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The House of the Sleeping Beauties

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He was not to do anything in bad taste, the woman of the inn warned old Eguchi. He was not to put his finger into the mouth of the sleeping girl, or try anything else of that sort.

There was this room, of about four yards square, and the one next to it, but apparently no other rooms upstairs. And, since the downstairs seemed too restrict for guests rooms, the place could scarcely be called an inn at all. Probably because its secret allowed none, there was no sign at the gate. All was silence. Admitted through the locked gate, old Eguchi had seen only the woman to whom he was now talking. It was his first visit. He did not know whether she was the proprietress or a maid. It seemed best not asked.

A small woman perhaps in her mid-forties, she had a youthful voice, and it was as if she had especially cultivated a calm, steady manner. The thin lips scarcely parted as she spoke. She did not often look at Eguchi. There was something in the dark eyes that lowered his defenses, and she

seemed quite at ease...

She made tea from the iron kettle on the bronze brazier. The tea leaves and the quality of the brewing were astonishingly good for the place and the occasion... to put old Eguchi more tranquilized. In the alcove hung a picture of Kawai Gyokudō, probably a reproduction, of a mountain village warm with autumn leaves. Nothing suggested it room had unusual secrets.

"And please do not try to wake her. Not that you could, whatever you did. She is soundly asleep and knows nothing."

The woman said it again: "She will sleep on and on and knows nothing at all, from start to finish. Not even who's been with her, You needn't worry."

Eguchi said nothing of the doubts that were coming over him.

"She is a very pretty girl. I only take guests I know I can trust."

As Eguchi looked away his eye fell to his wrist watch.

"What time is it?"

"A quarter to eleven."

"I should think so. Old gentlemen like to go to bed early and get up early. So whenever you're ready."

The woman got up and unlocked the door to the next room. She used her left hand. There was nothing remarkable about the act, but Eguchi held his breath as he watched her. She looked into the other room. She was no doubt used to looking through doorways, and there was nothing unusual about the back turned toward Eguchi.

Yet it seemed strange. There was a large, strange bird on the knot of her obi. He did not know what species it might be. Why should such realistic eyes and feet have been put on a stylized bird? It was not that the bird was disquieting in itself, only that the design was bad. But if disquiet was to be tied to the woman's back, it was there in the bird. The ground was a pale yellow, almost white.

The next room seemed to be dimly lighted. The woman closed the door without locking it, and put the key on the table before Eguchi. There was nothing in her manner to suggest that she had inspected a secret room, nor was there in the tone of her voice.

Here is the key. I hope you sleep well. If you have trouble getting to sleep, you will find some sleeping medicine by the pillow.

"Have you anything to drink?"

"I don't keep spirits."

"I can't even have a drink to put myself to sleep?"

"No."

"She's in the next room?"

"She's asleep, waiting for you."

"Oh!" Eguchi was a little surprised. When had the girl come into the next room? How long had she been asleep? Had the woman opened the door to make sure that she was asleep? Eguchi had heard by an old acquaintance who frequented the place that a girl would be waiting, asleep, and that she would not awake. But now that he was here he seemed unable to believe it.

"Where will you undress?" She seemed ready to help him. He was silent. "Listen to the waves. And the wind."

"Waves?"

"Good night." She left him.

Alone, old Eguchi looked around the room, bare and without contrivance. His eye came to rest on the door to the next room. It was of cedar, some three feet wide. It seemed to be put in after the house was finished. The wall too, upon examination, seemed once to have been a sliding partition, now sealed to form the secret chamber of the sleeping beauties. The colour was just that of the other wall, but it seemed fresher.

Eguchi took up the key. Having done so, he should have entered into the other room. But he remained seated. It was as the woman had said: the sound of the waves was violent. It was as if they were beating against a high cliff, and as if this little house were at its very edge. The wind carried the sound of approaching winter, perhaps because of the house itself, perhaps because of something in old Eguchi. Yet it was quite warm enough with only the single brazier. The district was a warm one. The wind did not seem to be driving leaves behind it. Having arrived late, Eguchi had not seen what sort of country the house lay in. But there had been the smell of the sea. The garden was large for the size of the house, with considerable number of pines and maples. The needles of the pines lay strong against the sky. The house had probably been a country villa.

The key still in his hand, Eguchi lighted a cigarette. He took a puff or two and put it out. But a second one he smoked to the end. It was less that he was ridiculing himself for the faint apprehension than he was aware of an unpleasant emptiness. He usually had a little whiskey before going to bed. He was a light sleeper, given to bad dreams. A poetess who had died young of cancer had said in one of her poems that for her,

on sleepless nights, 'the night offers toads and black dogs and corpses of the drowned'. It was a line that Eguchi could not forget. Remembering it now, he wondered whether the girl asleep... no, put to sleep... in the next room might be like a corpse from a drowning. And he felt some hesitation about going to her. He had not heard how the girl had been put to sleep. She would in any case be in an unnatural stupor, not conscious of events around her, and so she might have the muddy, leaden skin of racked by drugs. There might be dark circles under her eyes, her ribs might show through a dry, shriveled skin. Or she might be cold, bloated, puffy. She might be snoring slightly, her lips parted to show purplish gums. In his sixty-seven years old Eguchi had passed ugly nights with women. Indeed, the ugly nights were the hardest ones to forget. The ugliness had had to do not with the appearance of the women, but with their tragedies, their warped lives. He did not want to add another such episode, at his age, to the record. So ran his thoughts, on the edge of the adventure. But could there be anything uglier than an old man lying the night through beside a girl put to sleep, unawaking? Had he not come to this house seeking the ultimate in the ugliness of old age?

The woman had spoken of guests she could trust. It seemed that everyone who came here could be trust. The man who had told Eguchi of the house was so old that he was no longer a man. He seemed to think that Eguchi had reached the same stage of senility. Probably because the woman of the house, probably because she was accustomed only to make arrangements for such old men, she had turned upon Eguchi a look neither of pity nor of inquiry. Still able to enjoy himself, he was not yet a guest to be trusted. But it was possible to make himself one, because of his feelings at that time, because of the place, because of his companion. The ugliness of old age pressed down upon him. For him too, he thought, the dreary circumstances of the other guests were not far off. The fact that he was here surely indicated as much. And for he had no intention of breaking the ugly restrictions, the sad restrictions imposed upon the old men. He did not intend to break them, and he would not. Though it might be called a secret club, the number of old men who were members seemed to be few. Eguchi had come neither to expose its sins nor to pry into its secret practices. His curiosity was less than strong, because the dreariness of old age lay already upon him too.

"Some gentlemen say that they have good dreams when they come here." the woman had said. "Some say they remember how it was when

they were young."

Not even then did a wry smile comes over his face. He puts his hands to the table and stood up. He went to the cedar door.

"Ah!"

It was the crimson velvet curtains. The crimson was yet deeper in the dim light. It was as if a thin layer of light hovered before the curtains, as if he were stepping into a phantasm. There were curtains over the four walls. The door was curtained too, but the edge had been tied back. He locked the door, drew the curtain and looked down at the girl. She was not pretending. Her breathing was of the deepest sleep. He caught his breath. She was more beautiful than he had expected. And her beauty was not the only surprise. She was young too. She lay on her left side, her face toward him. He could not see his body, but she would not yet be twenty. It was as if another heart beat its wings in old Eguchi's chest.

Her right hand and the wrist were at the edge of the quilt. Her left arm seemed to stretch diagonally under the quilt. Her right thumb was half hidden under her cheek. The fingers on the pillow beside her face were slightly curved in the softness of sleep, though not enough to erase the delicate hollows where they joined the hand. The warm redness was gradually richer from the palm to the fingertips. It was a smooth, glowing white hand.

"Are you asleep? Are you going to wake up?"

It was as if he was asking so that he might touch her hand. He took it in his and shook it. He knew that he would not open her eyes. Her hand still in his, he contemplated her face. What kind of girl might she be? The eyebrows were untouched by cosmetics, the closed eyelashes were even. He caught the scent of maidenly hair. After a time the sound of the waves was higher, for his heart had been taken captive. Resolutely he undressed. Noting that the light came from above, he looked up. Electrical light came through Japanese paper at two skylights. As if it had more composure than was he to muster, he asked himself whether it was a light that set off to advantage the crimson of the velvet, and whether it was the light from the velvet set off the girl's skin of the girl like a beautiful ghost. But the colour was not strong enough to show against her skin. He had become accustomed to the light. It was too bright for him, used to sleeping in the dark, but apparently it could not be turned off. He saw that the quilt was a good one.

He slipped quietly under, afraid that the girl he knew would sleep on might awaken. She seemed to be quite naked. There was no reaction, no

hunching of the shoulders or pulling in of the hips, to suggest that she sensed his presence. There should be in a young girl, however soundly she slept, some sort of quick reaction. But this would not be an ordinary sleep, he knew. The thought made him avoid touching her as he stretched out. Her knee was slightly forward, leaving his legs an awkward position.

It took no inspection to tell him that she was not on the defensive, that she did not have her right knee resting on her left. The right knee was pulled back, the leg stretched out. The angle of the shoulders as she lay on her left side and that of the hips seemed a variance, because of the inclination of her torso. She did not appear to be very tall.

The fingers of the hand old Eguchi had shaken gently were also in deep sleep. The hand lay as he had dropped it. As he pulled his pillow back the hand fell away. One elbow on the pillow, he gazed at it. 'As if it were alive', he muttered to himself. It was of course alive, but once he uttered them the words took on an ominous meaning. Though this girl lost in sleep had not put an end to the hours of her life, had she not lost them, had they sink into bottles depths? She was not a living doll, for there could be not living dolls. But, so as not to shame an old man no longer a man, she had been made into a living toy. No, not a toy. For the old man, she could be life itself. Such life was, perhaps, life to be touched with confidence. To Eguchi's farsighted old eyes the hand from close up was yet more smoother and more beautiful. It was smoother to the touch, but he could not see the texture.

It came to the old eyes warned that in the earlobes was the same warm redness of blood that grew richer toward the tips of the fingers. He could see the ears through the hair. The flush of the earlobes argued the freshness of the girl with a plea that stabbed at him. Eguchi had first wandered into this secret house out of curiosity, but it seemed to him that men more senile than him might come here to it with even greater happiness and sorrow. The girl's hair was long, possibly for old men to played with. Lying back on his pillow, Eguchi brushed it aside to expose her ear. The sheen of the hair behind the ear was white. The neck and the shoulder too were young and fresh. They did not yet have the fullness of woman. He looked around the room. Only his own clothes were in the box. There was no sign of the girl's. Perhaps the woman had taken them away, but he started up at the thought that the girl might have come into the room naked. She was to be looked at. He knew that she had put to sleep for the purpose, and that there was no call for this

new surprise. But he covered her shoulder and closed his eyes. The scent of a baby came to him in the girl's scent. It was the milky scent of a nursing baby, and richer than that of the girl. Impossible... that the girl have had a child, that her breast should be swollen, that milk should be oozing from the nipples. He gazed afresh at the forehead and cheeks, and at the girlish line from the jaw down over the neck. Although he knew well enough already, he slightly raised the quilt that covered the shoulder. The breasts was not one that it have give milk. He touched it softly with his finger. It was not wet. The girl was approaching twenty. Even the expression babyish was not wholly inappropriate, she should no long have the milky scent of a baby. In fact it was a womanish scent, and yet it was very certain that old Eguchi had this very moment smelled a nursing baby. A passing spectre? However much he might ask why it had come to him, he did not know the answer. But probably it had come through the open left by a sudden emptiness in his heart. He felt surge of loneliness tinged with sorrow. More than sorrow or loneliness, it was the bleakness of old age, as if frozen to him. And it changed to pity and tenderness for the girl who scent out the smell of young warmth.

Possibly only for purposes of turning away a cold sense of guilty, the old man seemed to feel music in the girl's body. It was music of love. As if he wanted to flee, he looked at the four walls, so covered with velvet, taking its light from the ceiling, was soft and utterly motionless. It shut in a girl who had been put to sleep, and an old man.

"Wake up. Wake up." Eguchi shook at the girl's shoulder. Then he lifted her head. "Wake up. Wake up."

It was a feeling for the girl, rising inside him, that made him to do so. A moment had come in which the old man could not bear the fact the girl was sleeping, that she did not speak. that she did not know his face and his voice. That she knew nothing of what was happening, that she did not know the man Eguchi who was with her. Not the smallest part of his existence reached her. The girl would not wake up, it was the heaviness of a slumbering head in his hand. And yet he could admit the fact that she seemed to frown slightly as a definite living answer. He held his hand motionless. If she were to awaken upon such a slight motion, then the mystery of the place, which old Kiga, the man who had introduced him to it, had described as 'like sleeping with a secret Buddha', would be gone. For the old men who were customers the woman could 'trust', sleeping with a beauty who would not awaken was a temptation, an adventure, a joy they could trust. Old Kiga had said to

Eguchi that only when he was beside a girl who had been put to sleep could he himself feel alive.

When Kiga had visited Eguchi, he had looked out into the garden. Something red lay on the brown autumn moss.

"What can it be?"

He had gone down to look. The dots were red aoki berries. Numbers of them lay on the ground. Kiga picked one up. Toying with it, he told Eguchi of the secret house. He went to the house, he said, when the despair of old age was too much for him.

"It seems like a very long time since I lost hope in every last woman. There's a house where they put women to sleep so they don't wake up."

Was it as if a girl sound asleep, saying nothing, hearing nothing, said everything to and heard everything from an old man who, for a woman, was no longer a man? But this was Eguchi's first experience of such a woman. The girl had no doubt had this experience of old men numbers of times before. Giving everything over to him, aware of nothing, in a sleep as of suspended animation, she breathed gently, her innocent face on a side. Certain old men would perhaps caress every part of her body, others would be racked with sobs. The girl would not know, in either case. Even at this thought Eguchi was able to do nothing. In taking his hand from her neck, he was as cautious as if he were handling a breakable object. But the impulse to arouse her by violence still had not left him.

