students. Before long she abruptly set her pen aside, unsure of the point of it all.

When she read her parents’ letters asking how life at the factory was going, Masako felt a wave of depression well up deep inside. In a mix of anger and sadness, she wanted to shout, “How would you know anything about me or my feelings now!” Of course her parents could not understand. But even they would know that their daughter would never write anything

like these final words of some model student, and she felt keenly just how empty and meaningless the testament was.

“To My Revered Parents...”—

Masako fiddled with the paper itself for a long time when she tried to write it the third time. In the end she quickly scribbled:

“I was happy.”

She had a sense that was good enough. No matter who read these words, there could be no recriminations. And if her parents were able to read them, they would recall fondly the many years they had spent together and the unceasing gratitude of a daughter now dead.

Somehow, these few brief words contained her real feelings. Not once had she felt it would be better if she had never been born, not even when she wondered why her short life had to end with mobilization to a factory in an endless war. Yes, she couldn't help but feel happy to have been born. These final words celebrated and testified to that fact. At the same time, they preserved some measure of her defiance—*I have been happy up until now even with my little life. How much more happy I would have been had I lived the many years still in my future. I will be robbed of that....*

The words “To My Revered Parents” were now no longer necessary. On a clean sheet of paper, she wrote simply “I was happy.” She signed it. She folded it up until it was small enough to fit inside the empty mentholatum can, then she wrapped the can in a handkerchief and stuffed it into her air raid bag.

The fire alarm went off. Inside the air raid shelter Masako and the others huddled closer together, each girl using all ten fingers to cover her eyes or plug her ears.

A rush of air augured enemy planes as they flew over and onward in formation. The girls crowded close together, crushing their bodies against each other until they formed a single clump lacking individual distinction.

But the reverberations of bombs exploding on impact did not come. They weren't the usual bombs. From the peephole the girls could see a sprinkling of myriad tiny points of light, flickering against the eerie night sky. Each one then expanded before breaking into pieces. In the next instant, they merged into a huge fiery blanket of light that then rained

down together against the blackness. Incendiary bombs. Everyone stepped outside of the shelter. Almost immediately the fire alarm screeched again and they scrambled to get back inside.

In that moment when they were outside, they had witnessed a crimson stain spreading against the night sky. As if partner to that widening stain, the flames from earth stretched up to meet the heavens. Heaven and earth lit up as if a stage. The power behind the demon lights dropped by the enemy planes glittered ominously, a power spectacularly evident each time new bombs fell and lit up the sky.

The factory was not the target of the air raid this time, apparently. From start to finish, the bombardment had been trained on the residential areas beyond the factory's surrounding military roads.

Masako and the others realized that they were still alive. The morning of June 8th was already starting to dawn. The all-clear sirens made a welcome wail. Almost tenderly, the girls checked on the buildings of the factory and the dormitories to make sure they were still where they had been the night before, and then they took turns surveying the night's damage by climbing up on an emergency ladder they propped against the wall. A distant neighborhood they were used to seeing from the second floor of the dormitory was simply gone.

It was over there that dawn appeared to have taken a step backwards. Dark smoke and ashes joined together the sky and the burning red earth, spreading and threatening to expand over the factory compound as well. Already a light rain had started to fall. Countless enemy planes in the distance crisscrossed the sky, rending the firmament with firebombs. A widespread area was on fire, altering the atmospheric pressure.

No one could yet approach the areas still burning fiercely so people stood by, watching and waiting, some in the evacuation areas of the factory and others on the surrounding military road. *Our houses too have been burnt down like this. This is how they will burn.* Strangely attentive, the girls took in the scene before them.

. . .

It happened the night of that day. A boy who said he was five years old stayed overnight with Masako and the others. His family's house had apparently been destroyed.

When Masako and the girls returned from the 9 a.m. roll call, the boy was still sleeping in the same position as before.

Opening the window, the Resident Assistant Takimoto Sakiko said, “He seems alright. I was so worried he might still be crying like he did all last night.”

“If we’d only noticed sooner, we could’ve given him the blanket to hold onto right away.” Masako adjusted slightly the overhead lamp, which was partially covered in black cloth to prevent detection during air raids, and looked down at the sleeping boy scooped up in the circle of its light. The blanket was wrapped and tied in a small bundle next to a folded towel used for a pillow.

It was a child’s blanket and belonged to Hara Fumiko who had brought it with her in case of evacuation. Although already tatty with age, the pink blanket’s white design showed a full moon against which stood out two ridiculously large-eared baby rabbits pounding *mochi* rice cakes. Sleeping on his side, the boy’s hand rested near a rabbit’s ear.

Earlier, the crying boy had not been able to keep his eyes off of the rabbits on the blanket covering him. So they had rolled up the blanket and fixed it so that the rabbits were on the outside and the boy could pet them as he fell asleep.

The girls from the next room re-entered. The night before, they had heard the boy’s cries and come in right away to see what was going on. They had helped to calm him down, and when the boy finally fell asleep, it was nine in the morning and time for everyone to go for roll call.

Returning to the room after roll call, Resident Assistant Sakiko announced, “I’ll report him tomorrow.” She had not discussed this with anyone yet, and since the girls from the next room were there too, she tried to appear diplomatic in wielding her authority.

Kitamura Takeko had advanced together with Masako at the same school and, together with Sakiko and Fumiko, shared a room with her. Takeko turned to her and said, “Masako says she is going to sleep with him tonight.”

It was the first Masako had heard of that.

On that day, their morning shift had been cancelled. In the afternoon, they had helped to distribute food rations for the victims of the firebombing.

For the time being, food intended for factory use was to be used for food rations. Anyone who had received victim certification papers from temporary offices set up by neighborhood associations after the bombing could receive one portion each of hardtack and canned food for every two members of a family. The light rain was still drizzling. A tent had been set up near the gates to the factory, and it was there that Masako and the other girls worked. They did their best to help people.

“Everything is burnt to cinders, destroyed. Surely you can spare some dried bread?” A woman rushed over, brimming with anger. The girls tried to explain—“First you have to go to your local neighborhood association...”—only to be interrupted—“Neighborhood association? What world are you living in—such places no longer exist.” People left in a huff.

One old man angrily shouted, “When we go to the neighborhood office, they say to come here for rations. And when we come here, you tell us to go there. Can’t you people get your act together?”

One young girl wanted to know, “Why does that household that has three people, and mine, which has four, get the same amount of rations? How can that be?”

And the mobilized students had to explain, “We round up the odd numbers. Just as written on the posted notice.”

Another voice could be heard muttering, “The military has plenty for itself though.” There was no good answer to this.

Word was that their factory was responsible for processing close to half of all the bombing victims. Little wonder that Masako and the others had scratchy, hoarse throats by the time their work ended. Dried bread for lunch had not helped.

The evening meal too was dried bread. To make matters worse, the water supply that was still flowing after the air raid had gotten cut off at some point.

Later, Masako was making her way back to the dormitory when she recalled a water spigot at some distance from the main yard. Even as she went to check if the water was running, she doubted it would be. And sure enough, it wasn’t. Instead of water, she got a child.

The boy who suddenly appeared from around the corner of the storehouse looked as if he had been crying for some time. He broke into sobs when he saw Masako. “Mama’s gone! Mama’s gone!”

As if afraid that this new person would abandon him too, the boy clung tightly to Masako's trousers, refusing to let go. Masako freed herself from his clasp, but to reassure him that she had no intention of leaving, she settled both hands on his shoulders. "Where did you lose your mother?"

The boy stopped crying for a moment, with one hand balled up at his eyes. With the other he gestured towards the outside of the compound. "She was with some other uncle and auntie. And then all gone."

He began to wail again.

"Did your mother give you over to the uncle and the auntie to be cared for?"

"Mama got us some dried bread. That's where the auntie and th- them w- were...." His words trailed off, and he was crying again.

Gradually his sobbing was accompanied by longer intervals of relative calmness, until finally he took his fists from his eyes and began to hiccup. Masako asked him what his name was.

"Sugao."

"Little Sugao?"

"No. Sugao Shin'ichi."

Ah, so Sugao is his family name. Masako had no idea how that was supposed to be written but thought "Shin'ichi" probably adopted the usual Japanese characters for "new" and "one."

"Okay, Little Shin. Shin-chan."

The boy didn't like that either though, and told her to call him "Shinbō." He then opened all five fingers of his right hand to show her: "I'm just this."

Just about to ask how old he was, Masako felt somehow grateful that he was making it easier for her to find out more about him.

Masako nudged him forward so that her three roommates could see him better. "He says he and his mother came to get some dried bread and then he got lost. He wandered further inside the factory grounds looking for his mother."

The boy was wearing black serge trousers that looked like *monpe* baggy work pants, and his short-sleeved shirt may have once been light blue but now it was too faded to say for sure. The girls looked for a piece of fabric or something someone might have pinned in his clothing to identify him by name, address, age, or blood type, but there was nothing.

"Where do you live?"

“The same place, over there.”

“On the other side of the big road?”

“Yeah.”

“Lots of houses burned down there, didn’t they?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Listen now, did you and your mama run away from home?”

“Nope. We were at home. We didn’t run away anywhere.”

That the boy seemed to have difficulty remembering what happened at the time of the air raid only confirmed how terrifying the confusion must have been for him. He was cute, even a bit precocious, with a face like a kitten’s. At first his mouth had seemed big, what with all the crying, but now that he had settled down, his clever little bow-shaped mouth took on definition. He responded easily when asked about his everyday life.

He told them that his father was a soldier who had been in hospital but then sent back to fight in the war, and that there were two babies in the family, both girls.

“Twins perhaps?” Fumiko’s thoughts had inadvertently become audible but the boy answered anyway. “Nope. Two regular babies born nearly together.”

Fumiko gave a wry smile, probing further. “So living at your house are you and your mama, two little babies born less than a year apart—anybody else?”

“There is Konno. She goes to the factory though.”

“This factory?”

“Nope. . . . Konno always brings me back dried bananas.”

At the boy’s mention of dried bananas, Sakiko recalled that she had some dried bread left over from lunch and gave it to him. He started to eat, making loud crunching sounds.

“It’s good, huh?”

“Umm.” He swallowed a large mouthful.

Cramming in another large mouthful, he pressed his lips tightly shut, chewing so vigorously that his head appeared to nod up and down. Someone else asked him again, “Is it good?”

He took a big swallow, then, “When a person is trying to eat, you are not supposed to ask them questions.”

Everyone laughed.

Sakiko laughed too, but then she stood up and turned on the light. Spreading out the dark cloth to mask the light, she directed her question to

Masako sitting below her. “Masako, you haven’t reported this yet, have you?”

