

I



The Beauty Contest

According to the almanac for the eighth year of Bunsei (1825) in the reign of the Emperor Ninkō, the third day of the month of Yayoi was to be set aside for the changing of winter to summer clothes. Once that arduous task was completed, men and women were free to return to carnal pursuits. No less an authority than that old lecher, Ihara Saikaku, stated that in ancient times, the wag-tail bird taught humans the ways of lust, and since then there has been no end to the mischief it has caused.

On that day in question, a group of gaudily dressed young women lounged indolently outside a teahouse called the Peony Pavilion. Like all fashionable ladies, they had blackened their teeth, painted their skin white, and shaved their eyebrows, replaced with two black smudges high on their foreheads. Their long, thick, oiled hair was held up with an elaborate series of combs in the high shimada chignon, and the brocade sashes of their kimono tied in front announced to the world that they were ladies of easy virtue. But as this was not the great Yoshiwara pleasure district, but merely the town of Sawara, several days' travel north and east of Edo, they could not aspire to the lofty ranks of oiran or courtesan. In short, they were common whores, although like their bet-

ters in Edo, they had styled themselves with poetic names: Tsunehachi, Konoito, and Agemaki.

As these three ladies sat drinking tea and eating mochi with sweet bean jam, they amused themselves by evaluating the men who passed by, ranking the relative merits of each and commenting loudly on their appearance.

“Look, that one’s not bad at all,” said Agemaki. A young man in a striped kimono, leggings, and straw sandals strode by, clearly a commoner but with an air of refinement about him. “A fine high forehead and soft hands,” she continued. “He must be the first son of a wealthy merchant. Never had to do a day of work in his life.” They all laughed as the man hurried away, ignoring them.

“Now that one is more to my liking,” said Konoito. She pointed with her round fan at a young man across the way. His forehead had not yet been fully shaved; he still had the forelocks of a boy, which gave him a delightfully innocent look.

“What? That child?” Tsunehachi burst out laughing. “Come back in a year or two!” she shouted at him, and the boy turned his face in embarrassment as he passed them by.

Agemaki had already turned her attention elsewhere. “Oho, what have we here?” she exclaimed, pointing to a tall, broad-shouldered man approaching from the other end of the street. Although the road was crowded with people hurrying every which way, darting children and dogs, laborers pulling heavy carts, the man looked neither right nor left but strode forward, his high wooden sandals striking the road purposefully. The crowd parted deferentially before him, eyeing his katana and wakizashi, the two swords at his side that were the marks of his station, along with the clan insignia on the back of his black kimono. He was wearing a black lacquered hat with a curved brim that partially concealed his face, but they could clearly see his square jaw and smooth, even features. He appeared to be about thirty years of age.

“Oi! Samurai-san!” Konoito called to him. “Come sit here with us!” Without so much as a glance their way, the samurai ducked under the noren curtain and into the teahouse.

“Well, I never!” sniffed Tsunehachi. “Thinks he’s too good for us! But he’s not too good to have a drink on the sly.” As befit the dignity of their office, samurai were not allowed to frequent houses of resort like the Peony Pavilion, but in the latter years of the Tokugawa shogunate when the government had grown bloated and flabby, these laws were more often honored in the breach. Inside they could hear him shouting for sake in a deep, powerful voice.

“Look, that’s the best one so far!” Agemaki said excitedly, pointing to a figure approaching from the opposite direction. A young man of perhaps twenty, he was wearing the plain indigo kimono of a commoner, hiked up at the waistband to reveal tight-fitting trousers. On his head was a wide-brimmed conical sedge hat and dangling from the fingers of one hand he carried a thin bamboo staff. He walked with a sinuous grace, slow but sensuous. Beneath the hat, they could make out a slender face with skin as pale as moonlight, and a curving red mouth. He was by far the prettiest boy they had seen so far, the winner for certain. They speculated wildly on his identity—could he be an actor or a dancer? Perhaps a famous musician from Edo or the far away capital?

He too approached the door of the teahouse, then paused for a moment and removed his hat. For the first time the women could see he had the shaved head of a monk, but it was not that which made them shrink back in disgust. His eyes were only half open, scarred over and greyish white—the man was blind. More’s the pity; they could see now even more clearly his graceful, delicate features, sadly disfigured by his ruined eyes. It was plain that he was no actor, but merely an *anma*, or *masseur*.

“Excuse me, but is this the Peony Pavilion?” the young man asked in a light, boyish voice.

“Yes, *anma-san*,” Agemaki replied coldly.