As he withdrew his hand, her head turned gently and her shoulder with it, so that the girl was lying face up. He pulled back, wondering if she might open her eyes. Her nose and lips shone with youth in the light from the ceiling. She brought her left hand to her mouth. She seemed about to take the index finger between her teeth, and he wondered if it might be a way she had when she slept. But only she brought it softly to her lips, and no further. The lips parted slightly to show her teeth. She had been breathing through her nose, and now she breathed through her mouth. Her breath seemed to come a little faster.

He wondered if she would be in pain, and decided she was not. Because the lips were parted, a faint smile seemed to float on the cheeks. The sound of the waves breaking against the high cliff came nearer. The sound of the waves receding waves suggested large rocks at the base of the cliff. Water caught behind them seemed to follow after. The scent of the girl's breath was stronger from her mouth than it had been from her nose. It was not, however, the smell of milk. He asked himself again

why the smell of milk had come to him. It was a smell, perhaps, to make him feel woman in the girl.

Old Eguchi even now had a grandchild that smelled of milk. He could see it here, before him. Each of his three daughters were married and had children. And he had not forgotten how it had been when they smelled of milk, and how he had held the daughters themselves as nursing babies. Has the milky smell of these blood relatives come back as if to reprove him? No, it should to be the smell of Eguchi's own heart, going out to the girl. Eguchi too turned face up, and, lying so that he nowhere touched the girl, closed his eyes. He would do well to take the sleeping medicine at his pillow. It would not be as strong as the drug the girl had been given. He would be awake earlier than she. Otherwise, the secret of the fascination of the place would be gone. He opened the package. In it were two white pills.

If he took one, he fall in a slumber. Two, and he would fall into a deep of death. That would be just as well, he thought, looking at the pills. And the milk brought an unpleasant memory and a lunatic memory to him.

"Milk. It smells of milk. It smells like a baby."

Starting to fold the coat he had taken off, the woman glare at him, her face tense.

"Your baby. You took it in your arms when you left home, didn't you? Didn't you? I hate it. I hate it."

Her hands trembling violently, the woman stood up and threw the coat to the floor.

"I hate it. Coming here just after you've had a baby in your arms."

Her voice was harsh, but the look in her eyes was worse. She was a geisha with whom he had for some time been familiar. She had known all along that he had a wife and children, but the smell of the nursing child brought violent revulsion and jealousy. Eguchi and the geisha were not again on good terms.

The smell the geisha so disliked had been from his youngest child. Eguchi had had a lover before was married. Her parents became suspicions, and his occasional meetings with her were turbulent. Once when he withdrew his face he saw that her breast was lightly stained with blood. He was startled, but, as if nothing had happened, he brought his face back and gently licked it away. The girl, in a trance, did not know what had happened. The delirium had passed. Even when he told her she did not seem to be in pain.

So far away beyond the years, why had the two memories come back

to him? It did not seem likely that because he had had in him the two memories he had smelled milk in the girl beside him. They were far beyond the years, but he did not think, somehow, that one distinguished near memories from distant memories as they were new or old.

He might have a fresher and more immediate memories from his boyhood sixty years ago than from the yesterday. Was this tendency not clearer the older one aged? Could not a person's young days make him what he was, lead him through life? It was a triviality, but the girl, whose breast had been wet with blood had taught him that a man's lips could draw blood from almost any part of the woman's body. And although afterwards Eguchi had avoided going to that extreme, the memory, the gift from a woman bringing strength to a man's whole life, was still with him, a full sixty-seven years old.

A still more trivial thing.

"Before I go to sleep I close my eyes and count the men I wouldn't mind been kissed by. I count them up to my fingers. It's very pleasant. But it makes me sad when I can't think of even ten."

These remarks had been made to the young Eguchi by the wife of a business executive, a middle-aged woman, a woman of society, and, report had it, an intelligent woman. She was waltzing with him at that time. Taking this sudden confession to mean that he was among those she would not mind being kisses by, Eguchi held her hands less tightly.

"I only count them..." she said nonchalantly "You are young, and I suppose you don't find it sad to get to sleep. And if you do you always have your wife. But give it a try once I find it very good medicine."

Her voice was if anything dry, and Eguchi did not answer. She had said that she only counted them. But one could suspect that she called up their faces and bodies in her mind. To conjure up ten would take a considerable amount of time and imagining. At the thought, the perfume as of a love potion from this woman somewhat past her prime came more strongly to Eguchi. She was free to draw in her mind as she wished the figure of Eguchi among the men she would not mind being kissed by. The matter was no concern of his, and he could neither resist nor complain. And yet it was sullyng, the fact that without his knowing it he was being enjoyed in the mind of a middle-aged woman. But he had not forgotten her words. He was not without a suspicion afterwards that the woman have been playing with him, or that she had invented the story to make fun of him. But later still, only the words remained. The woman was long dead. Old Eguchi no longer had these doubts. And, clever

woman, she had died after having imagined herself kissing how many hundreds of men?

As old approached, Eguchi would, on nights when he had difficulty sleeping, sometimes remember the woman's words, and count up numbers of women in his fingers. But he did not stop at anything so simple as picturing those he would not mind kissing. He would travel back over memories of women with whom he had had affairs. And old love had come back tonight because the sleeping beauty had given him the illusion that he smelled milk.

Perhaps the blood on the breast of that girl from long ago had made him sense in the girl tonight an odor that did not exist. Perhaps it was a melancholy comfort for an old man to be sunk in memories of women who would not come back from the far past, even while he fondled a beauty who would not awaken. Eguchi was filled with a warm repose that had loneliness in it. He had but touched her lightly to see whether her breast was wet, and the twisted thought had not come to him of leaving her to be startled when she awoke after him, at having had blood drawn from her breast. Her breasts seemed to be beautifully rounded. A strange thought came to him: why, among all animals, in the long course of the world, had the breasts of the human female alone become beautiful?

It might be so too with lips. Old Eguchi thought of women getting ready for bed, of women taking off cosmetics before bed. There had been woman with pale lips when they took off their lipstick, and woman whose lips had shown the dirtiness of age. In the gentle light from the ceiling and the reflection of the velvet on the four walls, it was not clear whether or not the girl was lightly made up, but she had not gone so far as to have her eyebrows shaved. The lips and the teeth between them had a fresh glow. Since she could scarcely have perfumed her mouth, what came to him was the scent of a young woman's mouth. Eguchi did not like wide, dark nipples. From the glimpse he had had when he raised the quilt, it appeared that hers were still small and pink. She was sleeping face up, and he could kiss her breasts. She was certainly not a girl whose breasts he could have disliked kissing. If it was so with a man his age, thought Eguchi, then the really old men who came to the house must quite lose themselves in the joy, be willing to take any chance, to pay any price. There had probably been greedy ones among them, and their images were not wholly absent from Eguchi's mind. The girl was asleep and knew nothing. Would the face and the form remain

untouched and unsullied, as they were before him now? Because she was so beautiful asleep, Eguchi stopped short of the ugly act toward which these thoughts led him. Was the difference between him and the other old men that he still had in him. Something to function as a man? For the others, the girl would pass the night in bottomless sleep. He had twice tried, though gently, to arouse her, He did not himself know what he had meant to do if by chance the girl had opened her eyes, but he had probably made the try out of affection. No, he supposed it had rather been from his own disquiet and emptiness.

"Maybe I should go to sleep?" He heard himself muttering uselessly, and he added: "It's not forever. Not forever, for her or for me."

He closed his eyes. This strange night was, as all other nights, one from which he would awake up alive in the morning. The girl's elbow, as she lay with her index finger touched to her mouth, got in his way. He took her wrist and brought it to his side. He felt her pulse, holding the wrist between his index and middle fingers. It was gentle and regular. Her quiet breath was somewhat slower than Eguchi's. From time to time the wind passed over the house, but it no longer carried the sound of approaching winter. The roar of the waves against the cliff softened while rising. Its echo seemed to come up from the ocean as music sounding in the girl's body, the beating in her breasts, and the pulse at her wrist added to it. In time with the music, a pure white butterfly danced past his closed eyelids. He took his hand from her wrist. Nowhere was he touching her. The scent of her breath, of her body, of her hair, were of them strong.

Eguchi thought of the several days when he had run off to Kyoto, taking the back-country route, with the girl whose breast had been wet with blood. Perhaps the memory was vivid because the warmth of the fresh young body beside him came over to him faintly. There was numerous short tunnels on the road from the western provinces into Kyoto. Each time they went into a tunnel, the girl, as if frightened, would bring her knee to Eguchi's and take his hand. And each time they came out of one there would be a hill or a small ravine with a rainbow over it.

"How pretty!" she would say each time, or "How nice!" She had a word of praise for each little rainbow, and it would be no exaggeration to say that, searching to the left and the right, she found one each time they came out of a tunnel. Sometimes it would be so faint as to be hardly there at all. She came to feel something ominous in these strangely

abundant rainbows.

"Don't you suppose they're after us? I have a feeling they'll catch us when we get to Kyoto. Once they take me back they won't let me out of the house again."

Eguchi, who had just graduated from college and gone to work, had no way to make a living in Kyoto, and he knew that, unless he and the girl committed suicide together, they would presently have to go back to Tokyo. But, from the small rainbows, the cleanness of the girl's secret parts came before him and would not leave. He had seen it at an inn by a river in Kanazawa. It had been on a night of snow flurries. So struck had he been by the cleanness that he had held his breath and felt tears welling up; He had not seen such cleanness in the women of all the decades since. And he had come to think that he understood all cleanness, that cleanness in secret places was the girl's own property. He tried to laugh the notion away, but it became a fact in the flow of longing, and it was still a powerful memory, not to be shaken from the old Eguchi. A person sent by the girl's family took her back to Tokyo, and soon she was married.

When they chanced to meet by Shinobazu Pond, the girl had a baby strapped to her back. The baby had on a white wool cap. It was autumn and the lotuses in the pond were withering. Possibly the white butterfly dancing behind his closed eyelids tonight was called up by that white cap.

When they met by the pond, all Eguchi could think of was to ask whether she was happy.

"Yes." she replied immediately "I am happy." Probably there was no other answer.

"And why are you walking here all by yourself with a baby on your back? It was a strange question. The girl only looked into his face.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It is a girl. Really! Can you tell by looking at it?"

"Is it mine?"

"It is not." The girl shook her head, angrily. "It is not."

"Oh! Well, if it is, you needn't say so now. You can say so when you feel like it. Years and years from now."

"It is not. It really is not. I haven't forgotten that I loved you, but you are not to imagine things. You will only cause trouble to her."

"Oh?" Eguchi made no special attempt to look at the baby's face, but he looked on and on after the girl. She glanced back when she had gone

some distance. Seeing that he was still watching her, she quickened her pace. He did not see her again. More than ten years ago he had heard of her death. Eguchi, now sixty-seven, had lost many friends and relations, but the memory of the girl was still young. Reduced now to three details, the baby's white cap and the cleanness of the secret place and the blood on the breast, it was still clear and fresh. Probably there was no one in the world besides Eguchi who knew of that incomparable cleanness, and with his death, not far away now, it would quite disappear from the world. Though shyly, she had let him look on as he would. Perhaps that was the way with girls. But there could be no doubt that the girl did not herself know of the cleanness. She could not see it.

Early in the morning, after they got to Kyoto, Eguchi and the girl walked through a bamboo grove. The bamboo shimmered in the morning light. In Eguchi's memory the leaves were fine and soft, of pure silver, and the bamboo stalks were of silver too. On the path that skirted the grove, thistles and dew-flowers were in bloom. Such was the path that floated up in his memory. There would seem to be some confusion about the season. Beyond the path they climbed a blue stream, where a waterfall roared down, its spray catching the sunlight. In the spray the girl stood naked. The facts were different, but in the course of time Eguchi's mind had made them so. As he grew old, the hills of Kyoto and the trunks of the red pines in gentle clusters could sometimes bring the girl back to Eguchi. But memories as vivid as tonight's were rare. Was it the youth of the sleeping girl that invited them?

Old Eguchi was wide awake and did not seem likely to go to sleep. He did not want to remember women other than the girl who had looked at the little rainbows. Nor did he want to touch the sleeping girl, to look at her naked. Turning face down, he again opened the packet at his pillow. The woman of the inn had said that it was sleeping medicine, but Eguchi hesitated. He did not know what it would be, whether or not it would be the medicine the girl had been given. He took one pill in his mouth, and washed it down with a good amount of water. Perhaps because he was used to a bedtime drink but not to sleeping medicine, he was quickly pulled into sleep. He had a dream.

He was in the embrace of a woman, but she had four legs. The four legs were entwined about him. She had arms as well. Though half awoken he thought the four legs odd, but not repulsive. Those four legs, so much more provocative than two, were still with him. It was a medicine to make one have such dreams, he thought absently. The girl

had turned away from him, her hips toward him. He seemed to find something touching about the fact that her head was more distant than her hips. Half asleep and half awake, he took the long hair spread out toward him and played with it as if to comb it. And so he fell asleep.

His next dream was most pleasant. One of his daughters had borne a deformed child in a hospital. Awake, the old man could not remember what sort of deformity it had been. Probably he did not want to remember. It was hideous, in any case. The baby was immediately taken from the mother. It was behind a white curtain in the maternity room, and she went over and commenced hacking it to pieces, getting it ready to throw away. The doctor, a friend of Eguchi's, was standing beside her in white. Eguchi was too beside her. He was wide awake now, groaning from the horror of it. The crimson velvet on the four walls so startled him that he put his hands to his face and rubbed his forehead. It had been a horrible nightmare. Was it that, having come in search of misshapen pleasure, he had had a misshapen dream? He did not know which of this three daughters he had dreamed of, and he did not try to know. All three had borne quite normal babies.

Eguchi would have wanted to leave if it had been possible. But he took the other pill, to fall into a deeper sleep. The cold water passed down his throat. The girl still had her back to him. Thinking that she might – it was not impossible – bear the ugliest and most doltish of children, he put his hand to the roundness at her shoulder.

"Look this way."

As if in answer she turned over. One of her hands fell on his chest. One leg came toward him, as if trembling in the cold. So warm a girl could not be cold. From her mouth or her nose, he could not be sure which, came a small voice.