Masako had been afraid to report it and had not done so, either to the teachers or to Lieutenant Sakamoto, thinking she would put it off until tomorrow. Now she felt the weight of the task she had been evading. “No.”

Sitting down, Sakiko pressed her. “You don’t intend to look for this child’s mother?”

“We have no way of getting the child back to his mother.” Takeko broke in. “His house was probably all burned down anyway.”

Just then, the child let out a wail. Listening to them, he must have realized that he was the lost child in their conversation. He howled to go back to his mother.

“Could you close the window, please?” Concerned about the noise, Masako embraced the boy, intent on placating him. But to no avail. And then the door opened and more students came into the room. The closed room was starting to get hot and steamy. Masako stood up and stretched, sighing.

Takeko put down a futon. “Bring him over here. He has to get to sleep by nine.”

Fumiko brought out a blanket and put it over him, but he soon kicked it away with his little legs.

. . .

“We have to get going soon.”

Masako had been watching the child eat the leftovers she had set aside for him from her lunch when Takeko spoke.

It was the next day but Masako still had not reported him. Takeko kept trying to appease Sakiko, who would not let up about the report, by saying things like “Masako cannot go right now,” and “Maybe this evening, after carefully talking everything over with the other girls.”

“Wait a minute. We have to make him go to the bathroom first,” said Masako.

“Someone should keep watch, so I’ll go with you,” said Takeko.

The dormitory hallways were silent. Usually the girls spent their lunch break outdoors in the shade but now here was Takeko leading the way for Masako and the boy, carefully confirming that the coast was clear before they turned the corner into the washroom area.

“You can go by yourself, right? It’s okay. Just take your time.” Masako sent the boy into the stall, and kept watch by the doorway.

When they were alone together, Takeko smiled. “Hey, this is going to be fun, don’t you think?”

Masako had been smiling casually in return, but now she started.

“What do you mean!”

“C’mon. Don’t be like that. I know what you’re thinking. It’s been clear to me since last night. Look, I’m simply helping you do what you want to do anyway. Of course, I feel the same way. Everyone does, deep down.”

“So what, are you saying we shouldn’t report him?”

“No, make a report. Just, not to the Lieutenant. Leave it to me. Let’s just enjoy him until his mother shows up.”

“And if we’re found out?”

“You mean, they find out about our grand act of charity, done out of the kindness of our hearts?... Listen, it’s not going to work if you’re going to be wishy-washy about it.”

The child came out of the stall. “I’m done.”

“Good boy, Shinbō,” Takeko said. As they walked back to the room, she turned to Masako to pick up where she’d left off. “Sometimes I try to imagine how much longer this life can go on day in and day out like this past year, and then I think about that Lieutenant and what he is busy doing. You know, right?” She pointed in the direction of the dormitory where students from another school lived. “Rumor has it they’ve started gambling. Compared to that, what we’re doing is saintly! Really now, we might as well have a little fun ourselves.”

The girls who had come in from adjoining rooms to see the child were being ushered out. Masako joined Fumiko in shutting the windows.

“Shinbō, you are being so good,” Takeko said to him. “When break time rolls around, I’ll come back to see you, I promise.”

He ran over to Masako as she was closing the windows. “Auntie will come too?”

“Yes, I will. But stop calling me ‘Auntie’...”

Everyone laughed. This was the second time she had begged him not to call her that.

Leaving him alone, everyone went out into the hallway. Sakiko secured the large padlock with a clang, and said, “It’s no surprise he feels

grateful to you in particular. He must think we're all just older sisters compared to you."

That might well be so.

Of the four roommates Masako may have been the tallest after Takeko but compared to the others she hardly gave off the impression of a reliable Auntie. Rather, there was something of the frail sickly child in her stooped frame instead of the graceful slimness associated with the usual nineteen-year-old girl in the prime of her youth.

Masako's temperament matched her body type. When Takeko criticized Masako for being too weak in her resolve, she was right. Masako always seemed to need a little push or a helping hand. Even when Masako really wanted something, her desires rose to the surface as a kind of request. Occasionally, others gratified her wishes. She experienced a kind of psychological pleasure in feeling beholden to others.

Masako had rarely found her needs met so thoroughly and in such a fast and ready manner as from Takeko in this current situation. Takeko, of all the girls, most often spoke out and took bold action on her own.

Once, when they were both students at the same girls' school, they had taken part in training for emergency first aid. Each of them was handed a card that indicated a serious medical condition, and then they were supposed to provide the necessary and proper triage to the students playing the role of the wounded. When it was time for evaluations, Takeko had come out triumphantly, her hand on the bound and splinted arm of her wounded partner.

The nurse there helping with the training checked her work. Her treatment was faultless. But she had treated the wrong part of the body.

"This person's problem was a broken bone in the upper arm, right?... Well, is this the upper arm?"

"No. It is the lower arm." Humbly, Takeko acknowledged her error. But she just as quickly lost her humility after the nurse said, "If you cannot tell the difference between the upper and lower arm, then when push comes to shove, you will be useless."

"What? How come?" Takeko couldn't let it go. "When it's the real thing, it won't be a problem to know what needs treating and what does not. When it's the real thing, bright red blood will be shooting everywhere, and bones sticking out of the flesh. Then, it'll be okay to bind up the arm like this. It's only now in this kind of training that anybody cares if telling

the difference between a fictional upper arm or lower arm is more important than treating a real injury....”

Despite her usual boldness, Takeko became relatively obedient after graduating and being sent to the factory. Not only that, she had become the most skilled at her job, and the least likely to show fatigue.

Even Takeko was sometimes beaten down by their life of mobilized labor, as Masako well knew from being cornered by her when her bouts of depression hit. Almost nostalgically, Takeko would recall their school days before being mobilized. “I still had some fire in me then.” But nostalgia itself was such a used-up, shabby thing. By then, school holidays had already been eliminated. Any extra time that might have been used for school breaks was used instead for commuting to the factory.

The girls lifted their heads high in true emotion at encouraging news of battle victories, moved by the heroism of the men and officers they saw off to the front. They felt their hearts and minds tightly bound together with a single thread at the sight of the plain wooden box that indicated a soldier’s sacrifice. Yet they were terrified by the furious pace at which their sincere desire for small luxuries or girlish pleasures continued to be stripped away.

We have to do something about this. The girls thought that and little else, at a time when thinking such things was still possible.

Above all, they had to avoid serving in the Women’s Volunteer Corps. Even students focused on their career ambitions, thinking only about graduation, worried about this. When Takeko recalled nostalgically the way the girls had worked together to graduate and studied hard to pass their exams, how everyone truly lived up to their potential in being supportive of each other through tough times, Masako could have pointed out the irony of everyone passing their exams only to be sent four months later to the factory. In the end, their life had turned out not so differently from serving in the Women’s Volunteer Corps. Instead, Masako said only, “I wonder when this war will end.”

When the war did end, what would peace look like? What kind of relief would come to their daily lives, and what kind of pleasures and feelings would be possible? Masako (and surely Takeko, too) thought they would return to their exact same lives as before the war, and imagined it as a time when their lives could unfold with all the experiences they had yet to have before them.

But such a day would never come, would it? As long as they could remember, Japan had been engaged in military operations, and for close to ten years now the towns had been plunged into darkness at night, even if somehow, from somewhere, they could recall the glitter of neon lights on a summer evening. That kind of memory knew no bounds in its beauty, and its nostalgia.

I want something—Masako and Takeko knew this about each other. Of course, all of the students understood this about each other. But these two girls had spent more time together than anyone else so they understood more deeply, and with greater clarity, the empty ache of desire held by the other.

. . .

“How did it go?” As soon as dinner was over, Masako and the others went straight to Sonoda Michiko’s room. It had been her turn to leave the compound and deliver the reports to their school. Michiko barely returned in time for dinner, checking in with the military police, then murmuring to Masako and the others as she entered the cafeteria, “I’m back.”

Now in her room, she told them the details. “The crowds were terrible. So many families were looking for missing people. The police made people write everything down on a piece of paper and then put the sheets in a file. I got them to look through their records but they said there was no child named Sugao Shin’ichi listed yet. So I went ahead and filed a report.”

“And the letter?” Takeko asked.

“Yes, I sent it off.”

On the second night that the child slept there, Masako and the other girls discussed what to do about him. Or rather, Takeko told them her plan, and then got everyone to agree with her. Some students weren’t present but a number of students from other dorm rooms had shown up.

“The more I think about it, the more clearly I see how wrong it was that Masako didn’t take the child to the teachers and the Lieutenant as soon as she found him. It’s no use belaboring the point now but it was Masako’s mistake.”

Takeko had started off in her usual pushy manner.

“The more time passes, the more obvious it’s going to be that we kept him a secret.”

Guards stationed at the front gate day and night meant that aside from that day when rations had been distributed no one from outside should ever have been able to get in without being seen. Even though so many hours had passed, they could still report him now and say they just found him. But if they did that, then the child himself might talk too much when questioned. It would be impossible to get a regular day laborer to carry him out of the compound or even get the girl whose day it was to deliver the reports to do it. A child accompanying anyone would surely be stopped for questioning. And if they put him in a rucksack or whatever, even if they had something he could fit into in the first place, surely the contents would be checked.

As Takeko reached this point, Sakiko asked in despair, “So we just never let him go?”

“No, I’m not saying that.” In fact, though, what Takeko had been making most clear was just why they couldn’t let him go.

“If we were talking about a suitcase or something, we could just toss it over the wall in the middle of the night using the emergency ladder. But what would happen if we did that kind of thing with a child? Afterwards, he would be discovered, and he would certainly talk about having been in here. As I said before, we cannot keep him from talking. Whoever questions him will surely find their way straight back to us.”

A girl from one of the other dorm rooms had been listening to Takeko while looking at the boy’s sleeping form, and she tried to lighten the mood. “He can get in but he can’t get out. Poor Shinbō—he is like a little shrimp tangled up in the tentacles of sea anemone.”

Masako’s face reddened. The girl’s clumsy joke had hit a nerve. The child got into the compound all by himself but by now that girl, and it seemed everyone else too, felt that his being trapped here was Masako’s fault.

Just then Takeko added, “Even so, it is not impossible to get him out.” Masako urged everyone’s support as Takeko then began to explain the plan that she had already talked over with Masako. Masako lowered her head, hiding her face. It was obvious that she still felt the sting of Takeko’s opening rebuke, how failing to report the child right away was her fault.

“Monday rolls around again the day after tomorrow, right? It’s Sonoda Michiko’s turn to carry the reports.”

Michiko was not there to agree or disagree, so Takeko went on.

“Okay, I’ll ask her to do it. To make a report to the police. It’s not far, just the next station.”