“But not for you,” Konoito added, curling her lip in contempt.

Ignoring this last slight, the young man nodded and thanked them politely, then groped for the sliding door and let himself in.

Ichi, for that was the young man’s name, was indeed an *anma*, a member of the *Tōdōza*, the guild of blind men. There he had been

granted the lowest rank of zatō and trained as a masseur so that he might earn his living, but as anma did not belong to the four official classes of samurai, farmer, merchant, or craftsman, he was considered an outcaste or hinin, a non-person.

Ichi slid open the door to the teahouse, ducking reflexively as the noren curtain brushed across his bare head. He listened to the clink of dishes and chatter of the crowd for a moment before realizing he had no way to determine where there might be an empty seat.

“Excuse me,” he said. No one answered. “Excuse me!” he repeated, more loudly. The noise around him stopped for a moment. “I’d like a bottle of sake and a place to sit and enjoy it.” His request was a bold one, but he kept a smile on his face.

No one answered.

“Hello?” he asked, the smile faltering slightly.

A maid carrying a tray paused to glance up at him. “We didn’t call for a masseur,” she said curtly. At the same moment, the proprietor swaggered out from behind a partition.

“We don’t serve such as you here, anma-san,” he drawled.

Ichi’s ears reddened. “I have good money,” he protested. “Look!” He brandished an oblong silver coin.

“Where did an anma get so much money?” someone muttered.

“Probably stole it from a customer,” the proprietor sneered. He approached Ichi and speaking slowly and loudly told him, “This is no place for you or your stolen cash.” He batted the coin Ichi still held aloft out of his hand. Ichi gave a yelp of dismay. The coin barely made a clink as it struck the packed earth floor.

The tall samurai who had entered just before him looked up sharply from his corner seat, a frown on his even features. “What is this?” he demanded.

No one dared reply. The samurai strode over to the entrance, looking the proprietor up and down in contempt.

“What kind of man strikes one who is unable to strike back?” Without awaiting an answer, he retrieved the silver coin from the ground and pressed it into the masseur’s hand, clasping it with both of his.

For a moment, they both paused, as if taken by surprise. For the first time, the samurai looked at the masseur, taking in his elegant hands and long fingers, his pale skin and curving red lips.

“Anma-san!” the samurai declared suddenly. “I, Uchida Tomonosuke, wish to engage your services. Come to my house at the hour of the dog,” he commanded. The proprietor stared at them, dumbstruck.

In a softer, kinder voice the samurai added, “Best not to linger here. I’ll see you later tonight.” He gave the startled masseur a gentle push in the direction of the door. Ichi gathered his wits, bowed deeply, and departed. The samurai returned to his table, his face wiped free of all expression.

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Later that evening, back at home, Uchida Tomonosuke sat staring at the scroll hanging in the alcove. The stark black characters proclaimed, “In the void there is no form,” a line from the Heart Sutra. The calligraphy was by his mother, the Lady Chacha. A stern composition for a lady, perhaps, but his mother was a formidable woman.

The youngest maid, no more than a child, removed the tray with the remains of Tomonosuke’s evening meal. With a deep three-finger bow, she snapped the shōji shut crisply. Tomonosuke drew his tobacco pouch from his waistband, filled the tiny bowl of a long thin pipe, and lit it from the andon or oil lamp. With a barely audible sigh, he shifted his legs to a more comfortable cross-legged position.

Tomonosuke was a member of the Uchida clan and indeed a direct relation to the daimyō of Omigawa domain in Shimōsa province, Uchida Masakata, styled Ise-no-kami. Still, the higher ranking positions had gone to Tomonosuke’s two elder brothers. Officially Tomonosuke was a hatamoto or bannerman, but in reality he was merely a retainer of the third rank employed in the daimyō’s office of the exchequer. From this position he was painfully aware of the sad state of the domain’s finances. A small holding far enough from Edo to be considered provincial, yet close enough to still be under direct control of the shogunate, Omigawa domain provided an income of only ten thousand

koku of rice per annum, the bare minimum for the rank of daimyō. Of that, Tomonosuke's personal income was a mere five koku a year. It was just enough to maintain his small household, or rather his small rooms within the narrow row house that accommodated other low ranking retainers and their families. The house was one of many clustered along the banks of the Tone River in Sawara, a few hours' walk to the daimyō's seat.

