

# Chapter 1: The Secret

At the time, my thinking was whimsical, and the lively atmosphere encircling me was fading into the distance. I considered quietly slipping away from the men and women engaged in various interactions. In the end, I searched high and low for a suitable hideout. I found my refuge at a Shingon Buddhist temple in Matsuba-cho in Asakusa and rented one room in the priest's living quarters.

The temple was in a noisy, little-known town at the foot of the Asakusa Twelve Stories skyscraper. The Shibori trench ran behind this aristocratic *monzeki* temple in a line from Kikuya Bridge. A long, yellowish-orange earthen wall extended on the side where slums spread over the area like overturned boxes of garbage. The atmosphere strained under a heavy silence I found calming.

From the beginning, I was drawn to the overlooked, mysterious, lonely places in the city, rather than Shibuya or Okubo in the outskirts where a hermit would live. Like the stagnant pools that appear in the rapids of fast mountain streams, I preferred a tranquil enclosure with no traffic, except in exceptional cases or for special people, sandwiched between congested downtown streets.

At the same time, I had other concerns. I loved traveling and have walked from Kyoto, Sendai, and Hokkaido to Kyushu. I'm sure there are towns in Tokyo I've never stepped foot in despite having been born in Ningyo-cho and lived in Tokyo for twenty years. No, there are many more than I thought.

In the downtown of the big city, I know a lot or very little about places I have or haven't passed through in the countless large and small intersecting streets as in a beehive.

When I was twenty-one or -two, I went with my father to see the god of war, Hachiman-sama, in Fukugawa. I said, "Let's take the ferry and eat the famous soba at Komeichi in Fuyugi."

My father took me to a place behind the main Shinto shrine in the compound. The atmosphere was unlike the canal area in Koami-cho and Kobune-cho. The river was narrow and swelled fully at the low cliffs and listlessly pushed its way between the cramped houses crowded on the cliffs on both sides. On the round trip, two or three poles poked the river bottom to weave

the small ferry boat along one side between lines of several barges and lighters longer than the width of the river.

I often visited Hachiman-sama before but never thought about what was behind the compound. I only admired the front from the shrine arch to the main shrine. Naturally, I mused over the front, a panoramic picture that stopped you in your tracks, and not the back. Now, I gazed at this river and ferry landing and saw a scene like a puzzle where the wide ground stretched into eternity. Tokyo became more remote than Kyoto or Osaka. Perhaps I saw this world many times in dreams.

I wondered what sort of town was behind Asakusa Kannon-do Temple. The situation was illustrated when I saw the bright red roof tiles of the vast hall from the alley in the compound lined with shops and hardly anything else came to mind.

Little by little, I matured into an adult. As the world broadened, I visited the homes of friends, went out on excursions to view cherry blossoms, and walked everywhere in Tokyo. I had frequent unexpected encounters in other mysterious worlds as I had experienced as a child.

That other world was the perfect place to shelter. As much as I conducted a variety of searches far and wide, I discovered places I never passed through. Although I crossed Asakusa Bridge and Izumi Bridge several times, I never crossed Saemon Bridge that stood between them.

I always turned right at a corner near the streetcar tracks to go to the Ichimura-za kabuki theater in Nicho-machi. However, I can't recall ever stepping on the land in front of this theater that extended a short two or three blocks to Ryusei-za theater. I had no idea what was the situation from the approach on the right bank of the old Eitai Bridge to the left riverbank. And I seemed to remain ignorant of many places in the neighborhoods of Hatchobori, Eichizenbori, Shamisenbori, and Sanyabori.

A neighborhood of a temple in Matsuba-cho was the strangest town, even for that area. At the spot that turned onto an alley with the Rokku theater district and Yoshiwara red-light district at its tip, I was mesmerized by the creation of a lonely, old-fashioned district.

I ditched my unrivaled closest friend who said, "Tokyo is a mundane place with flashy wealth." He was not pleased with my sneaking away and hiding while he stood and quietly watched a disturbance.