"Are you having a nightmare too?" he asked.

But old Eguchi was quick to sink into the depths of sleep.

2

Old Eguchi had not thought that he would again go to the 'house of the sleeping beauties.' He had not thought when he spent that first night there that he would like to go again. So it had been too when he left in the morning.

It was about a fortnight later that a telephone call came asking whether he might like to pay a visit that night. The voice seemed to be that of the woman in her forties. Over the telephone it sounded even more like a cold whisper from a silent place.

"If you leave now, when may I hope to see you?"

"A little after nine, I'd imagine."

"That will be too soon. The young lady is to here yet, and even if she were she would not be asleep."

Startled, Eguchi did not answer.

"I should have her asleep by eleven. I'll be waiting for you any time after that."

The woman's speech was slow and calm, but Eguchi's heart raced.

"About eleven, then." he said, his throat dry.

What does it matter whether she's asleep or not, he should have been able to say, not seriously, perhaps, but half in jest. He would have liked to meet her before she went to sleep, he could have said. But somehow the words caught in his throat. He had come up against the secret rule of the house. Because it was such a strange rule, it had to be followed all the more strictly. Once it was broken, the place became no more than an ordinary bawdy house. The sad requests of the old men, allurements, all disappeared. Eguchi himself was startled at the fact that he had caught his breath so sharply upon being told that nine was too early, that the girl would not be asleep, that the woman would have her asleep by eleven. Might it be called the surprise of suddenly being pulled away from the every day world? For the girl could be asleep and certain not to awake up.

Was he too quick or slow, going again after a fortnight to a house he had not thought to revisit? He had not, in any case, resisted the temptation by force of will. He had not meant to indulge again in this sort of ugly senile dalliance, and in fact he was not yet as senile as the other men who visited the place. And yet that first visit had not left behind ugly memories. The guilt was there. But he felt that he had not in all his sixty-seven years spent another night so clean. So he still felt when he awoke in the morning. The sleeping medicine had worked, it seemed, and he had slept until eight, later than usual. No part of him was touching the girl. It was a sweet, childlike awakening, in her young warmth and soft scent.

The girl had lain with her face toward him, her head very slightly forward and her breasts back, and in the shadow of her jaw there had

been a scarcely perceptible line across the fresh, slender neck. Her long hair was spread over the pillow behind her. Looking up from the neatly closed lips, he had gazed at her eyebrows and eyelashes and had not doubted that she was a virgin. She was too near for his old eyes to make out the individual hairs of the eyelashes and eyebrows. Her skin, on which he could not see the fuzz, glowed softly. There was not a single mole on the face and neck. He had forgotten the nightmare, and as affection for the girl poured through him, there came over him too a childlike feeling that he was loved by the girl. He felt for a breast, and held it softly in his hand. There was in the touch a strange flicker of something, as if this were the breast of Eguchi's own mother before she had him inside her. He withdrew his hand, but the sensation went from his chest to his shoulders.

He heard the door to the next room open.

"Are you awake?" Asked the woman of the house. "I have breakfast ready."

"Yes."

Raising himself, Eguchi softly touched the girl's hair. He knew that the woman was sending the customer away before the girl awoke, but she was calm as she served him breakfast. Until when had the girl been put to sleep? But it would not do to ask unnecessary questions.

"A very pretty girl." He said nonchalantly.

"Yes. And did you have pleasant dreams?"

"It brought me pleasant dreams."

"The wind and the waves have quieted down." The woman changed the subject. "It will be what they call Indian Summer."

And now, coming a second time in half a month, Eguchi did not feel the curiosity of the earlier visit so much as reticence and a certain discomfort. But the excitement was also stronger. The impatience of the wait from nine to eleven had brought in a certain intoxication.

The same woman unlocked the gate for him. The same reproduction was in the alcove. The tea was again good. He was more nervous than on his earlier visit, but he managed to behave like an old and experienced customer.

"It's so warm hereabouts..." he said, looking around at the picture of the mountain village in autumn leaves "... that I imagine the maple leaves wither without really turning red. But then it was dark, and I didn't really get a good look at your garden."

It was an improbable way to make conversation.

"I wonder... " said the woman, indifferently "... it's gotten very cold. I've put on an electric blanket, a double one with two switches. You can adjust your side to suit yourself."

"I've never slept under an electric blanket."

"You can turn your side off if you like, but I must ask that you leave the girl's on."

Because she was naked, the old man knew.

"An interesting idea, a blanket that two people can adjust to suit themselves."

"It's American. But please don't be difficult and turn off the girl's side. You understand, I'm sure, that she won't wake up, no matter how cold she gets."

He did not answer.

"She's more experienced than the one before."

"What?"

"She's very pretty too. You won't do anything wrong, I know... and so it wouldn't be right if she weren't pretty."

"It's not the same one?"

"No. This evening... isn't it better to have a different one?"

"I'm not as promiscuous as all that."

"Promiscuous? But what does it have to do with promiscuousness?"

The woman's easy way of speaking seemed to hide a faint smile of derision.

"None of my guest are promiscuous. They are all kind enough to be gentlemen I can trust."

Thin-lipped, the woman did not look at him as she spoke. The note of mockery set Eguchi on edge, but he could think of nothing to say. What was she, after all, but a cold, seasoned procuress?

"And then you may think of it as promiscuous, but the girl herself is asleep, and doesn't even know who she has slept with. The girl the other time and the girl tonight will never know a thing about you, and to speak of promiscuous is a little..."

"I see. It's not a human relationship."

"What do you mean:"

It would be odd to explain, now that he had come to the house, that for an old man who was no longer a man, to keep company with a girl who had been put to sleep was 'not a human relationship'."

"And what's wrong with being promiscuous?"

Her voice strangely young, the woman laughed a laugh to soothe an

old man.

"If you're fond of the other girl, I can have her here the next time you come. But you'll admit afterwards that this one is better."

"Oh? What do you mean when you say she's more experienced? After all she's sound asleep;"

"Yes?" The woman got up, unlocked the door to the next room, looked inside, and put the key before old Eguchi. "I hope you sleep well."

Eguchi poured hot water into the pot and had a leisurely cup of tea. He meant it to be leisurely, at least, but his hand was shaking. It was not because of his age, he muttered. He was not yet a guest to be trusted. How would it be, by way of revenge for all the derided and insulted old men who came here, if he were to violate the rule of the house? And would that not be a more human way of keeping company with the girl? He did not know how heavily she had been drugged, but he was probably still capable of awakening her with his roughness. So he thought. But his heart did not rise to the challenge.

The ugly senility of the sad men who came to this house was not many years away for Eguchi himself. The immeasurable expanse of sex, its bottomless depth... what part of it had Eguchi known in his sixty-seven years? And around the old men, new flesh, young flesh, beautiful flesh was forever being born. Were not the longing of the sad old men for the unfinished dream, the secret of this house? Eguchi had thought before that girls who did not awaken were ageless freedom for old men. Asleep and unspeaking, they spoke as the old men wished.

He got up and opened the door to the next room, and already a warm smell came to him. He smiled. Why had he hesitated? The girl lay with both hands on the quilt. Her nails were pink. Her lipstick was a deep red. She lay face up.

"Experienced, is she?" he murmured as he came up to her. Her cheeks were flushed from the warm of the blankets, and indeed her whole face was flushed. The scent was rich. Her eyelids and cheeks were full. Her neck was so white as to take on the crimson of the velvet curtains. The closed eyes seemed to tell him that a young witch lay sleeping before him. As he undressed, his back to her, the warm smell enveloped him. The room was filled with it.

It did not seem likely that old Eguchi could be as reticent as he had been with the other girl. This was a girl who, whether sleeping or awake, called out to a man... so strongly that, were he to violate the rule of the house, he could only blame the misdeed on her. He lay with his eyes

closed, as if to savor the pleasure that was to come to later, and youthful warmth came up from deep inside him. The woman had spoken well when she said that this one was better. But the house seemed all the stranger for having been able to find such a girl. He lay wrapped in the perfume, thinking her too good to touch. Though he did not know a great deal about perfume, seemed to be the scent of the girl herself. There could be no greater happiness than thus drifting off into a sweet sleep. He wanted to do just that. He slid quietly toward her. As though in reply, she turned gently toward him, her arms extended under the blanket as if to embrace him.

"Are you awake?" he asked, pulling away and shaking her jaw. "Are you awake?" He put more strength into his hand. She turned face down as if to avoid it, and as she did so a corner of her mouth opened slightly, and the nail of his index finger brushed against one or two of her teeth. He left it there. Her lips remained parted. She was of course in a deep sleep, and not merely pretending.

Not expecting the girl tonight to be different from the girl of the other night, he had protested to the woman of the house. But he knew of course that to take sleeping medicine repeatedly could only injure a girl. It might be said that for the sake of the girl's health Eguchi and the other old men were to be made to be 'promiscuous'. But were not these upstairs rooms for a single guest only? Eguchi did not know much about the first floor, but if it was for guests at all it could not have more than one guest room. He hardly thought, then, that many girls were needed for the old men who came here. And were they all beautiful in their different ways, like the girl tonight and the one before?

The tooth against Eguchi's finger seemed to be very slightly damp with something that clung to the finger. He moved it back and forth in her mouth, feeling the teeth two and three times. On the outside they were for the most part dry, but on the inside they were smooth and damp. To the right they were crooked, a tooth on top of another. He took the crooked pair between his thumbs and index finger. He thought of putting his finger behind them, but, though asleep, she clenched her teeth and quite refused to open them. When he took his finger away it was stained red. And with what was he to wipe away the lipstick? If he wiped it on the pillow case, it would look as if she had smeared it herself when she turned face down. But it did not seem likely to come off unless he moistened it with his tongue, and seem likely to come off unless he moistened it with his tongue, and he was strangely revolted at the

thought of touching his mouth to the red finger. He rubbed it against the hair at her forehead. Rubbing with his thumb and index finger, he was soon probing through her hair with all five fingers, twisting it. And gradually his motions were rougher. The ends of the girl's hair sent out little sparks of electricity against his fingers. The scent from the hair was stronger. Partly because of the warmth of the electric blanket, the scent from under it too was stronger. As he played with the hair, he noted the lines at the edges, clean as if sketched in, and especially the line at the nape of the long neck, where the hair was short and brushed upwards. At the forehead long hair and short hair fell in strands, as if untended. Brushing it upwards he gazed at her eyebrows and eyelashes. The other hand was so deep in her hair that he could feel the skin beneath.

"No, she's not awake." he said to himself, clutching at her hair and shaking from the crown.

She seemed in pain, and rolled over face down. The motions brought her nearer the old man. Both arms were exposed. The right arm was on the pillow. The right cheek rested in it, so that Eguchi could see only the fingers. They were slightly spread, the little finger below the eyelashes, the index finger at her lips, inclined somewhat downwards, and the red of the dour long fingernails made a cluster along the white pillowcase. The left arm too was bent at the elbow. The hand was almost directly under Eguchi's eyes. The fingers, long and slender compared to the fullness of the cheeks, made him think of her outstretched legs. He felt for a leg with the sole of his foot. The left hand too lay with the fingers slightly parted. He rested his head on it. A spasm caused by his weight went all the way to her shoulder, but it was not enough to pull the hand away. He lay unmoving for a time. Her shoulders were slightly raised, and there was a young roundness in them. As he pulled the blanket over them, he took the roundness gently in his hands. He moved his face from her hand to her arm. He was drawn by the scent of the shoulder, the nape of the neck. There was a tremor along the shoulder and the back, but it passed immediately. The old man clung to them.

He would now have revenge upon this slave maiden, drugged into sleep, for all the contempt and derision endured by the old men who frequented the house. He would violate the rule of the house. He knew that he would not be allowed to come again. He hoped to awaken her by his roughness. But immediately he drew back, for he had come upon clear evidence of her virginity.

He groaned as he pulled away, his breathing was convulsive, his pulse

rapid, less from the sudden interruption than from the surprise. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. It was easy for him as it would have been for a young man. Stroking her hair, he opened his eyes again. She still lay face downward. A virgin prostitute, and at her age! What was she if not a prostitute? So he told himself. But with the passage of the storm his feelings toward the girl and his feelings toward himself had changed, and would not return to what they had been. He was not sorry. It would have been the merest folly, whatever he might have done to a sleeping and unknowing girl. But what had been the meaning of the surprise?

Led astray by the witchlike face, Eguchi had set out upon the forbidden path. And now he knew that the old men who were guests here came with a happiness more melancholy, a craving far stronger, a sadness far deeper than he had imagined. Though theirs was an easy sort of dalliance for old men, an easy way to juvenescence, it had deep inside it something that would not come back whatever the regrets, that would not be healed however strenuous the efforts. That the 'experienced' witch tonight was still a virgin was less the mark of the old men's respect for their promises than the grim mark of their decline. The purity of the girl was like the ugliness of the old men.

Perhaps the hand beneath her cheek had gone numb. She brought it over her head and slowly flexed the fingers two or three times. It touched Eguchi's hand, still probing through her hair. He took it in his. The fingers were supple and a little cold. He ground them together, as if to crush them. Raising her left shoulder, she turned half over. She brought her left arm up and flung it over Eguchi's shoulder as if to embrace him. It was without strength, however, and did not take his neck in its embrace. Her face, now turned toward him, was too near, a blurry white to his old eyes. But the too thick eyebrows, the eyelashes casting too dark a shadow, the full eyelids and cheeks, the long neck, all confirmed his first impression, that of a witch.

The breasts sagged slightly but were very full, and for a Japanese the nipples were large and swollen. He ran a hand down her spine and over her legs. They were stretched taut from the hips. What seemed like a disharmony between the upper and lower parts of her body may have to do with her being a virgin.