Five days each month, Tomonosuke made the long trip on foot to the office of the exchequer for his work rota. He undertook this wearisome journey, as he did everything else, without reflection or complaint, as he had been taught by his mother. If he excelled in his work, she often reminded him, he might aspire to be promoted from clerk to supervisor, but despite his dogged efforts, thus far this had not happened. The promotion had gone to men more skilled than he at flattery, their words as unctuous and sticky as ground sesame seeds. Even if his direct superiors were not worthy of their rank, still it never occurred to Tomonosuke to doubt the decisions of the daimyō or the senior counsellor. Surely if he continued to serve faithfully, they would at least increase his stipend at some point. If there was enough rice to do so, that is. Each month, Tomonosuke watched the lists of figures pile up in the domain account books. If the rice harvest this year was good, they might scrape by, but if not, well, they would all be staring into the void.

The maid slid open the shōji again. "A masseur is here to see you, my lord," she announced timidly.

It took Tomonosuke a moment to recall the incident earlier in the teahouse. He did not think to wonder how the masseur had found him, as he had given no more direction than simply stating his name. Whatever lengths the man might have gone to were none of his concern.

"Very well, show him in," he said.

The maid disappeared and in her place the blind man knelt in the doorway, bowing stiffly.

"Ichi, masseur of the rank of zatō, at your service, my lord," he said.

Tomonosuke was struck by how boyish his voice sounded. “Come in,” he grunted.

Feeling ahead of him with careful fingers, Ichi pulled himself over the threshold without standing and bowed again, seated directly before the samurai in the tiny room.

Tomonosuke stared at him. How absurd that one so lowly should be possessed of such beauty and grace. His tonsure, the mark of his station as a lay monk, had grown out slightly, and his black hair stood up stiffly away from his head, but the effect was charming. A single petal of a cherry blossom, which just now were falling, clung to the shoulder of his indigo kimono. Tomonosuke stared at the contrast between the pale petal and the deep blue of the rough fabric. Without thinking, softly he recited,

yuki to nomi
furudani aru o
sakurabana
ika ni chire to ka
kaze no fukuramu
 Like snow in the valley
 the cherry blossoms
 sad enough that they scatter,
 must the wind attack them so?

Ichi bowed his head and murmured,

hana no iro wa
kasumi ni komete
misezu tomo
 I can't even see
 the color of the flowers
 shrouded in mist

His voice was so low it could barely be heard.

“What did you say?” Tomonosuke demanded. Ichi sat up straight, his face paled.

“I apologize—”

Tomonosuke cut him off. “Recite the whole thing,” he demanded.

Ichi repeated the poem and added the final lines,

ka o dani nusume

haru no yamakaze

I only steal their scent

on the spring mountain breeze

It was a poem from the classic collection, the *Kokinshū*, a companion poem to the one Tomonosuke had recited. In these degenerate times, one was more apt to hear satiric comic verses or the wooden recitation of the sutras; how unexpected to hear the elegant lines of an ancient aristocratic age from the mouth of an anma.

“Most impressive! How do you come to know such a verse?” Tomonosuke inquired.

“My lord, I was trained by the Tōdōza. I can play the shamisen and biwa, recite any poem or song, old or new. I can chant the entire *Tale of the Heike* from the sounding of the Gion bell to the battle of Dan-no-ura—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Tomonosuke cut in. Impulsively, he reached out and brushed the petal away; it fluttered down to the rush matting laid on the polished wood floor. Sensing the movement of Tomonosuke’s hand, Ichi flinched and drew back in surprise. Instantly Tomonosuke regretted frightening him. The brief look of confusion and fear that flitted across Ichi’s mobile features reminded Tomonosuke of the earlier incident at the teahouse.

Quickly regaining his composure, Ichi bowed again and said, “Will your lordship allow me to begin the massage?”

Tomonosuke grunted in assent, and with a sharp rap, emptied the ashes from his pipe into the hibachi brazier. Ichi felt his way along the floor until he was kneeling behind him. With expert hands, he be-

gan kneading the samurai's shoulders. As he worked, Tomonosuke felt a slow, languorous heat rise to his head. It was pleasant.

"Lie on your side, please," Ichi requested. Tomonosuke complied, and as he lay there he found himself wondering about this strange masseur.

"So tell me, what made you decide to go for a drink at the Peony Pavilion?"

"No reason in particular. I received a generous payment from a grateful customer, and I thought I should celebrate."

"But surely you knew they would not serve an anma in such a place?"

Ichi paused the vigorous action of his hands. "Money is money, isn't that so?" He rolled Tomonosuke onto his other side and began massaging his back again.

"You know very well it isn't," Tomonosuke said. "The Peony Pavilion aspires to be the finest establishment in Sawara, and those women who hang about there, well, they are looking for a wealthy patron. Is there not some other place you usually go for a drink?"