“Are you sure the police won’t come here?” a student asked Takeko.

“We are not going to tell anyone that Shinbō is here. We are just going to ask anyone who comes looking for him to get in touch, and give out my family’s address as contact information.”

And so the plan was that Takeko would write a letter to her family letting them know that someone might try to contact them, or that a letter or something might arrive about a child named Sugao Shin’ichi, but no matter what happened they were not to reply directly. They were instructed to let Takeko know first... She’d ask Michiko to post the letter too, Takeko said.

“We wouldn’t hand over the child to the mother, just like that. No, we’d have to arrange a time, and then we’ll pass him over the wall. The mother will keep quiet about it. She’ll be so grateful when she sees that we took such good care of her lost child. Why would she tell anybody and create trouble for us?” Takeko asserted.

One girl spoke up. “But maybe the mother has already reported him to the police.”

Carried away by the plan that she had told them in such detail, Takeko found herself suddenly at a loss. It seems she had not considered this possibility. After a while, though, she rallied. “Well, so what if she has—if that is the case, we can just contact her right away and turn over the child.”

Now back from delivering the reports, Michiko confirmed that, in fact, no one had yet reported him. Takeko was elated.

“See, the mother has not reported him after all. Her home was burnt down, and she has those two babies to carry around, right? She could not have gotten around to it so easily.... Thank you for everything, Michiko.”

Masako too thanked Michiko. “I’m sorry you had to use so much time on your one precious trip home to deal with all this.”

“By the way, where is Shinbō?” Michiko inquired.

“He’s playing with some of the other girls.”

“Well, well. Here it is only the fourth day and that child is completely used to us and making himself at home.”

“I know what you mean. I guess it’s true what they say—how it’s easy to kidnap children. Although who’d want to kidnap anybody nowadays, when we’re all so short of food,” said Takeko. “Children do seem to meet and get used to strangers pretty quickly. Up until yesterday, Shinbō kept asking for his mother so we told him a letter had come from her saying ‘Shinbō, you stay here while Mama takes care of some business.’ Now look at him, he never even mentions her.”

“Seeing how quickly he takes all this in stride hardly makes me want to have children of my own, not even in the distant future,” Sakiko said.

“Oh, come on,” said Fumiko. “You’d make a great mother, I think. You’re the kindest of us all. Even if you did come across as rather pig-headed the other day, saying things like, ‘Tomorrow he must be reported.’”

“Well, what was I supposed to do, considering the position all this puts me in...”

“I know, I know, as Resident Assistant, you’re responsible for things in the dormitory. But don’t worry, if anyone has to take responsibility, it won’t be you, it will be his ‘Auntie,’” said Takeko.

The more attuned she was to Masako, the more effectively Takeko could say things in front of others like this that showed how much she enjoyed teasing, and unsettling, her close friend.

. . .

As usual, the child spent every day in the dormitory. His playthings were piling up in the shared room of Masako and the others: a spool once used for cotton thread, an empty can, pieces of wood used for packaging that doubled as building blocks. He played alone with these things while closed up in the room when the girls were at work.

“Has Shinbō always had this complexion? He strikes me as rather pale.” It was lunchtime, and Masako spoke up in concern.

“His hair has grown out so maybe he just looks different. Still, he probably does need to get a bit of sun.”

It was the rainy season and hardly a ray of sunshine made its way through the clouds even though it wasn’t raining at the moment. Since it was midday, it wasn’t completely dark. Earlier, Sakiko had made the child lie down in the narrow band of natural light that came into the shaded room but now she scooped him up.

“Shinbō, you can’t stand up here. If you want to stand up, you have to tumble all the way over here first out of the light and then stand up.” As usual, she was cautious about everything but it had gotten to where Sakiko no longer needed to walk on eggshells when giving orders or warning her fellow students. For some time now, everyone knew what was what. When Sakiko talked in this way, she was not just “talking.” In cooperating with her and with each other, the girls now felt they shared in a kind of mutual joy, as if dishing out portions of something delicious to eat together. The child was often invited to spend the night in other girls’ rooms.

And when it came to meals, they took turns in setting aside their own food for the boy.

All the mobilized students entered the cafeteria and took their seats. When they got quiet Lieutenant Sakamoto stood up from his place among the teachers. He reached behind him and pulled the string on the dinner bell: *Dinnnnnggg*. At this, everyone recited in unison the usual words said before meals:

“Taking up these chopsticks, we recognize the many blessings of Heaven and Earth under the Imperial Reign. We hereby receive this bounty from the Emperor and Nature. We are grateful for this food.”²

Everyone bowed their heads. After saying blessing the next moments would be punctuated by the sound of round tin lids being taken off of dishes, before being passed around the tables one side at a time. Masako and her roommates faced each other in two rows across the tables. Those mere thirty seconds of rustling and bustling was all that was needed. —It was then that somewhere, someone among the class of students would wink, or make some signal with the chopsticks box. Sometimes it happened in two places at once. One side would quickly hold out two fingers in the shadow under the table just at stomach level to give instructions to the other side. It meant “*You* hold off this time—*we* will get it ready.”

The students in charge of cleaning up also gathered the leftovers to take to the child, spooning food into a candy tray that one of the students had once used to hold medicine or something, and putting the rice in a yellow plastic sewing box.

Before, it had not been uncommon for the students to sigh heavily and grow downhearted by the end of the day when dinner was over but recently that mood had all but disappeared.

Today's meal was *konjac*, arum root. As usual, it was boiled with a bit of green vegetable and whale oil. The child was delighted to get it, cut up as it was into little squares and carried to him in the candy tray that he balanced on his knees. At first he just stared at it for a while. To get down to the business of eating, he stuck one of his chopsticks into a square of jiggly *konjac* and brought it up to his mouth, and then he just looked at two squares that he had managed to stab with his chopsticks and now held in both hands.

Takeko chastised him. "Shinbō, such bad manners!"

Fumiko broke in, "Oh, what's the harm? Let him do as he likes."

Masako was busy sewing clothes for the child.

"You know, if you hang that out to dry with the rest of our clothes, no one will even notice," said Fumiko, which made Masako smile ruefully.

"Are you trying to say this looks more like a pillowcase?"

Originally a long hand towel, she'd cut a hole out of its center and just used tape to hem the edges. The child would have to put his head through the hole, and under each arm would be strings in two places to pull it taut and tie it around him. Masako was busy sewing into place eight string ties, one by one.

Just then, a student came by from one of the other rooms.

"Bath time—tonight's our turn. Shinbō! What, you are still eating? But it's time to go for your bath."

"Alright now, you heard her, it's bath time. Let's finish up. You certainly made a long meal of that."

As he stuffed the last bit of *konjac* in his mouth, Takeko cleared everything away. She picked up his chopsticks and went to wash the dishes.

"Give me just one minute before he goes," Masako said, cutting the final thread.

"Shinbō, come and try this on." She made him change into the towel outfit.

"What do you think, does it look funny?" Masako pushed the child towards the other students so they could see.

"Well, it looks a bit like a samurai's *kamishimo*,³ doesn't it? The way it fits in the shoulders," one girl said.

"What if you dropped it here a bit... like this?" said another, tugging down the towel squared off at the shoulder.

Masako nodded, “Yes, that’s good,” and she helped the boy out of it. She tapped the naked boy on his little back. “Go on now, just as you are. See you later,” she said.

“Aren’t you coming?” asked Sakiko as she and the others headed after him. But Masako waited for Takeko to return, sewing on a diagonal the shoulder portion of the hand towel still warm from contact with the child’s body.

It had been more than twenty days since the child had come. In that time Takeko had received two letters from home. The first letter simply confirmed that her family understood to let her know if anyone contacted them, but so far no one had come forward. The second mentioned nothing of the matter.

“I’m starting to get worried,” Masako said to Takeko when she got back. “Something must’ve happened to Shinbō’s mother...”

“No, I don’t think so.” Takeko sat down next to Masako after putting away the child’s dishes. “She was here when rations were being handed out. At the very least, we know she wasn’t killed in the air raid, right?”

“But afterwards... I mean, that she would take no notice of the lost-and-found reports. There must be some reason why she hasn’t figured out that we’re looking for her and so she can come and get him.”

“Let’s wait it out for as long as it takes. In the meantime, the rainy season will pass. Who knows, next time there is an air raid we could get hit. Probably bombed, since this is a factory after all. Me, you, Shinbō, all of us, we’ll all just die. That’ll be it,” Takeko stated bluntly. She probably meant to ease Masako’s more minor worries by making an extreme comparison. And yet, she was not just making wild speculations but pointing out something all too likely to happen, something all too dark. Masako shrank in fear from this possibility, and Takeko immediately felt it too.

Both held their breaths, silent. After a moment more, Takeko spoke.

“Sorry. That was a weird thing to say,” she said in a hushed voice. But that only made matters worse. Such words hinted at other meanings, even darker portents. Shadows fell over both their faces.

The others returned from the bath, pushing the child ahead of them.

“Look at how nice and clean Shinbō is!” One of the girls cried out to Masako and Takeko.

The child was wearing a *yukata*, his face freshly washed and radiant. Another student had donated her sleeping robe, and with her roommates

had only finished making it into a child's *yukata* the day before. On it, four or five dragonflies rested on small pink flowers of various kinds, their wings wrapping around the child.

"Oh Shinbō, how cute you are!" At Masako's words, the child looked down at the dragonflies.

Someone called out, "Shinbō? Of everyone here, who do you like the best?"

"Auntie."

"Aw, of course, Auntie! Who is second?"

"Big sister Sakiko."

"Next?"

The child peered at Takeko and Fumiko, thinking hard. Finally he decided, and cried out firmly, "I'm not going to say anything more!"

"Well I'll be damned."

The room erupted in laughter. The child was unfazed, and he turned to the last girl who had asked him the question. "Shall I *kun kun* for you?"

"*Kun kun*? What is that?"

"I always do *kun kun* for mama."

"How is it done?"

"First, you have to be the baby."

"You mean like this?" The girl lay down on her side.

"No. Like a baby, face down."

The girl changed her position. The child turned his back on her, and dug his heels into the soles of her feet sticking out from her *yukata*, and then started pumping up and down on her feet with his heels.

"Ah, so this is *kun kun*. That really does the trick, Shinbō."

With the steady bouncing of the child's heels, the girl's feet bent beneath the pounding, and the top of each foot tapped the tatami mat floor. Unable to take her eyes from the scene before her, Masako felt pangs of jealousy.

The girl lying down turned her face over to the other side, announcing to the girls gathered there, "This really does feel good." She closed her eyes.