My objective when I retired from the world was not to undertake serious study. My nerves

were dulled as if filed down by a blade. If I didn't encounter objects having exceptionally rich, loud colors, my interest was not sparked. I found it impossible to delight in premiere art and first-class cuisine that demand finely tuned sensitivities.

My spirit lost the ability to admire the chefs at a chic downtown teahouse, praise the skills of Nizaemon and Ganjiro, and take in all the ordinary pleasures of the city. I could no longer stand the daily repetition of an uninteresting idle life caused by inertia. I tried to throw away convention and discover a whimsical artificial mode of life.

Is there anything mysterious and strange to jiggle my nerves numbed to ordinary stimuli? Is it impossible to inhabit a wild, absurd, fantastical space set apart from reality?

My spirit got lost in a world of the ancient fables of Babylon and Assyria, visualized the detective novels of Arthur Conan Doyle and Ruiko, loved the scorched earth and the green fields in the tropics under fierce light rays, and yearned for the eccentric mischievousness of a naughty youth.

I believed by abruptly hiding from the tumultuous world and keeping my behavior a secret for no reason, I could grace my life with some kind of mysterious, romantic colors. I relished the childhood fun of having a secret. The fun of children's games like Hide-and-Seek, Treasure Hunt, and Tea Server, especially when played in the dead of night, in a gloomy shed, or in front of swinging double doors surely sprang from the mystifying feeling of hiding a secret.

I wanted to experience the childhood feelings of playing Hide-and-Seek again so I hid away in an overlooked spot downtown. The doctrine of faith of this temple, Shingon Buddhism with its deep associations with secrets, incantations, and curses, was enough to tempt my curiosity and encourage my fantasies.

The south-facing room was in the newly-built priest's living quarters. Its eight tatami mats were tanned by the sun and transmitted serene warmth to the eyes. After midday, a peaceful autumn sun faded the shoji screen on the side like a lantern. And the room brightened like a large, standing paper-covered lantern.

I arranged all the books on philosophy and art I found enjoyable on the bookshelves. I opened and scattered books filled with extraordinary explanations and illustrations of magic, hypnotism, detective novels, chemistry, and anatomy throughout the room like I was airing them out. I lay on the floor, stretched out haphazardly, and lost myself in reading the mix including

works like *The Sign of Four* by Arthur Conan Doyle, *On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts* by Thomas De Quincey, and fables such as *The Arabian Nights* to the French wonder, *Sexuology*.

I earnestly begged for old Buddhist paintings, beginning with a map of hell and paradise hidden by the head priest, and others like Mount Meru and Buddha entering nirvana and hung them everywhere on the four walls of the room like maps in a classroom. The purple incense smoke rose straight up from the incense burner in the alcove and embraced the bright, warm room. Sometimes, I went to a shop beside Kikuya Bridge to buy sandalwood or agarwood to burn.

On a clear day, the glittering noon sunshine hit the shoji screen full on, and the room's interior became a magnificent sight like an awakening. Brilliant, colorful old pictures of various Buddhas, monks who attained nirvana, priests, priestesses, male and female attendants, elephants, and lions swam out in the ample light from spaces on the four walls.

From the myriad of documents thrown on the tatami, assorted tools for merciless killings, anesthesia, narcotics, witches, and religions melted into the incense smoke. A small, two-tatami scarlet carpet was spread out and enveloped by the smoke. While lying on my back, I set my dull eyes like a barbarian's and drew hallucinations in my heart every day.

Around nine in the evening, when the other occupants of the temple were fast asleep, after sipping whiskey from a rectangular bottle and getting drunk, I drew back the rain door to the veranda, climbed over the cemetery fence, and went for a walk.

Every night I changed into clothes that would not attract attention and dove into the crowd in the park, walked around, and hunted for secondhand goods dealers and old bookstores.