"No, this was the first time."

Tomonosuke was surprised. "Is that so? But you do drink, right?"

"I have had amazake on festival days."

Tomonosuke snorted. Amazake, a sweet, thick, barely alcoholic drink made from the lees of fermented rice, was for women and children.

"Would you like to try it now?"

Ichi was speechless. It was beyond fortuitous that the samurai had returned to him the fallen coin, saving him the indignity of crawling about on the earthen floor to find it, and furthermore given him an hour's employment. That they should sit and drink together as if they were equals was unthinkable. But before he could answer, Tomonosuke had already called for the maid to heat up a bottle and bring two cups. The sharp scent of heated sake filled the air.

"Your cup," Tomonosuke prompted.

Ichi reached out and Tomonosuke placed a tiny porcelain cup in his hand.

"It's so small!" he exclaimed without thinking.

Tomonosuke laughed. "It will be enough." With a clink, he filled the cup. Ichi held it up before him with a word of thanks, then drained it all with one gulp. Tomonosuke watched as Ichi's face contorted with confused emotions.

"Well?"

It was a strange sensation, hot and cold at the same time. Ichi could feel it burning all the way from his mouth to his stomach. Already he could feel the warmth radiating through him.

"It's good!" A grin split his face.

Tomonosuke regarded him curiously. Ichi maintained an air of studied, detached professionalism, but every so often, the mask slipped, and revealed his true feelings. Seeing that sudden smile was like seeing the sun peek out from behind the clouds, then disappear again a moment later. Tomonosuke found in himself a strong urge to find out more about him, to see behind the mask again.

"Have you always been a member of the Tōdōza?" he asked, as he poured another cup for both of them.

"Yes, my lord."

"Really? So you have been blind since birth?"

"No, my lord," Ichi replied, seeming uncomfortable with such personal questions. "I lost my sight as a child."

"Well then, you were not always a member of the Tōdōza. Who were you before that? What of your family?"

To Tomonosuke's dismay, the mask snapped back in place. Ichi dropped his head down and to one side, turned away from him. "It's better not to remember," he said shortly. "It was over twelve years ago. Whatever life I had before is gone now. There is only Ichi of the Tōdōza."

"I see." Tomonosuke coughed to hide his embarrassment at having upset the young man. He plucked the empty sake cup from Ichi's fingers. "Perhaps we should continue the massage," he suggested.

He lay down again on his side, and Ichi kneeled over him, slightly unsteadily. The young man was flushed red from the drink, two crimson

plotches on his pale cheeks. Tomonosuke felt the sake coursing through his veins as well. It was pleasing to lie there with Ichi's strong, sure hands on his back. He turned his head so he could look up at Ichi's face as he worked. Up close, the contrast of his finely shaped face, high nose and curving red mouth with his scarred eyes was even more striking. His eyes had lost their roundness, and the asymmetrical shape caused his eyelashes to point in various directions. Yet Tomonosuke was not repulsed, quite the opposite...

"So handsome," Tomonosuke murmured, putting a hand to Ichi's cheek.

Ichi froze.

They were interrupted by the loud clattering of the outside door, followed by a confusion of voices from the entryway calling the servants. A moment later the shōji opened with a bang and a woman stood in the doorway. Young and fashionable, she had a shawl draped over her shoulders and a kerchief on her head, protecting her elaborate chignon, with the sides standing out stiffly above her ears in the lantern side-locks style and the intricate coil called marumage at the back. It was Tomonosuke's wife, Okyō.

"What's going on here?" Pulling off the shawl and kerchief in one smooth motion with a snap, she stepped up into the room, followed by a girl with a sharp, pointed face: her maid, Rin. Okyō's gaze flicked over the recumbent Tomonosuke, with Ichi hovering just behind him.

"Ah, I see you've hired a masseur for me. How thoughtful," she declared coldly. "This way, if you please, anma-san." Without turning to see if he followed, she swept through the tiny room and into the larger inner room that also served as their sleeping quarters. Ichi followed after her obediently without a word.

Rin closed the sliding door behind them with a snap. Tomonosuke listened as Okyō barked orders at Ichi, who murmured assent. He felt unreasonably annoyed with his wife, although he was unsure exactly why. Why should he care if she enjoyed the services of a masseur? Tomonosuke rarely cared to touch her himself; their failure to produce children after five years of marriage was the chief cause of irritation be-

tween them. So why did he feel as if she were intruding on a private moment?