Masako picked up the towel outfit resting on her knees. She went back to work sewing the diagonal on the shoulder.

Off to the side, someone spoke up. "Shinbō, do me next."

"Okay."

"You have to do it for everyone."

“Okay.”

The girl lying down spoke then, her eyes still closed. “After you do everyone, you have to do me again.”

Everyone laughed, except Masako. Everyone’s laughter, their words, it all suddenly struck her as barbarous. She looked down at her sewing, and pushed the needle in and out.

Then Fumiko spoke up in a teasing voice, “Auntie’s mad, Shinbō, because you didn’t do *kun kun* for her first.”

The child continued pedaling as before but he spoke to Masako now, as if to cater to her wishes. “Auntie, you want me to do *kun kun* for you too?”

“No need.” In an instant, Masako’s brusque reply threw cold water over everyone’s fun. Hastily, she tried to turn it all into a joke. “I mean, look, if I say I don’t need it, what’re you going to do about it, Shinbō?”

“Not do it.”

“Not do it! But why not?”

“Why not? That’s the way it goes.”

Everyone started to laugh, and Masako, despite herself, gave a twisted smile. And yet, she was startled to realize her dark feelings had not gone away.

No one knew better than Masako what she owed to all her roommates, and the other students too, for all they had done to help her, especially with the child to take care of. Still, she didn’t like how the child was gradually becoming a communal possession. If she were to make some kind of point about the way the child was being used, then later, when it came time to ask someone for a favor, she would really have to flatter and cajole that person even when she didn’t feel like it. And now—as if now were the right time to assert any of her selfish displeasure!—her bad mood had come out, despite herself, for everyone to see. She was annoyed to see the child behaving like everyone’s pet and all the girls making him into one, each competing to be the most pleasing in the eyes of all the other girls. In the end she had only the child to take it out on.

She was even jealous of the boy’s *yukata* with its dragonflies just as she was taking such care to make this makeshift towel outfit for him. She stuffed it behind her and directed her words at the child. “Shinbō, your Auntie is going away soon.”

She meant that the day was fast approaching when she could go out of the compound to deliver the reports.

“Where’re you going?” Taken by surprise, the child stopped pedaling. It had worked.

“I’m going home.”

“You’re really leaving?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

The child’s eyes grew bigger by the minute, and tears welled up in them. That did it, now she had the proof she needed, and yet she continued, her words cruelly teasing.

“Because I don’t like you anymore.”

The child started bawling. Looking at him, Masako felt her mind become clear and calm for the first time.

Sakiko reproached her. “That’s nothing to joke about.”

The other girls rushed to console Shinbō, telling him that his Auntie wasn’t going anywhere, and then promptly correcting themselves. “No, wait, she is going but, don’t worry, she’s going to come back to Shinbō very soon.” Masako started to feel ill.

Masako pulled the child to her. “Shinbō, let me be honest, I have to go because I have to go on an errand. But I’ll soon be back. I won’t even stay overnight. Before you know it, I’ll be right back here with you.”

Hearing her own words, deep down Masako felt Takeko’s jinx come to life. Soon be back? So that she and this boy could die together? As she consoled him, these questions arose in her mind and she tried to think them through.—*Anything could happen and cause me to die this very night.—I don’t want to die with the child. I don’t want to die with anyone.—But of course, we probably will die together. What a meaningless “togetherness,” for me, and for the child.*

The more Masako thought about the hollowness of this kind of “togetherness,” the closer she felt to the child, and the closer she felt to the truth.

“I’ll be back,” Masako repeated, intently. “And look, I’m not leaving you alone. I wouldn’t do that. I’ll be back, soon.”

The child had mostly stopped crying by then. Watching him, Masako felt a painful lump in her throat, one that seemed only to grow. She covered her face with both hands.

From the corner of the room Takeko murmured, “What a strange night this is turning out to be.”

. . .

Finally the day came for Masako to carry the reports out of the compound.

At 7:50 a.m., all the mobilized students stood in lines in the yard facing the factory. Lieutenant Sakamoto followed four of the teachers to his place in front of the students, and stood at attention. He saluted, and called roll. Then, all together they chanted the full text of the “Imperial Rescript for Students and Youth.”⁴

Masako must’ve recited these lines hundreds of times. But never before had she recited it with such fresh emotion, so loudly. When it was over, she didn’t join the other girls preparing to get swallowed up by the factory. She was going to leave. She was going to head in the direction of the school and home—just leave. She was the only one of all the girls who carried an air raid bag hanging from her shoulder, and she tightened her grip on it with one hand. She had received it that morning from the Mobilization Affairs Office. The reports, her leave authorization, and some dried bread for her lunch were already inside. She pressed the flap on the bag tightly shut as she recited again the final words of the Rescript: “In the Name of the Emperor.”

The lines of students had started to move. Lieutenant Sakamoto and the teachers were about to go. Masako took one step out of line, and hesitated. The lines gained momentum, surged forward, and finally left Masako in their wake.

“Surely I can go now,” Masako thought, and she headed to the gate. Looking back, she saw several faces at the factory window watching her. She lifted her hand. Someone—it was hard to know who—waved, and Masako waved back furiously.

It was a beautiful day. The rainy season had ended, and summer had come.

The road built by the military gleamed white in the bright sunshine. Masako recognized that unique morning stench that greeted her from the burnt out ruins ahead. The smell of burnt trees, fragments of glass, rusted tin—all were the barest signs of human beings having lived there. The only thing unchanged was the military road.

Along the way stood a burnt-out shack on the side of the road. Through the entry way a woman crouched before a fire pit made of stones, roasting some soy beans she had put in a squared-off empty can. As Masako passed

by, she asked the woman, “Do you know if there used to be a family around here named Sugao? With a young boy, and some infants...?”

The smoke appeared to get in the woman’s eyes just then. With one hand, she continued roasting the beans while the other went to her eyes, and she answered Masako without looking at her.

“Never heard of them.”

Masako thanked her, and hurried on to the station.

The train was empty. As it approached the city, it got increasingly crowded. At one large station, the train tracks were littered with burnt out train cars. So that’s why it is so crowded, she thought, all the train cars are damaged ...

The crowds grew still more as she switched to the subway. Since transportation above ground was now so disrupted, people tried to go underground. But finding a way underground was not so easy either. The line of waiting passengers stretched upwards above ground, and out of the station buildings.

Having bought her ticket in the station underground, Masako took her place at the end of the line on the street above. It gave her the chance to look around and see how the city had been completely altered.

As she waited in line Masako saw that no part of the city remained untouched from the fires and bombing, even if it had not been completely wiped out like the working-class residential area she had seen earlier in the day. At the crushed ruins of a gas station a horse’s front legs dangled brokenly on a “Pegasus” sign, and the building’s row of charred and blackened windows were like so many eye sockets in a skull. In the shadows of these ruins moved the forms of exhausted people. One man sat on some crumbling stone steps, looking like someone who might never move again.

The line hardly advanced at all. To get to the school, she would have to take the subway to the end of the line and then transfer to another private railway.

—But somehow or other, she made it. It had been a year since she had last passed through the high school’s front gates.

She went to the Student Affairs Office, and met with the head teacher, who was its chief administrator. When she gave him the envelope that it was her duty to bring, he asked, “So how are things at the factory?” Masako wasn’t sure how to answer that.

“Is everyone doing okay?”

Masako wanted to tell the head teacher how grateful everyone was to him, this man who had made it possible for the new reporting system for the students—how much each of them looked forward to delivery day. But she was too eager. What she said instead came out in a rush.

“Everyone wants to come back to school. We fear we won’t be able to come back by September next year, which is when we’re supposed to graduate.”

“Ah, so that’s what everyone’s saying...” He offered Masako a chair. “We want to do something about that, you know.” Then, as if talking to himself, he added. “It will soon be twenty years since I first came to this school.” He went on.

“It was the beginning of the Shōwa era, around 1926, and a student from this school had just tried to commit a love suicide at the Miyako Hotel in Nara with a student from the university. Luckily, they failed. Up until two or three years ago, nothing in my life had caused me more trouble than that. But now the things that trouble me...”

The school bell sounded. When it ceased, Masako spoke hurriedly. “I completely understand. You’ve done everything you could for us.”

From somewhere in the empty school buildings came an echoing babble of voices, and someone who looked like a first-year student came in the room to ask the head teacher something.

A love suicide with a university student—that gave Masako pause. *Here we are doing our best to cling to what is left of our lives, and they were ready to so easily throw it away in that Miyako Hotel in Nara. What a luxury! To have such an extravagant event back then, at the beginning of Shōwa.*

The first-year student left.

“These students too will soon be gone. A gunpowder factory. They have already used up their four months of schooling. I did this and that to try to get them placed at a different kind of factory but they ended up there anyway. Everything was a little better back when we had to place your class.” The head teacher picked up the envelope Masako had brought, “Alright then, I guess I should look this over.”

Masako stood up, “I’ll take a walk around.”

She heard the second bell as she ascended the stone steps. The sound of voices had escaped from a classroom somewhere near the end of the corridor on the second floor, where the windows were open on both sides. But this only made the silence returning to the hallway before her with all

its windows now closed even more conspicuous, even more lonely. Masako went to the classroom at the end of the corridor and opened the door to peek inside. She was immediately overwhelmed by the combined smell of dust and dank humidity. She went to open a window that faced onto the schoolyard below.

“Well, well.” A teacher, book in hand, stood in the doorway. “Welcome home.”

“It’s certainly been a while.”

“I’ve been assigned to your factory next month. I’ll get to see all of you again then.” He gestured toward the classroom next door, and added, “Hey, why not join us in reading class, seeing as you have come all this way?”

“If you let me be a first-year student like them again,” Masako replied. “And fail me every year. If you do that, then every four months I’ll commute between home and school.”⁵

“Hmmm, I see. But you would also have no exams so I would find it hard to fail you, right? So, what do you think, do you want to sit in on the class?”

In the end, Masako didn’t go. But despite herself she was drawn to the door adjoining the next classroom, and listened in on the class lecture. She heard the faint mumble of a student who appeared to be translating an English text into Japanese, but it was abruptly cut off by the teacher’s clear voice.

“‘She put that on his head...’ you say?—Well now, that *is* a bit strange.” Everyone laughed. “It should be ‘She made him notice it.’”

That’s from *Little Women*, Masako thought. Last year at this time, Masako and the others had read that same passage.

Masako wandered around the dusty classroom as she recalled several hastily held lessons she had had in this school. *I see now*, she thought, *this classroom is supposed to be ours, for the second-year students*. Yet it was a room where they’d never had even one minute of lessons. They’d had no chance to experience what it was like to be rushed by the morning bell to reach their classrooms out of breath, or to blush furiously when called upon to solve a difficult problem in class, or to be fascinated by a lecture and suddenly feel their hearts soar at something ineffable that only later would open their eyes to pleasures hard to grasp in the moment.