I hung my cotton half-coat over my head, applied nail polish to my clean feet, slipped on leather-soled sandals and eyeglasses with gold frames, and stood up the collar of my cape donned to ward off the cold.

I enjoyed changing my face with a false mustache, a mole, and a birthmark. But one night at a vintage clothes store in Shamisenbori, a woman's lined kimono patterned with small and large hail on an indigo background caught my eye. I had to wear it soon.

I was captivated by it beyond simply loving its colors and stylish pattern. Not only women's clothes, but when I looked at and touched beautiful silk, for some reason, my body

trembled. I often reached a climax of pleasure while gazing at the color of a lover's skin. I envied a woman's ability to indulge herself, without fear of the world, and dress up in the clothes or silk crepe I fancy.

I trembled at the pleasant thought of wrapping my body with the cold heavy cloth of the vivid, fine-patterned lined kimono in the vintage clothes store. I wanted to dress in that kimono and walk the streets as a woman.... Without a second thought, I was ready to buy the kimono and complete the outfit with a long kimono from Yuzen and a black crepe silk *haori* half-coat. The clothes seemed to be for a big woman and would fit a small man like me.

In the hushed, empty temple late at night, I quietly turned to the dressing table and put on make-up. I looked a little grotesque the instant I patted white powder onto the bridge of my yellowish nose. When I spread out the viscous white liquid evenly with my open hand, it stayed on better than I imagined. The joy of my skin was exceptional when the sweet-smelling frozen dew soaked into my pores.

As I painted on the rouge and polishing powder, my face was needlessly pure white like plaster but amusingly transformed into a woman's face with a lively complexion. More than in the work of literary or fine artists, an actress, a geisha, or any ordinary woman knows a person skilled at make-up uses her body as the test subject and learns very interesting things.

A long undershirt, a half collar, an underskirt, and the sleeves with a crisp red silk backing gave the same sensation to my body as the feeling savored from an ordinary woman's skin. I painted everything white from the nape of my neck to my wrists, covered my hair with a wig in the *ichogaeshi* style, and dared to mingle in the streets at night.

The overcast night was gloomy. For some time, I wandered the stretch of Senzoku-cho, Kiyosumi-cho, Ryusenji-cho crisscrossed by lonesome streets with many trenches. Neither the police in the police boxes nor the people on the streets noticed me. The night winds chilled my face already dried out like a stretched-out cuticle. My breath moistened and warmed the cloth of the hood covering my mouth. As I walked, the hem of my long silk crepe underskirt twisted around my leg like it was playing.

By adjusting the obi sash tightened fast from the pit of my stomach to my ribs and the waistband, blood began to flow naturally in my blood vessels like a woman's. My masculine sensibilities and posture gradually vanished.

When my hand painted with face powder jutted out from the shadow of my Yuzen sleeve, the strong lines disappeared in the darkness and nimbly floated out whiter and plumper. I was captivated by the beauty of my hands. The woman who truly possessed hands this beautiful would provoke envy. Wouldn't it be fun to commit various crimes dressed as a woman, like the young thief, Benten Kozo, in kabuki plays?

I felt sensations reminiscent of secrecy and suspicion thoroughly enjoyed by readers of detective and crime novels on my walk to Rokku through the park gradually filling with people. Like murderers, robbers, and people who commit brutal acts, I had made up my mind.

When I came out at the four corners of the opera house at the edge of the lake from Twelve Stories, light from decorative lights and arc lanterns shimmered on my face plastered with make-up. The hues and stripes of my kimono were vivid. When I reached the front of the Tokiwaza theater, I slipped into the people streaming toward the huge mirror at the entrance to a photography shop at the end. The mirror reflected my figure magnificently disguised as a woman.

Beneath the white powder thickly painted on, a secret man is concealed, has a woman's eyes and mouth, moves like a woman, and smiles like a woman. Sweet scents and rustling clothes resembling murmurs arose as a group of several women passed in front and behind me. None of them doubted I was one of them. Some of the women seemed to envy the creation of my elegant face and choice of old-fashioned clothes.