Quietly now, he looked at her face and neck. It was a skin meant to take on a faint reflection from the crimson of the velvet curtains. Her body had so been used by old men that the woman of the house had

described by 'experienced', and yet she was a virgin. It was because the men were senile, and because she was in such a deep sleep. Thoughts almost fatherly came to him as he asked himself what vicissitudes this witchlike girl faced through the years ahead. In them was evidence that Eguchi too was old. There could be no doubt that the girl was here for money. Nor was there any doubt that, for the old men who paid out the money, sleeping beside such a girl was a happiness not of this world. Because the girl would not awaken, the aged guests need not feel the shame of their years. They were quite free to indulge in unlimited dreams and memories of woman. Was that not why they felt no hesitation at paying more than for woman awake? And the old men were confident in the knowledge that the girls put to sleep for them knew nothing of them. Nor did the old men know anything of the girls... not even what clothes they wore... to give clues of position and character. The reasons went beyond such simple matters as disquiet about later complications, They were a strange light at the bottom of a deep darkness.

But old Eguchi was not yet used to keeping company with a girl who said nothing, a girl who did not open her eyes, who gave him no recognition. Empty longing had not left him. He wanted to see the eyes of this witchlike girl. He wanted to hear her voice, to talk to her. The urge was not so strong to explore the sleeping girl with his hands. Indeed it had in it a certain bleakness, Having been startled into rejecting all thoughts of violating the secret rule, he would follow the ways of the other old men. The girl tonight, though asleep, was more alive than the girl the other night. Life was there, most definitely, in her scent, in her touch, in the way she moved.

As before, two sleeping pills lay beside his pillow. But tonight he thought he would not go to sleep immediately. He would look yet a time longer at the girl. Her movements were strong, even in her sleep. It seemed that she must turn over twenty or thirty times in the course of a night. She turned away from him, and immediately turned back again. She felt for him with her arm. He reached for a knee and brought it toward him.

"Don't." the girl seemed to say, in a voice that was not a voice.

"Are you awake: Wake up."

"Don't, don't." Her face brushed against his shoulder, as if to avoid the shaking. Her forehead touched his neck, her hair was against his nose. It was stiff, even painful. Eguchi turned away from the too strong odor.

"What do you think you're doing?" said the girl. "Stop it."

"I'm not doing a thing."

But she was talking in her sleep. Has she in her sleep misunderstood his motions, or was she dreaming of having been mistreated by some older man on some other night? His heart beat faster at the thought that, even though what she said was in bits and fragments, he could have something like a conversation with her. Perhaps in the morning he could awake her. But had she really heard him? Was it not less his words than his touch that made her talk in her sleep? He thought if striking her a smart blow, or pinching her. But instead he brought her slowly into his arms. She did not resist, nor did she speak. She seemed to find it hard to breathe. Her breath came sweetly against the old man's face. His own breathing was irregular. He was aroused again by this girl who was his to do with as he wished. What sort of sadness would assail her in the morning if he made her a woman of her? How would the direction of her life be changed? She would in any case know nothing until morning.

"Mother." It was like a low groan. "Wait, wait. Do you have to go? I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"What are you dreaming of? It's a dream, a dream." Old Eguchi took her more tightly in his arms, thinking to end the dream. The sadness in her voice stabbed him. Her breasts were pressed flat against him. Her arms moved. Was she trying to embrace him, thinking him her mother? No, even though she had been put to sleep, even though she was a virgin, the girl was unmistakably a witch. It seemed to Eguchi that he had not in all his sixty-seven years felt so fully the skin of a young witch. If somewhere there was a weird legend demanding a heroine, this was the girl for it.

It came to seem that she was not the witch but the bewitched. And she was alive while asleep. Her mind had been put into a deep sleep and her body had awakened as a woman. She had become a woman's body, without mind. And was it so well trained that the woman of the house called it 'experienced'.

He relaxed his embrace and put her bare arms around him as if to make her embrace him. And she did, gently. He lay still, his eyes closed. He was warmly drowsy, in a sort of mindless rapture. He seemed to have awakened to the feeling of wellbeing, of good fortune, that came to the old men who frequented the house. Did the sadness, ugliness, dreariness of old age leave the old men, where they filled with the blessings of young life? There could be for an old man worn to the point

of death no time of greater oblivion than when he lay enveloped in the skin of a young girl. But was it without feelings of guilt that the old men paid money for young girls actually add to the pleasure? As if, forgetting himself, he had forgotten that the girl was a sacrifice, he felt for her toes with his foot. It was only her toes that he had not already touched. They were long and supple. As with her fingers, every joint bent and unbent freely, and in that small detail the lure of the strange in the girl came over to Eguchi. He wondered what he should say, where he should touch, to get an answer from her.

"You aren't dreaming any more? Dreaming that your mother went away?" He probed into the hollows along her spine. She shook her shoulders and again turned face down. It seemed to be a position she liked. She turned toward Eguchi again. With her right hand she gently held the edge of the pillow, and her left arm rested in Eguchi's face. But she said nothing. Her soft breath came warmly to him. She moved the arm on his face, evidently seeking a more comfortable position. He took it in both hands and put it over his eyes. Her long fingernails cut gently into the lobe of the ear. Her wrist bent over his right eye, its narrowest part pressing down the eyelid. Wanting to keep it there, he held it in place with his hands. The scent that came through to his eyes was new to him again, and it brought rich new fantasies. Just at this time of year, two or three winter peonies blooming in the warm sun, under the high stone fence of an old temple in Yamato. White camellias in the garden near the veranda of the Shisendo. In the spring, wistaria and white rhododendrons in Nara. The 'petal dropping' camellia, filling the garden of the Camellia temple in Kyoto.

That was it. The flowers brought memories of his three married daughters. They were flowers he had seen on trips with the three, or with one of them. Now wives and mothers, they probably did not have such vivid memories themselves. Eguchi remembered well, and sometimes spoke of the flowers to his wife. She apparently did not feel as far from the daughters, now that they were married, as did Eguchi. She was still close to them, and need not dwell so on memories of flowers seen with them. And there were flowers from trips when she had not been along.

Far back in the eyes on which the girl's had rested, he let the images of flowers come up and fade away, fade away and come up. And feelings

returned of the days when, his daughters married, he had been drawn to other young girls. It seemed to him that the girl tonight was one of them. He released her arm, but it lay quiet over his eyes. Only his youngest daughter had been on a farewell trip he had taken with her a fortnight before she was married. The image of the camellia was specially strong. The marriage of his youngest daughter had been the most painful, Two youths had been in competition for her, and in the course of the competition she had lost her virginity. The trip had been a change of scenery, to revive her spirits.

Camellias are said to be bad luck because the flowers drop whole from the stem, like severed heads. But the double blossoms on this great tree, which was four hundred years old and bloomed in five different colours, fell petal by petal. Hence it was called the 'petal dropping' camellia.

"When they were thickest... " said the young wife of the priest to Eguchi "... we gather up five or six baskets a day."

The massing of flowers on the great camellia was less beautiful in the full sunlight, he was told, than with the sunlight behind it. Eguchi and his youngest daughter were sitting on the western veranda, and the sun was sinking behind the tree. They were looking into the sun. But the thick leaves and the clusters of flowers did not let the sunlight through. It sank into the camellia, as if the evening sun itself were hanging on the edges of the shadow. The Camellia Temple was in a noisy, vulgar part of the city, and there was nothing to see in the garden besides the camellia. Eguchi's eyes were filled with it, and he did not hear the noise of the city.

"It is in fine bloom." he said to his daughter.

"Sometimes when you get up in the morning there are so many petals that you can't see the ground..." said the young wife, leaving Eguchi and his daughter.

Were there five colours on the one tree? He could see red camellias and white, and camellias with crinkled petals. But Eguchi was not particularly interested in verifying the number of colours. He was quite caught up in the tree itself. It was remarkable that a tree four hundred years old could produce such a richness of blossoms. The whole of the evening light was sucked into the camellia, so that the inside of the tree must be warm with it. Although he could feel no wind, a branch at the

edge would rustle from time to time.

It did not seem that his youngest daughter was as lost in the famous tree as Eguchi himself. There was no strength in her eyes. Perhaps she was less gazing at the tree than looking into herself. She was his favourite among his daughters, and she had the willfulness of a youngest child, even more so now that her sisters were married. The older girls had asked their mother, with some jealousy if Eguchi did not mean to keep the youngest at home and bring a bridegroom into the family of her. His wife had passed the remark on to him. His youngest daughter had grown up a bright and lively girl. It seemed to him unwise for her to have so many men friends, and them again she was liveliest when she was surrounded by men. But that there were among them all two whom she liked was clear to her parents, and especially to her mother, who saw a good deal of them. One of them had taken her virginity. For a time she was silent and moody even in the security of the house, and she seemed impatient and irritable when, for instance, she was changing clothes. Her mother sensed that something had happened. She asked about it in a casual fashion, and the girl showed little hesitation in making her confession. The young man worked in a department store and had a rented room. The girl seemed to have gone meekly home with him.

"Is he the one you mean to marry?"

"No, Absolutely no." replied the girl, leaving her mother in some confusion.

The mother was sure that the youth had had his way by force. She talked the mother over with Eguchi. For Eguchi it was as though the jewel in his hand had been scarred. He was still more shocked when he learned that the girl had rushed into betrothal with the other suitor.

"What do you think?" asked Eguchi's wife, leaning tensely toward him. "Is it all right?"

"Was she told the man she's engaged too?" Eguchi's voice was sharp "Has she?"

"I wonder. I didn't ask. I was too surprised myself. Shall I ask?"

"Don't bother."

"Most people seem to think it's best not to tell the man you're going to marry. It's safest to be quiet. But we aren't all alike. She may suffer her whole life through if she doesn't tell him."

"But we haven't decided that she has our permission."

It did not, of course, seem natural to Eguchi that a girl accosted by one young man should suddenly become engaged to another. He knew that both were fond of his daughter. Well acquainted with both, he had thought that either would do for her. But was not this sudden engagement a rebound from the shock? Had she not turned to the second young man in bitterness, resentment, chagrin? Was she not, in the turmoil of her disillusionment with the one, throwing herself at the other? A girl like his youngest daughter might very well turn the more ardently to one young man from having been molested by another. They need not, perhaps, reprove her for an unworthy act of revenge and self-abasement.

But it had not occurred to Eguchi that such a thing could happen to his daughter. So probably it was with all parents. Eguchi may have had too much confidence in his high spirited daughter, so open and lively when surrounded by men. But now that the deed was done there seemed nothing strange about it. Her body was put together in a manner no different from the bodies of other women. A man could force himself upon her. At the thought of her unsightliness in the act, Eguchi was assailed by strong feelings of shame and degradation. No such feelings had come to him when he had sent his older daughters on their honeymoons. What had happened may have been an explosion of love on the part of the youth. But it had happened, and Eguchi could only reflect upon how his daughter's body was made, upon its inability to turn the act away. Were such reflections abnormal for a father? Eguchi did not immediately sanction the engagement, nor did he reject it. He and his wife learned considerably later that the competition between the youths had been rather vicious. His daughter's marriage was near when he took her to Kyoto and they say the camellia in full bloom. There was a faint roar inside it, like a swarm of honeybees.

She had a son two years after she was married. Her husband seemed quite wrapped up in the child. When, perhaps on a Sunday, the young couple would come to Eguchi's house, the wife would go out to help her mother in the kitchen, and the husband, most deftly, would feed the baby. And so matters had resolved themselves nicely. Although she lived in Tokyo, the daughter seldom came to see them after she was

married.

"How are you?"

"How am I? Happy, I suppose."

Perhaps people did not have a great deal to say to their parents about their marital relations, but Eguchi was somehow dissatisfied and a trifle disturbed. Given the natures of his youngest daughter, it seemed to him that she ought to say more. But she was more beautiful, she came into bloom. Even though the change might be physiological one from girl to young wife, it did not seem that there would be this flower like brightness if a shadow lay over her heart. After she had her baby her skin was clearer, as though she had been washed to the depths, and she seemed more in possession of herself.

And was that it? Was that why, in 'the house of the sleeping beauties', as he lay with the girl's arm over his eyes, the images of the camellia in full bloom and the other flowers came to him? There was of course neither in the girl sleeping here nor in Eguchi's youngest daughter the richness of the camellia. But the richness of a girl's body was not something one knew by looking at her or by lying quietly beside her. It was not to be compared with the richness of camellias. What flowed deep behind his eyelids from the girl's arm was the current of life, the melody of life, the lure of life, and, for an old man, the recovery of life. The eyes on which the girl's arm rested were heavy, and he took the arm away.

There was nowhere for her to put her left arm. Probably because it was awkward for her to stretch it taut along Eguchi's chest, she half turned over his face again. She brought both hands together over her bosom with the fingers interlocked. They touched Eguchi's chest. They were not clasped as in veneration, but still they suggest prayer, soft prayer. He took the two clasped hands between his own hands. It was as if he were praying for something himself. He closed his eyes, probably in nothing more than the sadness of an old man touching the hands of a sleeping young girl.

He heard the first drops of night rain falling on the quiet sea. The distant sound seemed to come not from an automobile but from the thunder of winter. It was not easy to catch. He unfolded the girl's hands and gazed at the fingers as he straightened them one by one. He wanted

to take the long, slender fingers in his mouth. What would she think, awakening the next morning, if there were tooth marks on her little finger and blood oozing from it? Eguchi brought the girl's arm down along her body. He looked at her rich breasts, the nipples large and swollen and dark. He raised them, gently sagging as they were. They were not as warm as her body, warmed by the electric blanket. He thought to bring his forehead to the hollow between them, but only drew near, and held back because of the scent. He rolled over the face down and this time took both the sleeping tablets at once. On the earlier visit he had taken one tablet, and then taken the other when he had awakened from a nightmare. But he had learned that they were only sleeping medicine. He was quick to fall asleep.

The voice of the girl sobbing awakened him. Then what sounded like sobs changed to laughter. The laughter went on and on. He put his arm over her breasts and shook her.

"You're dreaming, you're dreaming. What are you dreaming of?"

There was something ominous in the silence that followed the laughter. But Eguchi too was heavy with sleep, and it was all he could do to feel for the watch at his pillow. It was three thirty. Bringing his chest to her and drawing her hips toward him, he slept a warm sleep.

The next morning he was again aroused by the woman of the house.

"Are you awake?"