Masako approached a desk that should have been hers. She blew off the dust and sat down. Staring at the blackboard, she settled down into the

seat. With a lurch. A nail seemed to be missing from one of the back legs. She replaced the chair with one at the back of the classroom, and left.

At the Student Affairs Office, the documents she had to carry back to the factory were sealed in the envelope. “Okay, well—take care.”

“Thanks. Oh, and this, please.” Masako handed him the authorization paper for her leave, discreetly turning it over. She was supposed to get him to record the time she had arrived and departed.

“Oh, right.”

Masako watched the nib of the head teacher’s pen. The pen moved, marking first 10:30 a.m., and then 3:30 p.m. But according to the school clock it was not yet 11:00 a.m. Sure enough, it was as all the other girls had said. The head teacher then stamped it, and smiling, handed it to her.

“I must say you really are an exceptional student. Some girls go home first. One didn’t even show up here until almost 4:00 p.m., all in a rush.”

But for Masako her home was on the same private railway line as the school, and only about fifteen minutes away. The order of business depended on geography.

“I’m home!” Masako cried out in a loud voice as she entered the front door. Her father came in from the back garden where he had been stoking a fire in a small stove. He nodded, smiling, and then disappeared right away, calling loudly for her mother.

They sat down on cushions facing each other, and the mother looked her daughter over from head to foot. “You’ve gotten a little taller, no?”

“Perhaps I have.”

Her younger sisters were both at work at their factory, commuting each day. It had been a long time since she had had her mother to herself, which left her somehow shy and choked up. She didn’t feel so well.

“Where did Papa go?”

“He is heating up a bath for you. He took off from work for the day because you were coming home. You wait here. I’ll get some dinner started.” Her mother stood up.

“Papa. Join her over there,” her mother called.

He came in, holding a single sheet of paper that he wanted to show Masako. The printed characters on the flyer were in a low-quality blue ink and looked as if they had been clumsily written by hand. It read: “We have not forgotten the south—Truman.”

“Where did you get your hands on this kind of thing?”

“From over by the heater for the bath... It was dropped from the air.”

The central areas of the city had been burnt to the ground by air raids but not here in the southern residential areas.

Masako set the sheet of paper aside in distaste.

“It is good that you could come before the house gets burned down. You’ve already been to the school?”

“Yes. They even praised me for having gone by there first before coming home.”

“How long can you stay?”

“I have to leave just before three.”

“Not much time, is there? Hey, the bath is ready.”

Her mother interrupted from the kitchen doorway. “Dinner’s ready now too.”

“Which is first?” asked her father.

“Hmm, the bath, I guess...”

“Right! Just let me adjust the water temperature first.” Her father hurried toward the bath area. There came the sound of water rushing from the pipes into the tub. Going to pains to please her, he had probably boiled the water too long.

Is this what she had so looked forward to for months on end? Masako felt disappointed.

“What time do you go home?” Her mother was asking. Masako didn’t answer.

“She told me three,” her father informed her.

In her mind, Masako wondered. *Could these people really be enjoying all this so much? Even though they know the enemy has not forgotten the south. And me, at a factory. This is probably the last time for me to be here... I really must be nice to these people.* But her heart furiously asked something else: *Is this it? Is this what I have wanted for so long?*

Her mother came in.

But Masako avoided her by going out to the verandah. There, she gazed at the expanse of summer sky stretching out overhead. It was a high and clear azure, with the cumulous clouds of midsummer sparring with each other. In their freedom, they made her want the days that should belong to her.

What she had wanted was to see a world of peace, freedom, prosperity. Not this. Her arms and legs were worked to exhaustion at the factory. Her head was used for nothing more than counting summer underwear. She

knew she was tough but still, and again the sense of unfairness weighed heavily on her heart.—*No, not this. I want a living and breathing body and mind—and a larger life, one where I can really live, in a world where I can actually feel, and think, and experience things.*

Masako recalled a story often told about the day she was born. It was her mother's first time to give birth. And yet on the morning when it was due, the baby had leaped out without a moment's hesitation. You'd have thought it expected the world to be chock full of wonderful things and just couldn't wait to get started... Recalling that child along with her own recently passed nineteenth birthday, Masako couldn't help but see just how precious that child was.

. . .

No matter what, I have to get that child back to its mother, Masako thought, as she turned into the front gate at the factory.

She had begun to think that all their clinging to small diversions and acts of rebellion was petty, and rather ugly.

If she considered matters from the child's side, their acts were hardly trivial. *I'll go there directly now—no, okay, tomorrow will be soon enough. If only I'd made the report right away, we might have more readily located the child's mother. She probably had to sleep in the open that first night after their home was burnt down, but by now they're likely living together with some distant relatives or something... It doesn't matter who I tell, whether it is the Lieutenant or the teachers—I'm reporting him. I don't care how harsh a scolding I get, I'm going to take responsibility and make that report.*

But decisive action on Masako's part was put off for the time being—and then it was put off again by an hour, a day, a week.

When Masako got back, she checked in with Lieutenant Sakamoto. He said, "I guess you will be ready to work twice as hard tomorrow." With this indirect reference to the report delivery system, he was really saying, "I know all about that little arrangement between you girls and your school." Who could blame her for being afraid to report the child to this man? And then how quickly her affection had reignited when the child rushed to her, crying out, "Auntie is back!" Is it any wonder she felt ashamed to ignore the kindness of the others who on all sides had clamored,

“Shinbō was so worried about you! He didn’t know whether you would really come home or not.”

Deep down, Masako’s pangs of conscience about reporting the child stemmed more from nagging feelings of procrastination as she avoided an unpleasant task than from any real wish to return the child to its mother.

That things had turned out the way they had so far just could not be helped. It was not necessarily the case that the child would be returned to his mother even if she reported him now, and his mother apparently had not even gone to the police to look for him. Just by reporting him, who knows what kind of misfortune might befall him at this point? If he could not be with his mother, then there was no better place in the world for him than with them. By now, Masako had come to believe this.

While it might be a bizarre kind of charity, she reassured herself, she wanted to give him some measure of happiness despite the unhappiness of being separated from his mother (if he ever felt unhappy, mind you). She understood all too well how bizarre this logic was. And yet, she still felt that “all things considered, up until this point...” she had acted out of charity under makeshift conditions.

It was just past 10 a.m. when all the girls’ hands that were hard at work stopped at once. The ringing bell was neither a warning nor sounding an air raid. The bell was not supposed to go off until noon but here it was ringing throughout the compound.

What is going on? Just as the girls were starting to realize something unusual was afoot, Lieutenant Sakamoto rushed into the room. He shouted, “Cease work! Go outside and get in your lines.” Then he ran out again.

Masako had gone pale. She moved to Takeko’s side and, as everyone hurried out into the yard, whispered. “Have they found out?”

“I don’t think so. If that were the case, they would’ve called only us out. Take a look.” Masako looked in the direction in which Takeko was pointing, and sure enough, the students from the other school and even the regular men and women laborers were also forming lines.

Still, simply waiting to learn why they were being assembled in this fashion was enough to make Masako’s knees wobble terribly.

When everyone had settled into silence, the head of the factory appeared and spoke. “Today an inspection team from the Military Clothing Depot Headquarters in Tokyo will arrive in the afternoon. We have just been informed of this. We want you to start getting this place in tip-top

shape right away. Lunch will be served from 12:30 p.m. today. As soon as you finish eating, get back here and be in your lines by the time the bell rings at five minutes to 1:00 p.m.”

Then the Lieutenant turned to face the lines of students. “For the next thirty minutes, get your workplaces in order. Before the next bell rings at 12:30, clean the dormitories. When you are finished, be sure not to lock the doors. The inspection team will need access as they go around the compound.” Then he gave the order for them to disperse.

While they were getting their various worksites straightened up, girl after girl sought Masako out, whispering, “What’re we going to do about the child?” The girls rushed to cheer Masako up, sure she was the one most worried. They offered encouraging words of support as they came to her side to help her take out the trash, or carry a coil of rope, saying that they would find a way out of this, and if worse came to worst everyone would stand together.

“They may say that but are they willing to ask their teachers to hide the child in the wardrobes of their rooms?” Sakiko spoke to Masako, plunging the cleaning rag back into the water in the bucket despite having just wrung it out. Masako shook her head. How could they ask their teachers for such a favor at this point?

Thirty minutes had passed. Running here and there to put things in order, Masako was scrambling about in her mind too, seeking some way to hide the child.

How about cajoling him into the closet and getting him to hide behind the futons? The inspectors would probably only take a glance in each room from the doorway, and probably wouldn’t hear him even if he cried a little in the dark. But that presented its own dangers. A large futon could fall on that little child from above and smother him. It was so hot and humid in the closet, and with no one to hear him, finally his sobs would end, completely muffled... *I would never do such a thing to him.* Masako knew this, but just as she resolved never to be so careless she also experienced a brief surge of some fresh new feeling linked to the glimpse of a possible accident.

Masako could hardly wait for Sakiko to open the lock with her key before pulling open the door to make sure the child was still there. He was playing with a piece of wood among his building blocks.

“My, my, but aren’t we early? We have things to do today.” At Sakiko’s words the child replied, disappointed, “Oh, it’s not lunchtime yet?”

Masako paid him no mind as she opened the futon closet and climbed into the top shelf to push here and there on its ceiling. But there was no give anywhere.

“What are you doing?” Fumiko asked.

“Um, nothing.” Masako jumped down. “I just thought that there might be a crawl space behind the ceiling where we might...” Her eyes went to the child.

Next Masako dragged out a trunk, and stood it up on one end in the corner of the room. “Could you lend me a hand and hold this down?” A girl held onto the trunk as she climbed on top of it and again began pressing on the ceiling boards. She could see the hands on her wristwatch looking down at her, showing six minutes past noon. Only twenty-four minutes left. She became hot and flushed.

Several students came in, peppering Fumiko and Sakiko with questions.

“What’re we going to do?”

“What did she say was the plan?”

“Make sure Shinbō has a chance to pee.” Masako spoke while still looking up at the ceiling.

“Pee? Oh, right. Do it here.” Sakiko set down a bucket. Before long, they heard a vigorous splash.

That sound overlapped with the noise of footsteps in the corridor, just before a bunch of girls barreled in with Takeko in the lead. She asked, “Where’s the child?”

“He’s peeing.” “Right now, he’s taking a pee here.”