The familiar disturbances at night in the park were new to my eyes that held a secret. No matter where I went or what I saw, everything was bizarre, like an object touched for the first time. While people's eyes deceived, lantern light deceived, and I hid under glamorous cosmetics and silk crepe clothes, perhaps ordinary reality should have appeared in the mysterious colors of dreams to pull back the curtain of secrecy and peer through.

I continued to disguise myself every night. Sometimes, I nonchalantly slipped in among spectators standing to watch plays at Miyatoza or an audience for a moving picture. Close to midnight, I returned to the temple, went straight to the parlor, and quickly lit the bright air lamp. My tired body still dressed lay limply on the rug. During my swift descent into sleep, I gazed with regret at the colors of the gaudy kimono and waved around the cuffs.

I stared at the reflection in the mirror of my blotchy cheeks roughened by the peeling white

powder. Similar to intoxication by aged wine, this decadent pleasure aroused my soul.

With the map of paradise and hell in the background, I crawled onto the soft futon in the gaudy, long kimono like a prostitute. Until late night came, I turned the pages of strange books. In time, I became adept at applying make-up and being bold. To kindle fanciful associations, I inserted a dagger or opiates into my obi sash and went out. Without committing a crime, I wanted to fully take in only the beautiful romantic aromas accompanying a crime.

One night after only a week passed, I made the first step into a curious, outrageous, and mystical incident from an unexpectedly mysterious start.

That night, I guzzled much more than my usual amount of whiskey and walked with confidence to the seats for distinguished guests on the second floor of the San'yukan motion picture theater. Close to ten o'clock, the crowded venue filled with air cloudy like fog blackening and billowing from the stuffiness of the squirming crowd. The air floated by and decayed the white face powder. My drunken head was pained like it shattered each time the movie's light rays, grating in the darkness and evolving at a dizzying speed, stabbed my gawking eyes.

Sometimes the electric lights that popped on at the end of the film pierced through the cigarette smoke floating above the heads of the crowd on the lower floor like clouds boiling up from the depths of a gorge.

From the shadow of the kerchief covering my entire head, I looked around at the faces of the overflow crowd in the venue. I took secret pride in the many men looking amazed at the shape of my old-fashioned hood and women stealing glances, desirous of the stylish hues of my clothes. None of the other women in the audience seemed to attract others' eyes as much as I did because of my eccentric dress and the abundance of charm in my facial features.

The chairs beside me for distinguished guests should not have been empty when I took my seat. I didn't notice when they were occupied. When the electric lights were turned on the second or third time, a man and woman were seated to my left. The woman looked to be twenty-two or -three but was probably twenty-six or -seven. Her hair was styled with three rings. She was wrapped in a sky-blue cloak. Only her vivid breathtaking beauty was showily exposed. I couldn't tell whether she was a geisha or a daughter from a fine family. From the behavior of her gentleman companion, she didn't appear to be his wife.

"... Arrested at last ..." said the woman in a quiet voice. She was reading the program

about the film. While he blew tall smoke having the aroma of M.C.C. Turkish Cigarettes in my face, his big eyes gleaming more than the jewel on his finger peered at me in the darkness.

Her hoarse voice like a teacher of a shamisen was distinctive and at odds with her charming figure. I knew that voice. During a trip by boat to Shanghai two or three years ago, she was the woman named T with whom I acted on impulse and had a brief liaison on the steamboat.

At that time, I recall having difficulty telling whether she was a professional or an amateur from her bearing and clothes. Her male companion on the boat and the man she was with tonight were entirely different in presence and appearance. Perhaps countless men joined these two men as links in a chain of her past life. Anyway, she was certainly the type of woman who was always flitting like a butterfly from man to man.