He did not answer. Did the woman not have her ear to the door of the secret room? A spasm went through him at indications that was the case. Perhaps because of the heat from the blanket, the girl's shoulders were exposed, and she had an arm over head. He pulled the quilt up.

"Are you awake?"

Still not answering, he put his head under the quilt. A breast touched his chin. It was as if he were suddenly on fire. He put his arm around the girl's back and pulled her toward him with his foot.

"Sir! Sir!" The woman rapped on the door three or four times.

"I'm awake. I'm getting dressed." It seemed that she would come into the room if he did not answer.

The woman had brought water and toothpaste and the like into the room.

"And how was it?" she asked as she served his breakfast. "Don't you

think she's a good girl?"

"A very good girl." Eguchi nodded. "When will she wake up?"

"I wonder."

"Can't I stay until she's awake?"

"That's exactly the sort of things we can't allow." The woman said hastily. "We don't allow that even with our older guests."

"But she's too a good girl."

"It's best just to keep them company and not let foolish emotions get in the way." She doesn't even know she's slept with you. She won't cause you any trouble."

"But I remember her. What if we were to pass in the street?"

"You mean you might speak to her? Don't do that. It would be a crime."

"A crime?"

"It would indeed."

"A crime."

"I must ask you not to be difficult. Just take sleeping girls as sleeping girls."

He wanted to retort that he had not yet reached that sad degree of senility, but held himself back.

"I believe there was rain last night." he said.

"Really? I didn't notice."

"I definitively heard rain."

On the sea outside the window little waves caught the morning sunlight in near the cliff.

3

Eight days after his second visit old Eguchi went again to the 'house of the sleeping beauties'. It had been two weeks between his first and second visits, and so the interval had been cut in a half.

Was he gradually being pulled in by the spell of girls put to sleep?

"The one tonight is still in training." said the woman of the house as she made tea. "You may be disappointed, but please put up with her."

"A different one again?"

"You called just before you came, and I had to make do with what I had. If there is a girl you specially want I must ask you to let me know two or three days in advance."

"I see. But what do you mean when you say she's in training?"

"She's new. And small."

Old Eguchi was startled.

"She was frightened. She asked if she mightn't have someone with her. But I wouldn't want to upset you."

"Two of them? I shouldn't think that would be so bad. But if she's so sound asleep that she might as well be dead, how can she know whether to be frightened or not?"

"Quite true. But be easy with her, She's not used to it."

"I won't do a thing."

"I understand that perfectly."

"In training?" he muttered to himself. There were strange things in the world. As usual, the woman opened the door a crack and looked inside. "She's asleep. Please, whenever you're ready." She went out.

Eguchi had another cup of tea. He lay with his head on his arm. A chilly emptiness came over him. He got up as if the effort were almost too much for him and, quietly opening the door, looked into the secret room of the velvet.

The 'small' girl had a small face. Her hair, disheveled as if a braid had been undone, lay over one cheek, and the palm of her hand lay over the other down to her mouth. And so probably her face looked even smaller than it was. Childlike, she lay sleeping. Her hand lay against her face, or rather, the edge of her relaxed hand lightly touched her cheekbone, and the bent fingers lay from the bridge of her nose down over her lips. The long middle finger reached to her jaw. It was her left hand. Her right hand lay at the edge of the quilt, which the fingers gently grasped. She wore no cosmetics. Nor did it seem that she had taken any off before going to sleep.

Old Eguchi slipped in beside her. He was careful not to touch her. She did not move. But her warmth, different from the warmth of the electric blanket, enveloped him. It was like a wild and undeveloped warmth. Perhaps the smell of her hair and skin made him think so, but it was not only that.

"Sixteen or so, maybe?" he muttered to himself.

It was a house frequented by old men who could no longer use women as women. But Eguchi, on his third visit, knew that to sleep with such a

girl was a fleeting consolation, the pursuit of a vanished happiness in being alive. And were there among them old men who secretly asked to be a sadness in a young girl's body that called up in an old man a longing for death. But perhaps Eguchi was, among the old men who came to the house, one of the more easily moved. And perhaps most of them but wanted to drink in the youth of girls put to sleep, to enjoy girls who would not awaken.

At his pillow there were again two white sleeping tablets. He took them up and looked at them. They bore no marks or letters to tell him what the drug might be. It was without doubt different from the drug the girl had taken. He thought of asking on his next visit for the same drug. It was not likely that the request would be granted. But how would it be to sleep as of the dead? He was much taken with the thought of sleeping a deathlike sleep beside the girl put into a sleep like death.

'A sleep like death': the words brought back a memory of a woman. Three years before, in the spring, Eguchi had brought a woman back to his hotel in Kobe. She was from a night club, and it was of the dead? He was much taken with the thought of sleeping a deathlike sleep beside a girl put into a sleep like death.

"A sleep like death." The words brought back a memory of a woman. Three years before, in the spring, Eguchi had brought a woman back to his hotel in Kobe. She was from a night club, and it was past midnight. He had a drink of whisky from a bottle he kept in his room and offered some to the woman. She drank as much as he. He changed to the night kimono provided by the hotel. There was none for her. He took her in his arms still in her underwear.

He was gently and aimlessly stroking her back.

She pulled herself up. "I can't sleep in these." She took off all her cloths and threw them on the chair in front of the mirror. He was surprised, but told himself that such was the way with amateurs. She was unusually docile.

"Not yet?" he asked as he pulled away from her.

"You cheat, Mr. Eguchi." She said it twice. "You cheat." But still she was quiet and docile.

The whisky had its effect, and the old man was soon asleep. A feeling that the woman was already out of the bed awoke him in the morning. She was at the mirror arranging her hair.

"You're early."

"Because I have children."

"Children?"

"Two of them. Still very small."

She hurried away before he was out of bed.

It seemed strange that she, the first slender and firm fleshed woman he had embraced in a long while, should have two children. Hers had not been that sort of a body. Nor had it seemed likely that those breasts had nursed a child.

He opened his suitcase to take out a clean shirt, and saw that everything had been neatly put in order for him. In the course of his ten days' stay he had wadded his dirty linen and stuffed it inside, and stirred up the contents in search of something at the bottom, and tossed in gifts he had bought and received in Kobe. And the suitcase had so swelled up that it would no longer close. She had been able to look inside, and she had seen the confusion when he opened it for cigarettes. But even so, what had made her want to put it in order for him? And when had she done the work? All of his dirty underwear and the like was neatly folded. It must have taken time, even for a woman's skilled hands. Had she done it, unable to sleep herself, after Eguchi had gone to sleep?

"Well..." said Eguchi, gazing at the neat suitcase. "I wonder what made her do it?"

The next evening, as promised, the woman arrived to meet him at a Japanese restaurant. She was wearing Japanese kimono.

"You wear kimono?"

"Sometimes. But I don't imagine I look very good in it."

She laughed a different laugh. "I had a call from my friend at about noon. She said she was shocked. She asked if it was all right."

"You told her?"

"I don't keep secrets."

They walked through the city. Eguchi bought her material for a kimono and obi, and they went back to the hotel. From the window they could see the lights of a ship in the harbour. As they stood kissing in the window, Eguchi closed the blinds and pulled the curtains. He offered whisky to the woman, but she shook her head. She did not want to lose control of herself. She sank into a deep sleep. She awoke the next morning as Eguchi was getting out of bed.

"I slept as if I were dead. I really slept as if I were dead."

She lay still, her eyes open. They were misty, washed clean.

She knew that he would be going back to Tokyo today. She had married when her husband was in the Kobe office of a foreign company.

He had been in Singapore for two years now. Next month he would be back in Kobe. She had told Eguchi all this the night before. He had not known that she was married, and married to a foreigner. He had had no trouble luring her from the night club. He had gone there on the whim of a moment, and at the next table there had been two Occidental men and four Japanese women. The middle aged woman among them was an acquaintance of Eguchi's, and she greeted him. She was apparently acting as guide for the men. When the two men got up to dance, she asked whether he would not like to dance with the other young woman. Halfway through the second dance he suggested that they go out. It was as if she were embarking in a mischievous frolic. She readily came to the hotel, and when they were in his room, Eguchi was the one who felt the greater strain.

And so it was that Eguchi had an affair with a married woman, a foreigner's wife. She had left her children with a nurse or governess, and she did not show the reticence one might expect of a married woman. And so the feeling of having misbehaved was not strong. Certain pangs of conscience lingered on all the same. But the happiness of hearing her say that she had slept as if she were dead stayed with him like youthful music. Eguchi was sixty four at the time, the woman perhaps in her middle or late twenties. Such had been the difference in their ages that Eguchi had thought it probably his last affair with a young woman. In the course of only two nights, of a single night, indeed, the woman who had slept as if dead had become an unforgettable woman. She had written saying that when he was next in Kobe she would like to see him again. A note a month later told him that her husband had come back, but that she would like to see him again all the same. There was a similar note yet a month later, He heard no more.

"Well." Old Eguchi muttered to himself. "She got herself pregnant again, with her third one. No doubt about it." It was three years later, as he lay beside a small girl who had been out into a sleep like death, that the thought came to him.

It had not come to him before. Eguchi was puzzled that it should have come now. But the more he turned it over in his mind the surer he was that it was a fact. Had she stopped writing because she was pregnant? He was on the edge of a smile. He felt calm and reposed, as if her welcoming her husband back from Singapore and then getting pregnant had washed away the impropriety. And fond image of the woman's body came before him. It brought no stirrings of lust. The firm, smooth, tall

body was like a symbol of young womanhood. Her pregnancy was but a sudden working of his imagination, but he did not doubt it to be a fact.

"Do you like me?"

"Yes, I like you. That's the question all woman ask."

"But..." She did not go on to finish the sentence.

"Aren't you going to ask what it is like about you?"

"Al right. I won't say any more."

But the question made it clear to him that he did like her. He had forgotten it even now, three years later. The mother of three children, would she still have a body like that if a woman who had had none? Fondness for the woman flowed over him.

It was as if he had forgotten the girl beside him, the girl who had been put to sleep. But it was she who had made him think of the Kobe woman. The arm bent with the hand against the cheek was in his way. He grasped it by the wrist and stretched it out under the quilt. Too warm from the electric blanket, she had pushed it down to her shoulder blades. The small fresh roundness of the shoulders was so near as almost to brush against his eyes. He wanted to see whether he could take a shoulder in the palm of one hand, but held back. The flesh was not rich enough to hide the shoulder blades. He wanted to stroke them, but again held back. He gently brushed aside the hair over her right cheek. The sleeping face was soft in the gentle light from the ceiling and the crimson curtains. Nothing had been done to the eyebrows. The eyelashes were even, and so long that he could have taken them between his fingers. The lower lip thickened slightly toward the center. He could not see her teeth.

For Eguchi when he came to this house, there was nothing more beautiful than a young face in dreamless sleep. Might it be called the sweetest consolation to be found in this world? No woman, however beautiful, could conceal her age when she was at her best asleep. Or perhaps this house chose girls whose sleeping faces were particularly beautiful. He felt his life, his troubles over the years, fade away as he gazed at her small face. It would have been a happy night had he even now taken the tablets and gone off to sleep. But he lay quietly, his eyes closed. He did not want to sleep... for the girl, having made him remember the woman in Kobe, might bring other memories too.

The thought that the young wife in Kobe, having welcomed her husband back after two years, had immediately become pregnant, and the intense feeling, as if the inevitable, that it had to be the case were not

quick to leave Eguchi. It seemed to him that the affair had gone nothing to sully the child the woman had carried. The pregnancy and the birth were a reality and a blessing. Young life was at work in the woman, telling him all the more of his age. But why had she quietly given herself to him, without resistance and without restraint? It was, he thought, something that had not happened before in all his near seventy years. There had been nothing in her of the whore or the profligate. He had less sense of guilt, indeed, than he now had in this house, beside the girl so strangely put to sleep. Still in bed, he had watched with pleasure and approval as the woman quietly hurried off to the small children awaiting her. Probably the last young woman in his life, she had become unforgettable, and he did not think that she would have forgotten him. Though the affair would remain a secret throughout their lives, leaving no deep cuts, he did not think that either of them would forget.

But it was strange that this girl in training as a 'sleeping beauty' should have brought back the Kobe woman so vividly. He opened his eyes. He stroked her eye slashes gently. She frowned and turned away, and her lips parted. Her tongue shrank downwards, as if withdrawing into her lower jaw. There was a pleasing hollow down the precise center of the childlike tongue. He was tempted. He peered into the opened mouth. If he were to throttle her, would there be spasms along the small tongue? He remembered how, long before, he had known a prostitute even younger than this girl. His own tastes were rather different, but she was the one who had been allotted to him by his host. She used her long, thin tongue. It was watery, and Eguchi was not pleased. From the town came sounds of drum and flute that made one's heart beat faster. It seemed to be a festival night. The girl had almond eyes and a spirited face. She rushed ahead, despite the fact that she obviously had no interest in her customer.

"The festival." said Eguchi. "I imagine you're in a hurry to get to the festival."

"Why, you're exactly right. You've hit the nail on the head. It was on my way with a friend, and then I got called here."

"All right." he said, avoiding the cold, watery tongue. "Be on your way again. The drums are coming from a shrine, I suppose."

"But the woman here will scold me."

...

The girl tonight was perhaps two or three years older than the other, and her body was more a woman's. The great difference was that she had

been put to sleep and would not awaken. If festival drums were echoing tonight she would not hear them.

Straining his ears, he thought he could hear a faint late autumn wind blowing down over the hills behind the house. The warm breath from the girl's small parted lips came to his face. The dim light from the crimson velvet curtains flowed down inside her mouth. It did not seem to him that the girl's tongue would like the others's, cold and watery. The temptation was still strong. This girl was the first of the 'sleeping beauties' who had shown him her tongue. The impulse toward a misdeed more exciting than putting a finger to her tongue flashed through him.

But the misdeed did not take clear shape in Eguchi's mind as cruelty and terror. The affairs with the Kobe woman and the fourteen year old prostitute, for instance, were of but a moment in a long life, and they flowed away in a moment. To marry, to rear his daughters, these things were on the surface good. But to have had the long years in his power, to have controlled their lives, to have warped their natures even, these might be evil things. Perhaps, beguiled by custom and order, one's sense of evil went numb.