Takeko moved about impatiently, pulling Masako down from the trunk to ask in a barely controlled voice. “If we don’t do something fast, we will be in big trouble. Put him in that, right away. That one, that barrel...”

Barrels could be found at five locations around the compound, originally used to hold sake in the fermenting process but now used to store water to put out fires. A small tatami room could fit inside one of those large vats, and to fill them with water required a fire hose thrown up and over its top. Three small spigots were affixed closer to ground level.

Not too far from Masako's dormitory was one of these barrels, but it was hardly used because it leaked so badly. That was the one that Takeko was talking about. It was tall enough to block by almost two-thirds a window on one side of the corner room on the second floor of the building beside it. Without climbing out onto the windowsill, a grown man could not see inside, and there was no place to see anyone getting in and out of it from ground level outside thanks to its impressive girth.

The child had just finished up when Masako, doing her best to sound calm, said, "Hey there. We're just about to do some cleaning around here, but not the usual cleaning, I mean a *big* cleaning..."

"Uh-huh."

"That's why, Shinbō, we want to take you to a really fun place while we do that."

"Is Auntie coming too?"

The child had a worried look on his face. Masako got concerned, he may have noticed something.

"Don't be silly. Auntie and your big sisters are all going to clean, right? And then we have to go back to work. But as soon as break time rolls around, I'll come and get you. The place is really close by." Someone was poking her in the back, urging her to hurry.

Takeko joined in. "Shinbō, it is a house made out of a barrel! Doesn't that sound fun? Shinbō can pretend to be a rabbit, or a squirrel inside a barrel."

"Okay."

All around, palpable relief.

"You'll have to be a good boy while playing by yourself. Well, let's go! I'll help you carry your blocks." Masako held some pieces of wood, while Takeko followed her, carrying Shinbō. Masako did her best to walk slowly—*I mustn't frighten the child*—but her steps hastened in spite of herself.

The other students were already in the corner room on the second floor waiting for them. When they showed up, the girls there cried out, "They're here! They're here!"

They had made some arrangements already, hooking a metal piece from the rope ladder onto the edge of the barrel near the window, and now they were looking down into the sake vat.

Masako found a foothold on the fat metal rim of the giant barrel, and looked down inside. The rope ladder went down and down, into the deep, and surprisingly wide-bottomed, barrel.

“This is not going to work,” she said. “Somebody get inside first. He’s going to get scared otherwise.”

Right away, three girls disappeared into the barrel.

“Alright, now Shinbō’s turn.” Everyone urged.

“What about lunch?” Shinbō asked.

“I have it, I have your lunch,” one girl said. She rushed to the closet, stuck her head inside, and flew back to him with four or five dried sweet potatoes that she shoved into his hands. “See, here you go.”

“I’ll take him down,” Masako said, pulling the boy to her.

“Yes, that’s good. It is best that Auntie do it.” Everyone laughed, nervously.

Masako placed her feet on the rungs of the rope ladder and passed through the top of the sake barrel, grasping the edges with both hands.

“Okay, give me Shinbō.”

The child was carried to her, his hands full with dried sweet potatoes.

“Wait, save those for later. Together with the blocks—both for later.” Masako had someone take the sweet potatoes from the boy. One arm stretched out to grasp the metal rim of the sake vat while she held Shinbō with the other, but before long she could not bear his weight and felt the hand on her stiffened arm start to lose its grip.

“Take him,” Masako groaned. The child was pulled back up. “He is really heavy. I’ll have to carry him on my back.”

Masako leaned forward towards the window, offering her back. “Now hold on tight,” she said to the weight on her back.

But someone above called out, “That’s too dangerous. Wait, hold still, just like that—I’ll tie him to you.”

Slowly the bottom of the sake barrel came into view beneath Masako. *Ah, we made it.* The three students waiting inside the barrel took the child from her back.

Two more students came down, one clasping the sweet potatoes, the other the building blocks.

Masako peered closely at the child while wrapping the sweet potatoes in a handkerchief. “As soon as there’s a break, I’ll come right back. So be a good boy until then.”

The child dragged a hand along its walls as he walked pensively around the bottom of the barrel, as if he had yet to reach a verdict about being happy or sad about being there. Meanwhile, Masako casually put her hand on the rope ladder. The others followed after her.

Once back in the room, Masako looked down. The child was surely looking up but any such gaze was swallowed up midway in the darkness of the barrel. How much smaller and weaker did the small child seem in the bottom of such a large, wide sake barrel.

“That sake barrel still reeks of alcohol,” Masako fretted.

“What, you think Shinbō will get alcohol poisoning in there? Hardly,” said Takeko.

“It’s just so empty and exposed... Oh, we must clean! Clean! Only eleven minutes to go.”

The last of the students jumped out and over the top edge of the barrel. Hand over hand, the rope ladder was pulled up so quickly that it seemed to pour into the room. Masako put her foot on the windowsill, trying to get one last look at the child. But someone from behind pulled her away.

. . .

The inspection ended without incident.

Standing in their lines inside the factory at the work site, Masako and the other girls were granted a few words of praise from the chief inspector. One phrase stood out: “In a state of war, all of us are heartened by your doing your little part as befits female students...” The day’s evaluation was apparently good because Lieutenant Sakamoto was ebullient. When work ended at 5 p.m., he even told them, “You had no breaks today and I’m sure you are all tired. Go on, I’d like you to take a good rest.”

“No break” was right. They not only had had no mid-day break, but the 3 p.m. break too had been cancelled.

Masako was exhausted.

All the while at work, she had done nothing but worry about the child. *Is that corner room being inspected right now? Is the child crying? Surely he’s sobbing, with no idea of when I’m coming back? Did they peek inside the barrel?* —When the row of inspectors appeared suddenly at their work site, she had felt keenly the stabs of yet another kind of uneasiness. At one point she had cringed in fear when military men showed up at the work room, their chests decorated with war medals, soon followed by two

soldiers with few to no medals, then both the factory head and Lieutenant Sakamoto, all heading straight for her.

In between such events, Masako was anxious about sun exposure. The child was not used to sunlight. They should have given him some water at least. Overall the day had been pretty cloudy but every time the sun's rays shone strongly through the window she worried he may have collapsed from heatstroke.

From the time the bell had rung earlier in the day and she had had to rush about in a panic, worrying about every detail at a feverish pitch, until now, it felt as if Masako's whole body had been being wantonly buffeted this way and that.

She hurried towards the second floor the minute they were released from work. In passing by the toilet area she realized that she had not gone even once since early morning, surely due in part to all the stress. Now, suddenly, she could not wait another minute.

She relieved herself, came out of the stall and went to the faucets. At that moment, one of two students standing nearby motioned for her to come over, "Just for a minute."

"What is it?"

Their eyes were trained on something beyond the window's pane. She followed their gaze.

"Look. At that!"

Masako didn't yet see what they were talking about.

"It's wet," one said.

The three walked over to the base of the sake barrel and crouched down. It was sopping wet all around their feet. Now she could see clearly what had been obscured by the distance and angle of the view from the window in the T-shaped washroom jutting out from the dormitory: a terrifying amount of water.

Masako looked up at the sides of the sake barrel. She put her hand on its wet wooden surface, and spoke in a voice like one whose tongue had burnt and shriveled. "Someone filled it with water."

She tried one spigot but, in horror, could not turn it on. Finally one of the other girls gave it a try. From the wide mouth of the spigot the water came gushing out.

In the corner room on the second floor, Masako sat off by herself, hugging her legs and trembling. Students overflowed the room and the

hallway outside it, and soon the faces of the Lieutenant and two teachers appeared among them. The military doctor and a nurse stood off to one side. The room groaned under the weight of all the people. Ashen-faced, Takeko proceeded to the room's center where suddenly she cried out, causing the Lieutenant to rush to her.

But Masako heard nothing anyone said. The Lieutenant cast several piercing glances her way but she paid him no mind, unafraid.

For the hundredth time, and to no one in particular, she repeated, "Is there still so much water in there?"

The child is submerged. The water will have to be drained. Before long, the three small spigots had been fully opened. Frozen in fear, Masako could hear nothing but the terrifying sound of gushing water slamming into her ears. Only one other thing reached her. "The building blocks are floating."

The child was given injection after injection, and given artificial respiration. As one, they all stooped over him, watchful for any sign. Masako was at the very front.

The naked child on the respirator had both arms arched over his head, and his nipples that were nothing but markings on his body appeared to drift upwards as if to join them. Several times Masako caught her breath, as when they seemed to have moved with a sudden lurch. But in the end it was just that his arms had been lowered, and fixed in place by his sides.

The military doctor stood up, and the nurse started to put away their instruments.

Masako shifted her position. She touched the small chest of the dead child. "Is there nothing you can do?" The words came out despite herself, and for the first time, tears.

A student clasped her hands together in prayer, and everyone else followed suit. Automatically, Masako too folded her hands.

"How awful that must have been for him."—*To have had all that water pouring down on your little head as the water level just kept rising. You slipped in the water, with nothing to hold onto in the bottom of the barrel, you kept slipping and falling as you drowned.*—Masako opened her eyes. Someone had tapped her on the shoulder.

"Come to the Mobilization Office right now. You hear me?" The Lieutenant said, and he left the room.

The two teachers spoke then.

"Keep your calm."

“We’ll be right by your side, don’t worry.”
They trailed after the Lieutenant.

. . .

At first, a gag order was issued, demanding the students not speak about the cause of the child’s death. And then began night after night of interrogations by the Lieutenant.

Sometimes it was one, sometimes several students that he called to the Mobilization Office, and at other times he headed to the dormitory. When he came to the dormitory, he searched each of the student’s rooms. The teachers occasionally had to accompany him, and at other times they did not have to go.

No student in her class had escaped at least one beating by the Lieutenant. Even those students who had long had a more distant attitude to the child would say, “I too am responsible. I didn’t speak up against keeping him.”

At which the Lieutenant would respond, “Who asked you to go along with the plan? Why didn’t you speak up?” And then he hit them.

Those students who seemed even a little willing to cooperate with the Lieutenant were questioned more often, and endured to that same degree more beatings at his hands.

The student who had provided the candy tray used for the student’s food container was forced to bring it to him.

“So you say you put it in here. You told him, ‘Eat this,’ and ‘Stay here,’ didn’t you? This is no orphanage! Enough is enough!” He threw the candy tray at her. The student threw up her arm to block it but it hit her on the elbow, and in an instant a round lump swelled up.

The Lieutenant forced the student who had cut up her own nightwear so as to make a *yukata* for the boy to bring all the boy’s clothes to him. She laid them before the Lieutenant. At the sight of all those precious tiny clothes obviously made with such care, the Lieutenant erupted, beside himself with rage. “You went and did all this on top of everything else!” He ripped the clothes into pieces. Later the girl told the others, “That was when I learned that even at the most terrifying moments, there is always something that might make you laugh.”