When we became familiar with each other on the boat two years ago, we didn't reveal our true family names for various reasons and landed in Shanghai without knowing each other's circumstances or addresses. For good reason, I deceived the woman I longed for and stealthily covered my tracks. Since then, I only thought of this woman in dreams of the Pacific Ocean and never thought I'd see her in a place like this.

She was a little plump at that time and slimmed down to a divine weight. Her moist, round eyes with long lashes were bright like they've had been wiped clean and possessed a manly authority a man wouldn't think a man had. Only her vivid lips possibly dyed with red blood when touched and her long hairline hiding her earlobes were unchanged from the past. Her nose looked a little higher, slightly more severe than before.

Was the woman interested in me? I couldn't be sure. When the lights came on, she was delicately flirting with her companion and showed contempt for me, the outsider and an ordinary woman, and wasn't particularly worried about me.

Now next to that woman, I despised my disguise I had been proud of. I was overwhelmed by the charm of the spirited enchantress and the freedom in her facial expressions. Her make-up applied with supreme skill made me feel like a hideous, disgraceful monster. From the perspective of femininity and her stunning appearance, I was no competition at all and withered into timidity like a star before the moon.

In the thick, foul air hanging low in the venue, a distinct outline not seen with clouds floated up. When her supple hand flitted into view from the shadows of her cloak, it swam like a



fish and was enchanting. As she chatted with the man, from time to time, her eyes rose like in a dream and looked at the ceiling, frowned and looked down at the crowd, and smiled showing her row of white teeth. Each time she looked deeply interested. Her large, vibrant black pupils reflected this interest and were noticeable from a far-off corner downstairs like two jewels in the theater. The features on her face, as organs for simply watching, smiling, listening, and talking, were rich in suggestive emotions. More than a human face, hers was a sweet food that enticed men's hearts.

Not one gaze in the theater focused on me. Foolishly, I felt jealousy and rage at the beauty of that woman who stole my popularity. The charm of appearing to be a woman that I had found amusing but became self-indulgence instantly extinguished the light and ended in the regret of being ignored. Had the woman recognized me and was deliberately exacting cynical revenge?

I realized my jealousy that envied beauty was gradually turning into love in my heart. Defeated in my challenge to her, now, I wanted victory over her as a man. Driven by my uncontrollable appetite, I thought about suddenly grabbing the woman's supple body with all my might and trembled.

Do you know who I am? I saw you tonight after several years. I'm beginning to love you again. Do you have the heart to be with me a second time? Do you have the heart to return here tomorrow night and wait for me? I don't care to share my address with anyone. I'm simply asking you to come here tomorrow around this time and wait for me.

Concealed by the darkness, I took out a sheet of paper and a pencil from my sash, jotted down this note, tossed it in her sleeve, and closely watched her reaction.

Around eleven, she quietly watched the moving picture until the end. During the commotion of the audience rising and going outside, the woman whispered again in my ear.

"... Arrested at last. ..."

With a more confident and bolder gaze than earlier, she stared at my face for a short time and eventually disappeared into the crowd with the man.

"... Arrested at last. ..."

In no time, the woman found me out. This thought sent a shiver through me.

Nonetheless, would she docilely come the next night? Did I not understand my weakness and performed my mimicry without measuring the strength of my rival's many years of experience? I returned to the temple bothered by various anxieties and fears.

When I took off my overgarments as usual and was dressed only in the long *nagajuban* slip I wore under the kimono, a small square of Western-style paper drifted down from the back of my hood.

The ink traces of "Mr. S. K." transmitted light like *tamakaiki* silk cloth. I was sure the woman wrote this. During the performance, I visited the toilet once or twice. She dashed off her response and secretly slipped it into my collar.

I meet you in an unexpected figure in an unexpected place. Although your attire is different, how could I miss the face I couldn't forget in my sleep for the past three years? From the beginning, I knew you were the hooded woman and was amused given your ever whimsical nature.