Lying beside a girl who had been put to sleep was doubtless evil. The evil would become clearer were he to kill her. It would be easy to strangle her, or to cover her nose and mouth. She was asleep with her mouth open, showing her childlike tongue. It was a tongue that seemed likely to curl around his finger, were he to touch it, like that of a babe at its mother's breast. He put his hand to her jaw and upper lip and closed her mouth. When he took it away the mouth fell open again. In the lips parted in sleep, the old man saw youth.

The fact of her being so very young may have caused the impulse to flash through him. But it seemed to him that among the old men who secretly came to this 'house of sleeping beauties', there must be some who not only looked wistfully back to the vanished past but sought to forget the evil they had done through their lives. Old Kiga, who had introduced Eguchi to the house, had of course not revealed the secrets of the others guests. There were probably only a few of them. Eguchi could imagine that they were worldly successes. But among them must be some who had made their successes by wrongdoing and kept their gains by repeated wrongdoing. They would be among the defeated, rather... victims of terror. In their hearts as they lay against the flesh of naked young girls put to sleep would be more than fear of approaching death and regret for their lost youth. There might also be remorse, and the

turmoil so common in the families of the successful. They would have no Buddha before whom to kneel. The naked girl would know nothing, would not open her eyes, of one of the old men were to hold her tight in his arms, shed cold tears, even sob and wail. The old man need feel no shame, no damage to his pride. The regrets and the sadness could flow quite freely. And might not the 'sleeping beauty' herself be a Buddha of sorts? And she was flesh and blood. Her young skin and scent might be forgiveness for the sad old men.

Old Eguchi quietly closed his eyes as these thoughts came to him. It seemed a little strange that, among the three 'sleeping beauties' he had been with, the one tonight, the smallest and youngest, quite inexperienced, should have called them up. He took her in his arms, enveloped her. Until then he had avoided touching her. Drained the strength, she did not resist. She was pathetically slight. She may have felt Eguchi even from the depths of sleep. She closed her mouth. Her hips, thrust forward, came against him roughly.

What sort of life would she have, he wondered. Would it be a quiet and peaceful one, even though she achieved no great eminence? He hoped that she would find happiness for having given comfort to the old men here. He almost thought that, as in old legends, she was the incarnation of a Buddha. Where there not old stories in which prostitutes and courtesans were Buddha incarnate?

He took her loose hair lightly in his hand. He strove to quiet himself, seeking confession and repentance of his misdeeds. But it was the woman in his past, that floated into his mind. And what he remembered fondly had nothing to do with the length of his affairs with them, their beauty, their grace and intelligence. It had to do with such things as the remark the Kobe woman had made: 'I slept as if I were dead. I really slept as if I were dead.' It had to do with women who had lost themselves in his caresses, who had been frantic with pleasure. Was the pleasure less a matter of the depths of their affections than of their physical endowments? What would this girl be like when she was fully grown? He extended the arm that embraced her and stroked her back. But of course he had no way of knowing. When on his previous visit he had slept with the witchlike girl, he had asked himself how much of the depth and breadth of sex he had known in his sixty seven years, and he had felt the thought as his own senility. And it was strange that the small girl tonight seemed to bring sex back from the past. He touched his lips gently to her closed lips. There were no taste. They were dry. The fact

that there was no taste seemed to improve them. He might never see her again. By the time the small lips were damp with the taste of sex, Eguchi might already be dead. The thought did not sadden him. Leaving her mouth, his lips brushed against her eyebrows and eyelashes. She moved her head slightly. Her forehead came against his eyes. His eyes were closed, and he closed them tighter.

Behind the closed eyes an endless succession of phantasms floated up and disappeared. Presently they began to take on a certain shape. A number of golden arrows flew near and passed on. At their tips were hyacinths of deep purple. At their tails were orchids of various colors. It seemed strange that at such speed the flowers did not fall. Eguchi opened his eyes. He had begun to doze off.

He had not yet taken the sleeping tablets. He looked at his watch, beside them. It was twelve thirty. He took them in his hand. But it seemed a pity to go to sleep tonight, when he felt none of the gloom and the loneliness of old age. The girl was breathing peacefully. Whatever she had taken or had an injection of, she seemed to be in no pain. Perhaps it was a very large dose of sleeping medicine, perhaps it was a light poison, Eguchi thought that he would like at least once to sink into such a deep sleep. Getting quietly out of bed, he went to the room next door. He pressed the button, thinking to demand of the woman the medicine the girl had been given. The bell rang on and on, informing him of the cold, inside and out. He was reluctant to ring too long, here in the secret house in the depths of the night. The region was a warm one, and with red leaves still clung to the branches. But, in a wind so faint that it was scarcely a wind at all, he could hear the rustle of fallen leaves in the garden.

The waves against the cliff were gentle. The place was like a haunted house in the lonely quiet. He shivered. He had come out in a cotton kimono.

Back in the secret room, the small girl's cheeks were flushed. The electric blanket was turned low, but she was young. He warmed himself against her, her back arched in the warmth. Her feet were exposed.

"You'll catch a cold." said Eguchi. He felt the great difference in their ages. It would have been good to take the small girl inside him.

"Did you hear me ring last night?" he asked as the woman of the house served him breakfast. "I wanted the medicine you gave her. I wanted to sleep like her."

"That is not permitted. It's dangerous for old people."

"You needn't to worry. I have a strong heart. And I wouldn't have any regrets if I went."

"You're asking a lot for someone who has been here three times."

"What is the most you can get by with in this house?"

She stared back at him, a faint smile on her lips.

4

The grey of the winter morning was by evening a cold drizzle. Inside the gate of the 'house of sleeping beauties', Eguchi noticed that the drizzle had become sleet. The usual woman closed and locked the gate behind him. He saw white dots in the light pointed at his feet. There was only a scattering of them. They were soft, and melted as they hit the flagstones.

"Be careful." said the woman. "The stones are wet." holding an umbrella for him, she tried to take his hand. The forbidding warmth from the middle aged hand seemed about to come through his glove.

"I'm all right." He shook her away. "I'm not so old yet that I need to be led by the hand."

"They're slippery." The fallen maple leaves had been not swept away. Some were withered and faded, but they glowed in the rain.

"Do you have them coming here half paralyzed? Do you have to lead them and hold them up?"

"You're not to ask about the others."

"But the winter must be dangerous for them. What would you do if one of them had a stroke or a heart attack?"

"That would be the end of things." she said coldly. "It might be paradise for the gentleman, of course."

"You wouldn't come through undamaged yourself."

"No." Whatever there might have been in the woman's past to account for such composure, there was no flicker of change in her expression.

The upstairs room was as usual, save that the village of the maple leaves had been changed for a snow scene. It too was without doubt a reproduction.

"You always give such short notice." she said as she made the usual good tea. "Didn't you like any of other three?"

"I like all three of them too well."

"Then you should let me know two or three days in advance which you want. You're very promiscuous."

"Is it promiscuous, even with a sleeping girl? She doesn't know a thing, It could be anyone."

"She may be asleep, but she's still flesh and blood."

"Do they ever ask what sort of old man was with them?"

"They are absolutely forbidden so. That's the strict rule of the house, You needn't worry."

"I believe you suggested it wouldn't do to have a man too fond of one of yours girls. Do you remember? We spoke about promiscuousness, and you said to me exactly what I said to you tonight. We've changed places. Very odd. Is the woman in you beginning to show through?"

There was a sarcastic smile at the corners of her thin lips. "I would imagine that over the years you've made a great many women weep."

"What an idea!" Eguchi was caught off balance.

"I think you protest too much."

"I wouldn't be coming here if I were that kind of man. The old men who come here still have their attachments. But struggling and moaning won't bring anything back."

"I wonder." There still was no change in her expression.

"I asked you last time. What is the worst they can get by with?"

"Having the girl asleep, I should think."

"Can I have the same medicine?"

"I believe I had to refuse you last time."

"What is the worst thing an old man can do?"

"There are no bad things in this house." She lowered her youthful voice, which seemed to impose itself upon him with a new force.

"No bad things?"

The woman's dark eyes were calm. "Of course, if you were to try to strangle one of the girls, it would be like wrenching the arm of a baby."

The remark was distasteful. "She wouldn't even wake up then?"

"I think not."

"Made to order if you wanted to commit suicide and take someone with you."

"Please do, if you feel lonely about doing it by yourself."

"And when you're too lonely even to suicide?"

"I suppose there are such times for old people." As always, her manner was calm. "Have you been drinking? You're not making a great deal of

sense."

"I've had something worse than liquor."

She glanced at him briefly. "The one tonight is very warm." She said as if to make light of his words. "Just right for a cold night like this. Warm yourself with her." And she went downstairs.

Eguchi opened the door to the secret room. The sweet smell of woman was stronger than usual. The girl lay with her back to him. She was breathing heavily, though not quite snoring. She seemed to be a large girl. He could not be certain in the light from the crimson velvet curtains, but her rich hair may have had a reddish cast. The skin from the full ears over the round neck was extraordinarily white. She seemed, as the woman had said, very warm, and yet she was not flushed.

"Ah!" He cried out involuntary as he slipped behind her.

She was indeed warm. Her skin was so smooth that it seemed to cling to him. From its moistness came the scent. He lay still for a time, his eyes closed. The girl too lay still. The flesh was rich at the hips and below. The warmth less sank into him than enveloped him. Her bosom was full, but the breasts seemed low and wide, and the nipples were remarkably small. The woman had spoken of strangulation. He remembered now and trembled at the thought, because of the girl's skin. If he were to strangle her, what sort of scent would she give off? He forced upon himself a picture of the girl in the daytime, and, to subdue the temptation, he gave her an awkwardness gait. The excitement faded. But what was awkwardness in a walking girl? What were well shaped legs? What, for a sixty seven year old man with a girl who was probably for the one night only, were intelligence, culture, barbarity? He was but touching her. And, put to sleep, she knew nothing of the fact that an ugly old man was touching her. Nor would she know tomorrow. Was she a toy, a sacrifice? Old Eguchi had come to this house only four times, and yet the feeling that with each new visit there was a new numbness inside him was especially strong tonight.

Was this girl also well trained? Perhaps because she had come to think nothing of the sad old men who were her guests, she did not respond to Eguchi's touch. Any kind of inhumanity, given practice, becomes human. All the varieties of transgression are buried in the darkness of the world. But Eguchi was a little different from the other old men who frequented the house. Indeed he was very different. Old Kiga, who had introduced him, had been wrong when he thought Eguchi like the rest of them. Eguchi had not ceased to be a man. It might therefore be said that

he did not feel the sorrow and happiness, the regrets and loneliness, as intensely as the others. It was not necessary for him that the girl remain asleep.

There had been his second visit, when, with that witch of a girl, he had come close to violating the rule of the house, and had pulled himself back in his astonishment at finding that she was a virgin. He had vowed then to observe the rule, to leave the sleeping beauties in peace. He had vowed to respect the old men's secret. It did seem to be the case that all the girls of the house were virgins. And to what sort of solicitude did that attest? Was it the wish of the old men, a wish that approached the mournful? Eguchi thought he understood, and he also thought it foolish.

But he was suspicious of the one tonight. He found it hard to believe that she was a virgin. Raising his chest to her shoulder, he looked into her face. It was not as well put together as her body. But it was more innocent than he would have expected. The nostrils were somewhat distended, and the bridge of the nose was low. The cheeks were broad and round. A widow's peak came low over her forehead. The short eyebrows were heavy and regular.

"Very pretty." muttered old Eguchi, pressing his cheek to hers, It too was smooth and moist. Perhaps because his weight was heavy against her shoulder, she turned face up. Eguchi pulled away.

He lay for a time with eyes closed, for the girl's scent was unusually strong. It is said that the sense of smell is the quickest to call up memories. But was this not too thick and sweet a smell? Eguchi thought of the milky smell of a baby. Even though the two were utterly different, were they not somehow basic to humanity? From ancient times old men had sought to use the scent given off by girls as an elixir of youth. The scent of the girl tonight could not have been called fragrant. Were he to violate the rule of the house, there would be an objectionably sharp and carnal smell. But was the fact that it came to him as objectionable a sign that Eguchi was already senile? Was not this sort of heavy, sharp smell the basis of human life? She seemed like a girl who could easily be made pregnant. Although she had been put to sleep, her physiological processes had not stopped, and she would awaken in the course of the next day. Is she were to become pregnant, it would be quite without her knowledge. Suppose Eguchi, now sixty seven, were to leave such a child behind. It was the body of woman that invited man into the lower circles of hell.

She had been stripped of all defenses, for the sake of her aged guest, of

the sad old man. She was naked, and she would not awaken. Eguchi felt a wave of pity for her. A thought came to him: the aged have death, and the young have love, and death comes once, and love comes over and over again. It was a thought for which he was unprepared, but it calmed him... not that he had been especially overwrought. From outside there came the faint rustle of sleet. The sound of the sea had faded away. Old Eguchi could see the great, dark sea, on which the sleet fell and melted. A wild bird like a great eagle flew skimming the waves, something in its mouth dripping blood. Was it not a human infant? It could be. Perhaps it was the specter of human iniquity. He shook his head gently on the pillow and the specter went away.

"Warm, warm." said Eguchi.

It was not only the electric blanket. She had thrown off the quilt, and her bosom, rich and wide but somewhat wanting in emphasis, was half exposed. The fair skin was slightly tinged in the light from the crimson velvet. Gazing at the handsome bosom, he traced the peaked hairline with her finger. She continued to breathe quietly and slowly. What sort of teeth would be behind the small lips? Taking the lower lip at its center he opened it slightly. Though not small in proportion to the size of her lips, her teeth were small all the same, and regularly ranged. He took away his hand. Her lips remained open. He could still see the tips of her teeth. He rubbed off some of the lipstick at his fingertips on the full earlobe, and the rest on the round neck. The scarcely visible smear of red was pleasant against the remarkably white skin.