When the Lieutenant was tearing all the boy’s clothes into shreds, he suddenly picked up the piece of clothing that Masako had sewn for him.

Watching the Lieutenant hold up that little outfit that was nothing but a hand towel with holes cut out of it, saying, “What the hell...?” and truly puzzled at what it was supposed to be—she couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her. In that instant, the Lieutenant sprang for her.

Lieutenant Sakamoto learned about the day-to-day life of the dead child from the students at large. Masako and her roommates were mainly questioned about the boy’s arrival and his death. The students from the corner room were interrogated about his death.

Takeko told the Lieutenant that she was the one who had hatched the plan to put the child in the sake vat. But when some students from the corner room told him that it was they who had come up with the idea, they all then said that they could not remember who had come up with the idea but, anyway, it hardly mattered since they were all used to seeing that barrel every day, and it just seemed the most natural place even if Takeko may have mentioned it first.

No one knew who had been the first to come up with the plan, much less put it into words, aside from the five students from the corner room and Takeko; and yet, when the Lieutenant questioned them, it was as if he wanted it to be Takeko because he already found her to be far too clever with words for her own good. She went along with him, never seeking to dissuade him.

“He said to tell you to come right now,” Masako said to Takeko, upon her own return from questioning.

“Oh?” Takeko replied. She had just glanced at Masako but then did a doubletake, fixing her gaze on her. “What happened to your face!”

“It must be a bit puffy?” Masako put both hands to her cheeks.

“It is not just a little puffy. Go on, take a look in the mirror.”

That evening’s beating by the Lieutenant was far from the first for Masako. He may have been a bit rough, leaving the usual lumps and bruises and stinging her cheeks, but she couldn’t say that this time he had beat her worse than usual.

Yet when she looked in the mirror, she found herself exclaiming, “How awful of him to do this.”

The only part of her face untouched was perhaps her forehead. Her eyes had narrowed, and her nostrils become smaller. Both temples were swollen, her chin doubled, and her whole face was purplish with blue bruises everywhere. Looking at herself in the mirror, Masako was unable to recall her own face.

“Ice it down for her,” Takeko urged the others as she left the room. The other two roommates had yet to receive their nightly punishment.

Masako went to lie down. A wet compress placed on her face felt good. “I’m sorry. Causing so much trouble, and now you have to take care of me.”

Sakiko cut her off. “Don’t say that.”

When Masako was first called to the Mobilization Office just after the child died, her heart was racing and she could not respond to any of the questions. From the second time on, when the questions were about day-to-day goings on, she answered frankly and honestly. But whenever she was asked why she had let the child stay, all she could say was “It was done out of charity.”

At other times she replied by adding two or three other sentences, such as “Because it was too cruel to make him sleep out in the cold,” or “It was already getting dark by that time.” And “We didn’t intend to keep him for long. That’s why we reported him to the police,” or “If I had reported him to the Mobilization Office, I thought that would be the end of it and he would have been sent away.”

She continued to insist that it was out of charity that she kept him, but she knew that it was not because Takeko had persuaded her to do it, and neither was it because she really believed anymore in the makeshift conditions under which “all things considered, up until this point, keeping him here was the greatest kindness anyone could have shown that child.”

The Lieutenant too sensed that there was something more behind Masako’s single-minded repetition that keeping the child had been out of the kindness of their hearts. Just as the interrogation reached the point where Masako would invariably repeat these words, her face must have reflected some persistent obstinacy because that was the moment when the Lieutenant just as invariably raised his hand against her.

That night the Lieutenant had resolved to bring that stubborn hidden meaning out into the open. He came at her on all sides, “Is that all you have to say? You aspired to a bit of charitable kindness? Someone like you?” And as soon as she replied—“Yes, you could put it that way....” he beat her freely.

The Lieutenant and Masako sat at either end of a four-legged table facing each other, with a teacher on each side.

One of the teachers began, sounding rather professorial with his vague open questions meant to encourage discussion. “Well, Miss Sone, there

are various kinds of charitable deeds. So can you tell us what kind of charitable deed this was, and with what intention it was carried out?"

But the Lieutenant kicked aside such a line of questioning right away. "The problem here is not charitable deeds. The problem is that there was nothing charitable about it at all." And he stood up and approached Masako. It was obvious that his interrogation was not going to involve the teachers as anything but spectators. They remained seated stiffly at the table facing each other, their peculiar individual tics emerging as the tension mounted, such as one gradually sticking out his lip while the other squinted his eyes behind thick glasses and audibly—hunh, hunh—breathed.

When it came time for her first blow, as usual she moved to avoid it, even though it was hardly very brave of her to do so. As soon as she saw the Lieutenant stand up from his chair and assume the posture to hit her—*So this is how it is going to be, is it ?...*—she left her chair rocking as she reacted instinctively, seeking any means of escape. The Lieutenant came at her in a rush. She fell back two steps, and stumbled right, trying to evade the best she could. Her only avenues of escape were naturally wherever the two teachers were not. From their fixed gazes anyone could tell that all they wanted was to be as far away from any of this as possible.

Masako repeatedly dodged, and threw up her arms to block the blows, so the Lieutenant had to get in his first three or four punches quickly. By the time she realized the side blow to her cheek had landed, the force of its impact had already doubled. She was filled with pain and heat and shame and anger, all concentrated in her cheek and jostling for dominance.

Not unlike the way these feelings and sensations fought amongst themselves, she herself was screaming inside. *We had no choice but to keep the child—no, even if I tried to tell you my feelings, what it was I wanted, how could you understand? If I thought it was something you could understand, I would tell you. That is how it is, so do what you will to me. No matter what, there is no way you will ever get it.*

"Hey you!—Charity, is it? Are you going to say charity again?" The Lieutenant was speaking. His chest was just before Masako's eyes, several horizontal folds repeatedly wrinkling in his military uniform. By the time she knew what she was looking at, she didn't so much feel the blows glancing off her head anymore, and her anger and her pain had fled. All she felt by then was a fat cheek growing warmer and thicker with every punch. She thought—*Ah, I see now. Perhaps I was wrong to think he*

would never get it. Better to say that, for better or worse, what he can understand is only what we say between us two alone....

—What are the right words that I could use to convey to the Lieutenant what girls like me and Takeko talk about, what we mean when we say, Back then we still had some fire in us, didn't we? Or ask, When will the war be over? Shall I begin by saying that it all started when we were just first-year elementary school students who had to do air raid drills? Then tell him about entering the girls' school and having to wear that sticky rayon uniform, and how we all had really looked forward to putting our school pin through it and wearing it on our chests, but then would I have to tell him too that we saw the pin was nothing but a piece of wood with silver foil wrapped around it?...

Irritation, frustration, bitterness now came flooding into Masako's mind and body at the realization that she would never be able to convey these feelings to the Lieutenant, no matter how hard she tried.

The Lieutenant hit her in the shoulder. He was too close, having already taken two steps forward. A little more distance opened between them, and again she could see those folds wrinkling in his uniform.

—Again, wrinkling.

*I want you to hit me harder. I want you to hit me more furiously. And then, when all my feelings of irritation, frustration, and bitterness that are tearing me up get condensed into one tight little ball I want you to smash it to smithereens. If you were to do that, what a new and refreshing feeling that would certainly be.—*Preoccupied with this vision, Masako let the Lieutenant do as he pleased.

Takeko had come back unexpectedly soon. She showed no visible marks of having been punished but she was trembling with indignation.

Behind her came a teacher. "Now, now, stay where you are," he said to Masako when she tried to get up. He peeled back the towels on both of her cheeks to take a look, and then put them back right away. Then he went over by Takeko's side.

"Look, it was not a crime of involuntary manslaughter. You never... You know full well that after the cleaning was done, the factory head did a quick survey. He is the one who said that it was better that empty

emergency water barrels had water in them, and so he ordered them filled. The factory workers who were following orders did not know about the child when they filled them, and then the child died, right? If it was a crime of involuntary manslaughter then they should be looking at the factory head or those factory workers, not you.”

“Put me on the stand for the crime of involuntary manslaughter.” Takeko was trembling so badly that her voice pitched strangely high and low but yet retained its furious intensity. One would think that rather than having gone out of his way to console her, the teacher had instead tried to bite her.

“It is my fault that the child is dead so if I am put to death for it, so be it. But how can the Lieutenant say what he said? How did he come up with such a ridiculous, perversely warped idea?”

When she later relayed to the other girls what had happened, Takeko told them that the Lieutenant had told her that that very evening he was going to make her confess to involuntary manslaughter. And she had responded, “Go right ahead.” So the Lieutenant had come back with “Go ahead you say? Then go ahead I will. No escape now. Since you killed your own child, after all.”

At first Takeko did not take in just what the Lieutenant meant by those words. And when he repeated them, she thought he meant only that she should confess because “you let a child die who was supposed to be in your loving care.”

But then he went on, taking advantage of Takeko’s silence. “It was a child you yourself gave birth to, wasn’t it? In the confusion on that day you chose to beg off of your distribution duties, and that is when you went out of the compound to go get him...?”

Takeko pleaded her case with the teachers time and time again.

“That child was five. I am still only nineteen. No wait, just go to my old school and ask them, you’ll see that I have never done anything unusual, or ever even taken time off of school. I have never missed one day of school. I have never once wanted to have children, either, much less actually had one.”

The teacher spoke gently. “There is not a soul who believes that, you know.”

“Lieutenant Sakamoto cannot really believe all he is saying either.”

“Well, actually he does.... No—okay, listen, you are looking at this all wrong. The fact is that Lieutenant Sakamoto has a problem. His

problem, in short, is what all of you were doing for more than a month while you were keeping that child here. You see what I mean? And his problem doesn't end with just you and us. It is a problem that is not going to simply go away because over and beyond what happened to the boy, responsibility rests with the Lieutenant, of course, not to mention the head of the factory, for failures in reporting, for their supervisory negligence. You girls apparently want to say that on inspection day the child somehow got in the compound of his own accord, by chance found an unlocked room during inspection, and then got trapped in a barrel used for emergency water storage—but you cannot say that. It may help the Lieutenant somewhat, but think about the guards who committed no crime but certainly committed at least some kind of negligence for having overlooked that child getting in here in the first place. Of course the head of the factory is not going to get off lightly. And in the end, the Lieutenant is just being told from above that he needs to come up with a good idea to solve the problem, but he doesn't have any good ideas. He's not particularly trying to pin everything on you but that's just the way things are, and in the end, we cannot change the fact that the child stayed here and what we did to him. So you see, the Lieutenant does not really believe that the child is your son. —It is just that the Lieutenant is thoroughly at a loss. He is so angry at what you all did for that boy. He is at a breaking point and he cannot help but do these awful things and say things to make you suffer in turn.”