I was unsure but somehow knew your meeting me was you having fun. I was too happy but couldn't tell. I will do as you say and be waiting for you tomorrow night. It would be convenient for me if you come to Kaminarimon Gate between nine and nine-thirty.

The rickshaw man I'll send will look for you and bring you to my home. Like your address being a secret, I will not tell you where I'm living and have arranged for you to be blindfolded for the ride. If you don't wish to comply, I will never see you but won't be too saddened by that.

As I read this letter, before I knew it, I was a character in a detective novel. Inexplicable curiosity and terror whirled in my head. Women understand their inclinations, perhaps, I should strive to imitate them.

The next evening brought a heavy downpour. I wore a new outfit and a rubber-coated overcoat over the Oshima kimono. I went outside into a waterfall of rain pummeling my Western-style silk umbrella. A newly dug ditch overflowed into the traffic circle. I put my *tabi* socks in my breast pocket. My drenched bare feet sparkled, lit up by the lamps on the row of houses.

The downpour of rain hit and disappeared into the flood flowing from the skies. Paths down the usually lively, broad alleys were cut off. Several men with their hems tucked up dashed out like soldiers on the run from the enemy.

Except when the occasional streetcar passed through, gushing water collected on the tracks. Only light from scattered light poles and advertisements shined dimly. Everything from my overcoat and wrists to my elbows was drenched. At last, I reached Kaminarimon Gate and stood dejected in the rain pierced by light from arc lamps.

I looked around and couldn't see a soul. Hidden in a dark corner somewhere, someone might be watching me. I lingered on this thought for a time. Finally, from the darkness in the direction of Azuma Bridge, light from one red paper lantern approached. An old-fashioned rickshaw rapidly came rattling over the paving stones of the streetcar tracks and stopped in front of me.

"Sir, please get in," said the rickshaw man, wearing a deep bamboo hat and waterproof cape. His voice seemed to disappear in the echoes of the rain flowing down the shaft. The man quickly slipped behind me and wrapped a smooth silk cloth twice over my eyes. He tied the cloth so tight it pulled up the skin at my temples.

"Now, please get in."

As he spoke, his rough hand grabbed mine and hurriedly help me into the rickshaw.

I heard the rain pouring onto the musty-smelling hood. I was certain a woman was seated beside me. The scent of face powder and the warmth of body heat charged the interior

To disorient me, the rickshaw man lifted the rickshaw by the sidebars ran around and around a few times in the same place, turned right, turned left, and drifted into a labyrinth. From time to time, we came out at streetcar tracks and crossed small bridges.

The cab shook for a long time. Of course, the woman beside me was T; she sat still and was quiet. She seemed to be there to supervise, maybe, to enforce my wearing the blindfold.

Even if she weren't there, I had no interest in removing the blindfold. I was thrown into a fog of mystery with everything: the woman met on the ocean, like in a dream; a cab at night during a torrential downpour; a secret in a city at night; a blindfold; and silence.

Eventually, the woman separated my lips shut tight and inserted a cigarette. She struck a match to light it for me.

After about an hour, the rickshaw stopped. Again, the rough hand guided two or three blocks down a narrow road, opened a back door with a squeak, and led me into a house.

Still blindfolded, I was left alone, sitting in a tatami room, and soon heard the opening of a sliding door. The silent woman sat and squirmed closer like a mermaid and laid face up across my lap. She wrapped her arms around my neck and loosened the knot of the silk blindfold.

It was probably an eight-tatami room. The construction and the decor were first class and made of wood. But similar to not knowing her identity, I couldn't tell whether this was a waiting room, a mistress's quarters, or a respectable, upscale house. A wooden fence surrounded the luxuriant plants beyond the veranda. From what I could see, this house was somewhere in Tokyo, but I had no idea where.

"Please come often," said the woman, as she leaned her body against a square rosewood desk in the center of the room, and her white arms crawled limply onto the desktop like two living creatures.