Yes, she would be a virgin. Having had doubts about the girl on his second night, and having been startled at his own baseness, he felt no impulse to investigate. What was it to him? Then, as he began to think that it indeed was something to him, he seemed to hear a derisive voice.

"Is it some devil in there trying to laugh at me?"

"Nothing as simple, I'm afraid. You're making too much of your own sentimentality, and your dissatisfaction at not being able to die."

"I'm trying think for old men who are sadder than I am."

"Scoundrel. Someone who puts the blame on others is not fit to be ranked with the scoundrels."

"Scoundrel? Very well, a scoundrel. But why is a virgin pure, and another woman not? I haven't asked for virgins."

"That's because you don't know real senility. Don't come to this place again. If by a chance in a million, a chance in a million, a girl were to open her eyes... aren't you underestimating the shame?"

Something like a self interrogation passed through Eguchi's mind. But of course it did not establish that only four times, he was puzzled that all four girls should have been virgins. Was it the demand, the hope of the old men that they should be?

If the girl should awaken... the thought had a strong pull. Of she were to open her eyes, even in a daze, how intense would the shock be, of what sort would it be? She would probably not go on sleeping if, for instance, he were to cut her arm almost off or stab her on the chest or abdomen.

"You're depraved." he muttered to himself.

The impotence of the other old men was probably not very far off Eguchi himself. Thoughts of atrocities rose in him: destroy this house, destroy his own life too, because the girl tonight was not what could have been called a regular featured beauty, because he felt close to him a pretty girl with her broad bosom exposed. He felt something like contrition turned upon itself. And there was contrition too for a life that seemed likely to have a timid ending. He did not have the courage of his youngest daughter, with whom he had gone to see the camellia. He closed his eyes again.

Two butterflies were sporting in low shrubbery along the stepping stones of a garden. They disappeared in the shrubbery, they brushed against it, they seemed to be enjoying themselves. They flew slightly higher and danced lightly in and out, and another butterfly appeared from the leaves, and another. Two sets of mates, he thought... and then there were five, all whirling about together. Was it a flight? But butterflies appeared one after another from the shrubbery, and the garden was a dancing swarm of white butterflies, close to the ground. The down swept branches of a maple waved in a wind that did not seem to exist. The twigs were delicate and, because the leaves were large, sensitive to the wind. The swarm of butterflies had so grown that it was like a field of white flowers, The maple leaves here had quite fallen. A few shriveled leaves might still be clinging to the branches, but tonight it was sleeting.

Eguchi had forgotten the cold of the sleet. Was that dancing swarm of white butterflies brought by the ample white bosom of the girl, spread put here beside him? Was there something in the girl to quiet the bad impulses in an old man? He opened his eyes. He gazed at the small pink nipples. They were like a symbol of good. He put a cheek to them. The back of his eyelids seemed to warm. He wanted to leave his mark on the

girl. Of he were to violate the rule of the house, she would be in dismay when she awoke. He left on her breasts several marks the color of blood. He shivered.

"You'll be cold." He pulled up the quilt. He drank down both of the tablets at his pillow. "A bit heavy in the lower parts." He reached down and pulled her toward him.

The next morning he was twice around by the woman of the house. The first time she rapped in the door.

"It's nine o'clock, sir."

"I'm getting up. I imagine it's cold out there."

"I lit the stove early."

"What about the sleet?"

"It's cloudy, but the sleet has stopped."

"Oh!"

"I've had your breakfast ready for some time."

"I see." With this indifferent answer, he closed his eyes again. "A devil will be coming for you..." he said. He brought himself against the remarkable skin of the girl.

In no more than ten minutes the woman come again.

"Sir!" This time she rapped sharply. "Are you back in bed?" Her voice too was sharp.

"The door isn't locked." he said. The woman came in. Sluggishly, he pulled himself up. She helped him into his clothes. She even put on his socks, but her touch was unpleasant. In the next room the tea was, as always, good. As he sipped at it, she turned a cold, suspicious eye on him.

"And how was she? Did you like her?"

"Well enough, I suppose."

"That's good. And did you have pleasant dreams?"

"Dreams? None at all. I just slept. It's been a long time since I slept so well." He yawned openly. "I'm still not wide awake."

"I imagine you were tired last night."

"It was her fault. Does she come here often?"

The woman looked down, her expression severe.

"I have a special request." he said. His manner was serious. "When I've finished breakfast, will you let me have some more sleeping medicine? I'll pay extra. Not that I know when the girl will awake up."

"Completely out of question." The woman's face had taken on a muddy pallor, and her shoulders were rigid. "You're really going too

far."

"Too far?" He tried to laugh, but the laugh refused to come.

Perhaps suspecting that Eguchi had done something to the girl, she went hastily into the room.

5

The new year came, the wild sea was of dead winter. On land there was little wind.

"It was good of you to come on such a cold night." At the house of the sleeping beauties, the woman opened the door.

"That's why I've come..." said Old Eguchi. "To die on a night like this, with a young girl's skin to warm him, that would be paradise for an old man."

"You say such unpleasant things."

"An old man lives next door to death."

A stove was burning in the usual upstairs room. And as usual the tea was good.

"I feel a draft."

"Oh!" She looked around. "There shouldn't be any."

"Do you have a ghost with us?"

She started and looked at him. Her face was white.

"Give me another cup. A full one. Don't cool it. Let me have it off the fire."

She did as ordered. "Have you heard something?" she asked in a cold voice.

"Maybe."

"Oh! You heard and still you've come?" Sensing that Eguchi had heard, she had evidently decided not to hide the secret. But her expression was forbidding. "I shouldn't, I know, after having brought you all this distance... But may I ask you to leave?"

"I came with my eyes open."

She laughed. One could hear something diabolical in the laugh.

"It was bound to happen. Winter is a dangerous time for old men. Maybe you should close down in winter."

She did not answer.

"I don't know what sort of old men come here, but another dies and then another, you'll be in trouble."

"Tell it to the man who owns the place. What have I done wrong?" Her face was ashen.

"Oh, but you did do something wrong. It was still dark, and they took the body to an inn. O imagine you helped."

She clutched at her knees. "It was for his sake. For his good name."

"Good name? The dead have good names? But you're right. It's stupid, but I imagine things do have to be patched over. More for the sake of the family. Does the owner of this place have the inn too?"

The woman did not answer.

"I doubt if the newspapers would have had much to say, even if he did die beside a naked girl. If I'd been that old man, I think I'd have been happier left as I was."

"There would have been investigations, and the room itself is a little strange, you know, and the other gentlemen who are good enough to come here might have had questions asked. And then there are the girls."

"I imagine the girl would sleep on without knowing the old man had died. He might toss about a little, but I doubt if that would be enough to wake her up."

But if we had left him here, then we'd have had to carry the girl out and hide her. And even then they'd have known that a woman had been with him.

"You'd take her away?"

"And that would be to clear a crime."

"I suppose not."

"So she didn't even know he was dead." How long after the old man died had the girl, put to sleep, lain warming the corpse? She had not know when the body was carried away.

"My blood pressure is good and my heart is strong and you have nothing to worry about. But if it should happen to me, I must ask you not to carry me away. Leave me here beside her."

"Quite out of the question." said the woman hastily. "I must ask you to leave if you insist upon saying such things."

"I'm joking." He could not think that sudden death might be near.

The newspaper notice of the funeral had but mentioned 'sudden death'. The details had been whispered to Eguchi at the funeral by old Kiga. The cause of death had been heart failure.

"it wasn't the sort of inn for a company director to be found in..." said

Kiga "... and there was another he often stayed at. And so people said that old Fukura must have died a happy death. Not of course that they know what really happened."

"Oh!"

"A kind of euthanasia, you might say. But not the real thing. More painful. We were very close, and I guessed immediately, and went to investigate. But I haven't told anyone. Not even the family knows. Do those notices in the newspapers amuse you."

There was two notices side by side, the first over the names of his wife and son, the other over that of his company.

"Fukura was like this, you know." Kiga's gesture indicated a thick neck, a thick chest, and especially a large paunch. "You'd better be careful yourself."

"You needn't worry about me."

"And they carried that huge body away in the night."

Who had carried him away? Someone in an automobile, no doubt. The picture was not a pleasant one.

"They seem to have gotten away with it." Whispered old Kiga at the funeral. "But with this sort of thing going on, I doubt if that house will last long."

"Probably not."

Tonight, sensing that Eguchi knew of old Fukura's death, the woman of the house made no attempt to hide the secret. But she was being careful.

"And the girl really knew nothing about it?" Eguchi was unnecessarily persistent.

"There would be no way for her to know. But he seems to have been in pain. There was a scratch from her neck over her breasts. She of course did not know what had happened. 'What a nasty old man', she said when she woke up the next morning."

"A nasty old man. Even in his last struggles."

"It was nothing you could call a wound, really. Just a welt with blood oozing out in places."

She now seemed prepared to tell him everything. He no longer wanted to hear. The victim was but an old man who had been meant to drop dead somewhere some day. Perhaps it had been a happy death. Eguchi's imagination played with the picture of that huge body being carried to the hot spring inn.

"The death of an old man is an ugly thing. I suppose you might think

of it as rebirth in heaven... but I'm sure he went the other way."

She didn't comment.

"Do I know the girl who was with him?"

"That I cannot tell you."

"I see."

"She will be on holiday till the welt goes away."

"Another cup of tea, please. I'm thirsty."

"Certainly. I'll change the leaves."

"You managed to keep it quiet. But don't you suppose you'll be closing down before long?"

"Do you think so?" Her manner was calm. She didn't not look up from the tea. "The ghost should be coming out one of these nights."

"I'd like to have a good talk with it."

"And what about?"

"About sad old man."

"I was joking."

He took a sip of tea.

"Yes of course. You were joking. But I have a ghost here inside me. You have one too." He pointed at the woman with his right hand. "How did you know he was dead?"

"I heard a strange groaning and came upstairs. His breathing and his pulse had stopped."

"And the girl didn't know." he said again.

"We arrange things so nothing as minor as that will wake her."

"As minor as that? And she didn't know when you carried the body out?"

"No."

"So the girl is the awful one."

"Awful? What is awful about her? Stop this talk and go on into the other room. Have any of the other girls seemed awful?"

"Maybe youth us awful for an old man."

"And what does that mean?" Smiling faintly, she got up, went to the cedar door, opened it a crack, and looked in. "Fast asleep. Here. Here." She took the key from her obi. "I meant to tell you. There are two of them."

"Two?" Eguchi was startled. Perhaps the girls knew of the death of old Fukura.

"You may go in whenever you're ready." The woman left.

The curiosity and the shyness of his first visit had left him. Yet he

pulled back as he opened the door.

Was this also an apprentice? But she seemed wild and rough, quite unlike the 'small girl' of the other night. The wildness made him almost forget about the death of Fukura. It was the girl who had been put to sleep nearer the door. Perhaps because she was not used to such devices for the aged as electric blankets, or perhaps because her warmth kept the winter cold at a distance, she had pushed the bedding down to the pit of her stomach. She seemed to be lying with her legs spread wide. She lay face up, her arms flung out. The nipples were large and dark, and had a purplish cast. It was not a beautiful color in the light from the crimson velvet curtains. Nor could the skin of the neck and breasts have been called beautiful. Still it had a dark glow. There seemed to be a faint odor at the armpits.

"Life itself." muttered Eguchi. A girl like this breathed life into a sixty seven years old man. Eguchi had doubts as to whether the girl was Japanese. She could not yet be twenty, for the nipples were flat despite the width of the breasts. The body was firm.

He took her hand. The fingers and the nails were long. She would be tall, in the modern fashion. What sort of voice would she have, what would be her way of speaking? There were numbers of women on radio and television whose voices he liked. He would close his eyes and listen to them. He wanted to hear this girl's voice. There was of course no way of really talking to a girl who was asleep. How could he make her speak? A voice was different when it came from a sleeping person. Most women have several voices, but this girl would probably have only one. Even from the sleeping form he could see that she was untutored and without affectation.

He sat toying with the long fingernails. Were fingernails so hard? Were these healthy young fingernails? The color of blood was vivid beneath them. He noticed for the first time that she had on a golden necklace thin as a thread. He wanted to smile. Although she had pushed the bedding down below her breasts on so cold a night, there seemed to be a touch of perspiration at her forehead. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it away. The scent was strong on the handkerchief. He also wiped her armpits. Since he would not be able to take the handkerchief home, he wadded it and threw it into a corner of the room.

"She has on lipstick." It was most natural that she should, but with this girl the lipstick too made him want to smile. He gazed at it for a time. "Has she had an operation for a harelip?"

He retrieved his handkerchief and wiped at her lipstick. There was no trace of surgery. The center of the upper lip was raised, to cut a clean pointed line. It was strangely appealing.

He remembered a kiss from more than forty years before. With his hands very lightly on the shoulders of the girl before him, he had brought his lips to her. She shook her head left and right.

"No, no. I don't."

"You have."

"No, no. I don't."

Eguchi wiped his lips, and showed her the handkerchief stained with pink.

"But you have. Look at this."

The girl took the handkerchief and stared at it, and then stuffed it into her handbag.

"I don't," she said, hanging her head silently, choked with tears.

They had not met again. And what might she have done with the handkerchief? But more than the handkerchief, what of the girl herself? Was she still living, now more than forty years later?

How many years had he forgotten her, until she was brought back by the peaked upper lip of the girl who had been put to sleep? There was lipstick on the handkerchief, and the girl's had been wiped away. And would she think, if he left it by her pillow, that he had stolen a kiss? The guests here were of course free to kiss. Kissing was not among the forbidden acts. A man could kiss, however senile he was. The sleeping lips might be cold and wet. Do not the dead lips of a woman one has loved give the greater thrill of emotion? The urge was not strong with Eguchi, as he thought of the bleak senility of the old men who frequented the house.

Yet the unusual shape of these lips did arouse him. So there are such lips, he thought, lightly touching the center of the upper lip with his little finger. It was dry. And the skin seemed thick. The girl began licking her lip, and did not stop until it was well moistened. He took his finger away.

"Does she kiss even when she's asleep?"

He stopped, however, at briefly stroking the hair at her ear. It was coarse and stiff. He got up and undressed.