“*With good reason,*” Masako thought, her swollen face throbbing.

Just as we are unable to convey our true feelings to the Lieutenant, we cannot understand what he is going through. With this incident, there will be various problems going forward with his status, and his relationships with the head of the factory and the Military Clothing Depot both. And each one of these problems nags at him, and getting snarled together, harasses the Lieutenant. Even if he were able to talk to us about how unbearable things are for him, who are we to be able to really understand that? At most we might grasp that he is troubled. Deep inside, she was nodding over and over again.

. . .

At lunchtime, Masako was in her room. Nearby, Takeko was writing a letter home. *Remember that child I told you about called Sugao Shinichi?*

Well, please forget all of that. And if people come looking for him due to a police report someone filed, please tell them that you don't recall anyone from our home ever filing such a report, and that someone must have made a report using our address as a contact, but really, who would do such a thing... who knows? Anyway, can I get you to answer like that?—At Lieutenant Sakamoto's order, Takeko wrote a letter home to this effect. When it was done, the Lieutenant would censor it.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the corridor outside. The door opened.

"Here you are. You weren't in the yard so I thought you must be in here. The Lieutenant wants everyone to gather in the hallway downstairs."

When they were lined up, the Lieutenant showed up and carried out roll call. Then he spoke to all the students gathered there.

"The child's mother has come."

The mood suddenly changed. The Lieutenant sensed it, and spoke. "A guard reported that a woman has come asking to meet with the students who were distributing rations on the day of the air raid, and since she says she lost a child here, I met with her. I asked her name. It is her. She came here with her three children after being bombed out of her home, and she confesses that she temporarily abandoned him here. As she put it, everything wasn't completely destroyed by fire here, and we had food. She said she intended to come right back for him. But I told her that no students had reported seeing a lost child that day. So now we cannot tell her otherwise. And of course, there is *that*, too..." By "that," the Lieutenant was referring to the small anonymous jar of ashes and bones kept in the Mobilization Office.

"No matter what we say or do, this is bad. But just in case, she wants to ask you students if you have any memory from that day of having seen a lost child, or having seen anyone dealing with a lost child. I'm going to bring her here. You know nothing. Understood?"

He brought in a gaunt, kindly looking woman who was wearing a white blouse over *kasuri* patterned *monpe* trousers.⁶

"Here we are. Go right ahead," the Lieutenant said to her.

She began her questions, speaking in a low voice. "You are the students who distributed food rations on that day?"

No one answered right away. A few nodded faintly.

"Yes, they are," said the Lieutenant.

“I wonder if you noticed a child who went missing on that day. Just a little boy, of about five?... He was wearing a light blue shirt.”

She spoke almost in a whisper.

“Ohhh.”

Faint voices were heard.

“Raise your hand if you saw anything,” the Lieutenant said, but not a hand lifted.

Masako could not bear it any longer. Ever since the child’s death, her heart had felt as though it were being torn asunder. The teachers had warned them that their crime was to be sealed up tightly inside and never see daylight beyond these walls, which only intensified the pressure that now expanded to full capacity—if only she could release a little of that pressure.

Her heart breaking in two, Masako could no longer hold it in. If she let this chance go by, it would be all over. If only she could lift her hand. She tried to open a window into her heart, her crime.

She hesitated. The Lieutenant would be put on the spot.—That child was not in this compound on that day, nor on the day of the inspection. Whether the boy had been here at all was not even a question. *But in fact that child had come from somewhere and had been inside these walls.*

Something inside Masako was starting to rend. But the Lieutenant’s face was right in front of her.—Where in the world had that child come from? Did he just percolate up from the earth? *No, that’s not it. Well then, how about we say the boy fell from the skies?*

If we say that, Masako thought, then of course the boy would be an angel. He was an angel fallen from the skies who came just for us. And I killed him.—In one fell swoop, her heart cracked in two. It opened wide.

Suddenly, Masako’s right hand was caught. Takeko pressed it down, having stopped it before it reached shoulder level.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

“On the Inside” (塀の中 *Hei no naka*, 1962) is one of the earliest and certainly one of the more autobiographical of Kōno Taeko’s 河野多恵子 (1926–2015) fictional works. Challenges abound in translating Kōno Taeko in general, and this story’s mix of autobiographical, historical, and fictional elements is just one reason for that. The most obvious hurdles are Kōno’s long, often convoluted sentences, twisty syntax, and eccentric use of punctuation (dashes, quotation marks, italics, and ellipses). Despite long sentences, she writes in many short paragraphs, and tends to break long stories overall into multiple sections that allow her to present events and information out of chronological order. Wherever possible, I have tried to retain these characteristics. I preserve the main sections as in the original, which were indicated by breaks in the text, by indicating these section breaks with asterisks. Occasionally, though, time or place shifts occur within sections, which can be confusing for readers. In such instances, I have indicated those shifts by adding a simple line break in the text within the section.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in translating Kōno’s fiction lies in finding the right voices, the apt emotional register, for the narrator and characters. Distinguishing between the interior voices of characters and the narrator’s point of view is the first step to doing that. For instance, movement between the narrator’s perspective and a character’s internal monologue or thoughts is often indicated in the original Japanese text with dashes. However, dashes are also used in the original Japanese to signal changes of speaker in dialogue, making it hard to replicate Kōno’s techniques to the same effect exactly in English. In this translation I use italics to show a character’s interior voice and regular font for the narrator’s report or assessment, and characters’ spoken speech. At certain points, such as the final scene of the story, we see a kind of competition for who gets to tell the story between the voice of the narrator (coherent in offering an objective assessment of characters or events in their physical surroundings) and that of the main character, Masako (whose strong, mixed emotions signal a breakdown in reasoning and her struggle with the internalized threats and ridicule of Lieutenant Sakamoto). Italics help the reader to better see and follow these internal dueling voices.

Masako, followed closely by her friends Sakiko, Fumiko, and Takeko, are at the heart of this story, and these specifically delineated girls are

meant to stand in for all the girls mobilized to the factory as individuals in their commonly shared everyday life during wartime. At times, the speaker is not indicated when the girls are all gathered together, and that either implies a continuation of the main speaker at the time or else the interruption or inclusion of other girls' voices.

These challenges to reading and translating Kōno Taeko result in a rich experience of reading, however. Meanings proliferate in her fiction precisely due to such techniques and her literary style. Please consult the notes to the translation for definitions of certain historical or cultural references in the story. The critical essay “Toddler Hunting in Wartime: Kōno Taeko’s ‘On the Inside’,” also in this volume of *Japanese Language and Literature*, offers an introduction to Kōno in general, and one interpretation of this story in its larger historical and biographical context. Its notes about the title, variant published versions of the story, and daily life in wartime Japan may interest scholars and general readers alike.

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NOTES

¹ A *tanuki* is both an actual animal, commonly known as a “raccoon dog,” and the stuff of tradition and legends. Here, we find an allusion to the latter, the *tanuki*’s reputed magical power and ability to transform into humans, or other animals and objects, in order to wreak havoc or cause mischief, usually at night. See Michael Dylan Foster, “Haunting Modernity: *Tanuki*, Trains, and Transformation in Japan,” *Asian Ethnology* 71.1 (2012): 3–29.

- ² There is little information about the local areas and schools that used these prayers, much less the content of the prayers themselves or when they began to be used in group settings. As we can see in this story, such prayers were recited at mealtime, to thank the emperor as a deity for the bounty of food being received. The Collaborative Reference Database of the National Diet Library (NDL) responded to a patron’s question about the oral history of one such “prayer,” however, and the NDL responded with several examples from local sources (March 13, 2007 created; August 25, 2012, last updated) of the prayer being said at mealtimes in schools from the early 1940s in Shimane Prefecture and in Machida near Tokyo. See online: https://crd.ndl.go.jp/reference/detail?page=ref_view&id=1000072089. The translation here is my own.
- ³ The term *kamishimo* refers to traditional clothing worn by samurai during the Edo Period (1603–1867), consisting of a *kataginu* top and *hakama* pleated bottom garment. In this context, the comparison stresses the top *kataginu*, which is sleeve-less and has broad extended shoulders stiffened with paper.
- ⁴ The short passage of the 1890 “Imperial Rescript on Education” can be found in its entirety and translated at various online sites. See <https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/glossary/imperial-rescript-education>. It espouses the ideologies invested in it by the politicians and Ministry of Education policymakers who created it, as described in detail in Benjamin C. Duke, *The History of Modern Japanese Education: Constructing the National School System, 1872–1890* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2014). These ideologies included Confucian values of filial piety and loyalty, secular ideals about education, as well as emperor worship. Kōno’s story mentions its 1939 revision into the “Imperial Rescript for Students and Youth,” which advocated the same general principles as the original Meiji-era rescript but targeted students. The translation here is my own, adapted from existing translations of the Meiji-era text.
- ⁵ A series of laws were passed to draft or mobilize students along with the general population for the war effort, beginning with the 1938 National Mobilization Law (*Kokka sōdōin hō*). This led in turn to increased local recruitment and patriotic activities by neighborhood associations and organized groups such as the Women’s Volunteer Corps (*Joshi teishintai*) until student labor became compulsory by 1944. Depending on student grade levels and the kind of school, mobilized students were either conscripted to fight on the front lines as soldiers (in the case of boys and men), or conscripted for labor at agricultural sites and factories, in the case of boys, girls, and women. In many cases, first and second-year students of *senmon gakkō* (special girls’ schools or vocational schools) and universities were not mobilized to live away from home at factories (as usually happened if a student was recruited by the Women’s Volunteer Corps) even if their schools had reduced class hours and shortened academic calendars due to

students being required to travel and labor at work sites while attending school; often, third and fourth-year students were mobilized to live away from home to provide labor. However, as the war went on and the labor shortage worsened, stricter conscription laws accompanied manipulation of the academic schedule to move up graduation dates (*sotsugyō kuriage*) so that more students could be mobilized sooner. Masako's joking request of the teacher to make her a first-year student again in this context means Masako would not be mobilized for labor at the factory, and could instead commute from home to work sites while also attending classes at her school.

⁶ The term *kasuri* refers to a traditional resist-dyeing technique applied to fabrics and clothing that originated hundreds of years ago in Southeast Asia and Okinawa to later spread and be developed in local ways at textile centers throughout Japan. This common design is characterized by a blurred, splashed pattern printed or woven into everyday kimono fabrics.