"You'll catch a cold. I don't care how healthy you are." He put her arms under the bedding and covered her breasts. He lay down beside her. She turned over. Then, with a groan, she thrust her arms abruptly

out. The old man was pushed cleanly away. He laughed on and on. A most valiant sort of apprentice, he said to himself.

Because she had been put into a sleep from which she would not awaken, and because her body was probably numbed, he could do as he wished. But the vigour to take such a girl by force was no longer in Eguchi... or he had forgotten it. He approached her with a soft passion, a gentle affirmation, a feeling of nearness to woman. The adventure, the fight that set one to breathing harder, had gone.

"I'm old." he muttered, thinking such thoughts even while smiling at his rejection by the sleeping girl.

He was not really qualified to come to this house as the other old men came. But it was probably the girl with the darkly glowing skin who made him feel more keenly than usual that he too had left before him not a great deal of life as a man.

It seemed to him that to force himself upon the girl would be the tonic to bring stirrings of youth. He was growing a little tired of the 'house of the sleeping beauties'. And even as he wearied of it the number of his visits increased. He felt a sudden urging of the blood: he wanted to use force on her, break the rule of the house, destroy the ugly nostrum, and so take his leave. But force would not be necessary. There would be no resistance from the body of the girl put to sleep. He could probably even strangle her with no difficulty. The impulse let him, and an emptiness, dark in its depths, spread over him. The high waves were near and seemed a great distance away, partly because here on the land there was no wind. He saw the dark floor of the night if the dark sea. Raising himself on an elbow, he brought his face to the girl's. She was breathing heavily. He decided not to kiss her, and fell back again.

He lay as she had thrust him away, his chest exposed. He went to the other girl, She had been facing away, but she rolled over toward him. There was a gentle voluptuousness in this greeting, even as she lay asleep. One hand fell at the old man's hip.

"A good combination." Toying with the girl's fingers, he closed his eyes. The small boned fingers were supple, so supple that it seemed they would bend indefinitely without breaking. He wanted to take them in his mouth. Her breasts were small but round and high. They fitted into the palm of his hand. The roundness at her hips was similar. Woman is infinite, thought the older man, with a touch of sadness. He opened his eyes. She had a long neck. It too was slender and graceful. But the slenderness was different from that of old Japan. There was a double

line at the closed eyelids, so shallow that with the eyes open it might become but a single line. Or it might be at times single and then double. Or perhaps a single line at one eye and a double at the other. Because of the light from the velvet curtains he could not be sure of the color of her skin. But it seemed tan at the face, white at the neck, somewhat tan again at the shoulders, and so white at the breasts that it might have been bleached.

He could see that the darkly glowing girl was tall. This one did not seem to be much shorter. He stretched out a leg, His toes first came against the thick skinned sole of the dark girl's foot. It was oily. He drew his foot away hastily, but the withdrawal became an invitation. The thought flashed through his mind that old Fukura's partner when he had his last seizure had been this dark skinned girl. Hence tonight there were two girls.

But that could not be the case. The girl who had been with Fukura was in vacation until the welt over her neck and breast went away. Had the woman of the house not just this moment told him so? He again put his foot against the thick skinned sole of the girl's foot, and explored the dark flesh upwards.

A spasm came over to him, as of to say: 'initiate me into the spell of life'. The girl had pushed off the quilt, or rather the electric blanket beneath it. One foot lay flung outside the quilt. Thinking he would like to roll her out into the midwinter cold, he gazed at her breasts and abdomen. He put his head to a breast and listened to her heart. He had expected it to be strong, but it was engagingly subdued. But was it not a little uneven?

"You'll catch cold." He covered her, and turned off her side of the blanket. The spell that was a woman's life, he thought, was not so great a thing. Suppose he were to throttle her. It would be easy. It would be no trouble at all even for an old man. He took his handkerchief and wiped the cheek that had been against her breast. The girl's oily smell seemed to come from it. The sound of the girl's heart stayed on, deep in his ear. He put a hand to his own heart. Perhaps because it was his own, it seemed the stronger than the two.

He turned to the gentler girl, his back toward the dark one. The well shaped nose seemed the more courtly and elegant to his farsighted old eyes. He could not resist putting his hand under the long, slender neck and pulling her toward him. As her head moved softly toward him there came with it a sweet scent.

It mixed with the wild, sharp scent of the dark girl behind him. He brought the fair girl against him. Her breathing was short and rapid. But he need not fear that she would awaken. He lay still for a time.

"Shall I ask her to forgive me? As the last woman in my life?"

The girl behind him seemed to seek arouse him. He put out his hand and felt. The flesh there was as at her breasts.

"Be quiet. Listen to the winter waves and be quit." He sought to calm himself.

"These girls have been put to sleep; They might as well be paralyzed. They have been given some poison or some strong drug." And why? "Why if not money?" Yet he found himself hesitating. Every woman was different from every other. He knew that. And yet was the one before him so very different that he was ready to inflict upon her a wound that would not heal, a sorrow to last through her life? The sixty seven year old heal, a sorrow to last through her life? The sixty seven year old Eguchi could, if he wished, think that all women's bodies were alike. And in this girl there was neither affirmation nor denial, there was no response whatsoever. All that distinguished her from a corpse was that she breathed and had warm blood. Indeed tomorrow morning when the living girl awoke, would she be much different from an open eyed corpse? There was now in the girl no love or shame or fear. When she awoke there could remain bitterness and regret. He would not know who had taken her. She could but infer that was an old man. She would probably not tell the woman of the house. She would conceal to the end the fact that the rule of this house of old men had been broken, and so no one would know but herself. Her soft skin clung to Eguchi. The dark girl, perhaps after all chilly now that her side of the blanket had been turned off, pressed against Eguchi with her naked back. One of her feet was between the feet of the fair skinned girl. Eguchi felt his strength leave him... and again he wanted to laugh. He reached for the sleeping medicine. He was sandwiched tightly between them and could move only with difficulty. His hand on the fair girl's forehead, he looked at the usual tablets.

"Shall I go without them tonight?" he muttered.

It was clearly a strong drug. He would drop effortlessly into sleep. For the first time it occurred to him to wonder whether all the old men who came to the house obediently took the medicine. But was it not compounding the ugliness of old age if, regretting the hours lost in sleep, they refrained from taking it? He thought that he himself had not yet

entered into that companionship of ugliness. Once again he drank down the medicine. He had once said, he remembered, that he wanted the drug the girl had taken. The woman had answered that it was dangerous for old men. He had not insisted.

Did 'dangerous' suggest dying in one's sleep? Eguchi was but an old man of ordinary circumstances. Being human, he fell from time to time into a lonely emptiness, a cold despondency. Would this not be a most desirable place to die? To arouse curiosity, to invite the disdain of the world... would these not be to cap his life with proper death? All of this acquaintances would be surprised. He could not calculate the injury he would do to his family. But to die in his sleep between, for instance, the two young girls tonight... might that not be the ultimate wish of a man in his last years? No, it was not so. Like old Fukura, he would be told that he had committed suicide from an overdose of sleeping medicine. Since there would be no suicide note, it would be said that he had been despondent about the prospects ahead. He could see the faint smile of the woman of the house.

"Foolish ideas. As if I wanted to bring bad luck."

He laughed, but it was not a bright laugh. The drug was taking effect.

"Al right." he murmured. "I'll get her up and make her give me what they had."

But it was not likely that she would agree. And Eguchi was not eager to get up, and did not really want the other drug. He lay face up and put his arms around the two girls, around a soft, docile, fragrant neck, and a hard, oily neck. Something flowed up inside him. He looked at the crimson curtains to the left and the right.

"Ah."

"Ah!" It was the dark girl who seemed to answer. She put an arm on his chest. Was she in pain? He took away his arm and turned his back to her. With the free arm he embraced the hollow at the hips of the fair girl. He closed his eyes.

"The last woman in my life? Why must I think so? Even for a minute." And who had been the first woman in his life?

His was less sleepy than dazed.

The thought flashed across his mind. The first woman in his life had been his mother. "Of course. Could it be anyone except Mother?" came the unexpected affirmation. "But can I say that Mother was my woman?"

Now at sixty seven, as he lay between two naked girls, a new truth

came from inside him. Was it a blasphemy, was it yearning? He opened his eyes and blinked, as if to drive away a nightmare. But the drug was working. He had a dull headache. Drowsily, he pursued the image of his mother. And then he sighed, and took two breasts, one of each of the girls, in the palms of his hands. A smooth one and an oily one. He closed his eyes.

Eguchi's mother had died one winter night when he was seventeen. Eguchi and his father held her hands. She had long suffered from tuberculosis and her arms were skin and bones, but her grip was so strong that Eguchi's fingers ached. The coldness of her hand sank all the way to his shoulder. The nurse who had been massaging her feet left quietly. She had probably gone to call the doctor.

"Yoshio. Yoshio." His mother called out in little gasps. Eguchi understood, and stroked her tormented bosom. As he did so she vomited a large quantity of blood. It came bubbling from her nose. She stopped breathing. The gauze and the towels at her pillow were not enough to wipe up the blood.

"Wipe it with your sleeve, Yoshio." said the father. "Nurse, nurse! Bring a basin and water, Yes, and a new pillow and a nightgown and sheets."

It was natural that when old Eguchi thought of his mother as the first woman in his life, he thought of her death.

"Ah!" The curtains that walled the secret room seemed the color of blood. He closed his eyes tight, but the red would not disappear. He was half asleep from the drug. The fresh young breasts of the two girls were in the palms of his two hands. His conscience and his reason were numbed, and there seemed to be tears at the corners of his eyes.

Why, in a place like this, had he thought of his mother as the first woman in his life? But the thought of his mother as his first woman did not bring up thoughts of later women. Actually his first woman had been his wife. Very well. But old wife, having sent three daughter out in marriage, would be sleeping alone this cold winter night. Or would she still be awake? She would not hear the sound of waves, but the cold of the night would be harsher than here. He asked himself what they were, the two breasts in his hands. They would still be coursing with warm blood when he himself was dead. And what did that fact mean? He put a certain sluggish strength into his hands. There was no response, for the breasts too were deep in sleep. When, in her last hour, he had stroked his mother's bosom, he had of course felt her withered breasts. They had not

been like breasts. He did not remember them now. What he remembered was groping for them and going to sleep, one day when he was still an infant.

Old Eguchi was finally being pulled to sleep. He brought his hands from the girl's breasts into a more comfortable position. He turned toward the dark girl, because hers was the strong scent. Her rough breath hit his face. Her mouth was slightly open.

"A crooked tooth. A pretty one." He took it between his fingers. She had large teeth, but this one was small. Had her breath not been coming at him, Eguchi might have kissed the tooth. The strong scent interfered with his sleep, and he turned away. Even then her breath hit the nape of his nape of his neck. She was not snoring, but she seemed to put her voice into her breathing. He hunched his shoulders and brought his cheek to the forehead of the fair girl. She was perhaps frowning, but also seemed that she was smiling. The oily skin of the dark girl was unpleasant behind him. It was cold and slippery. He fell asleep.

It may have been because he had difficulty sleeping between the two girls that Eguchi had a succession of nightmares. There was no thread running through them, but they were disturbingly erotic. In the last of them he came home from his honeymoon to find flowers like red dahlias blooming and waving in such profusion that they almost buried the house. Wondering whether it was the right house, he hesitated to go inside.

"Welcome home. Why are you standing there?" It was his dead mother who greeted them. "Is your wife afraid of us?"

"But the flowers, Mother?"

"Yes." said the mother calmly. "Come on in."

"I thought we had come to the wrong house. I could hardly have made a mistake. But what flowers."

Ceremonial food had been laid out for them. After she had exchanged greetings with his bride, Eguchi's mother went into the kitchen to warm the soup. He smelled sea bream. He went out to look at the flowers. His bride went with him.

"Aren't they beautiful?" she said.

"Yes." Not wishing to frighten her, he did not add that they had not been there before.

He gazed at a particularly large one among them. A red drop oozed from one of the petals.

Old Eguchi awoke with a groan. He shook his head, but he was still in

a daze. He was facing the dark girl. Her body was cold. He started up. She was nothing breathing. He felt her breasts. There was no pulse. He leaped up. He staggered and fell. Trembling violently, he went into the next room. The call button was in the alcove. He heard footsteps below.

"Did I strangled her in my sleep?" He went, almost crawled, back to the other room and looked at the girl.

"Is something wrong?" the woman of the house came in.

"She's dead." his teeth were chattering.

The woman rubbed her eyes and looked calmly down at the girl.

"Dead? There is no reason that she should be."

"She's dead. She's nothing breathing and there's no pulse."

Her expression changing, the woman knelt beside the dark girl.

"Dead, isn't she?"

The woman rolled back the bedding and inspected the girl.

"Did you do anything to her?"

"Not a thing."

"She's not dead." said the woman with forced coolness. "You needn't worry."

"She's dead. Call a doctor."

The woman did not answer.

"What did you give to her? maybe she was allergic."

"Don't be alarmed. We won't cause you any trouble. We won't tell your name."

"She's dead."

"I think not."

"What time is it?"

"After four."

She staggered as she lifted the dark, naked body.

"Let me help you."

"Don't bother. There's a man downstairs."

"She's heavy."

"Please. You needn't bother. Go back to sleep, There is the other girl."

There was another girl... no remark had ever struck him more sharply. There was of course the fair skinned girl still asleep in the next room.

"Do you expect me to sleep after this?" His voice was angry, but there was also fear in it. "I'm going home."

"Please don't. It wouldn't do to be noticed at this hour."

"I can't possibly go back to sleep."

"I'll bring you more medicine."

He heard her dragging the dark girl downstairs. Standing in his night kimono, he for the first time felt the cold press upon him. The woman came back with two white tablets.

"Here you are. Sleep late tomorrow."

"Oh!" He opened the door to the next room. The covers ere as they had been, thrown back in confusion, and the naked form of the fair girl in shining beauty.

He gazed at her.

He heard an automobile pulling away, probably with the dark girl's body. Was she being taken to the dubious inn to which old Fukura had been taken?