She looked elegant. A two-colored obi sash closed her kimono with muted stripes and a collar. Her hair was tied back in the old *ichogaeshi* style. Although she looked graceful last night, I was surprised.

"You probably think I look odd dressed like this tonight. To keep people from recognizing me, I have to change my appearance every day."

As she turned over a Western-style cup on the desk and poured wine, her manner was more dispirited than I thought. She said, "Please understand. After we went our separate ways in Shanghai, I experienced various hardships with different men but was strangely unable to forget you. Please don't throw me away this time. Not knowing my identity or my circumstances, think of me as a woman in a dream, and please be with me forever."

Each word she spoke held mournful tones like a song melody from a distant land echoed in my heart. The flashy, strong-willed, and intelligent woman from last night could show what

could be called her melancholy, commendable side. She seemed to abandon everything and flung out her soul in front of me.

Attracted by a love adventure unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy with the vague *woman in a dream* and the *secret woman*, I went to the woman every night after that, stayed until around two in the morning, and returned blindfolded to Kaminarimon Gate. For one month then two, we met without knowing the other's address or name.

My desire to investigate her circumstances and house was not small. However, as time passed, a peculiar curiosity gripped me. I only wanted to know where in Tokyo the rickshaw I boarded with the woman go, or what was the destination I traveled to blindfolded from Asakusa.

The rickshaw man ran through the streets and rattled the rickshaw for thirty minutes, an hour, and sometimes an hour and a half. The woman's house where he lowered the handle sidebars may have been unexpectedly close to Kaminarimon Gate. While I was shaken in the cab every night, nothing prevented me from speculating about where I was in my heart.

One night, I could no longer stand it and pestered the woman in the cab.

"Would you let me remove this blindfold for a moment?"

"No, I cannot."

The woman was upset and tightly held down my hands then pushed my head down onto them.

"Please, don't speak so selfishly. My home is my secret. If you find out this secret, I will be thrown away by you."

"Why would I do that?"

"If that happened, I'd no longer be *the woman in a dream*. More than loving me, you are in love with a woman in a dream."

I begged in every possible way, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"If I have no choice, I will show you ... but only for a moment," she said with sorrow. As she weakly removed the blindfold, she asked, "Do you know where we are?"

She looked anxious.

The ground color of the beautiful clear sky darkened strangely. A plane of stars twinkled. The Milky Way flowed like a white fog from end to end. Shops lined both sides of a narrow alley, and lantern light brightly lit the streets.

Mysteriously, despite this being a fairly lively street, I had no idea where we were. The rickshaw gradually went down an alley. One or two more blocks in front of us, I saw the signboard of a seal engraving shop with Seibido written in large letters. I glimpsed the town and house number in small characters on the side of the signboard a distance away from the rickshaw. The woman noticed.

"Oh no," she said and covered my eyes again.

Until now, I believed I'd never been to this street with the signboard for the seal engraving shop encountered in this alley with many bustling shops. I was lured again by the feelings of a puzzling world I experienced as a child.

"Could you read the signboard?"

"No, I couldn't. I absolutely do not know where we are. I only know about your life on the waves of the Pacific Ocean three years ago. I was tempted by you and thought about going with you to a fantastic country far across the sea," I answered.

In a grieving voice, she said, "Please, hold onto those feelings in your future life. Please, live in the fantastic country and think of the woman in the dream. Please, don't speak about tonight's selfishness."

Tears streamed from the woman's eyes.

For some time after, I was unable to forget the scene on the mysterious street shown to me by the woman that night. The signboard of the seal engraving shop seen at the end of the bustling, narrow alley lit brightly by lanterns left a clear impression in my mind. In the end, I struggled to find that town and eventually devised a plan.

While being pulled around and around Kaminarimon Gate as a rider every night for a long time, the number of times the rickshaws circled one place and the number of right and left turns became constant, and I somehow memorized them.

One morning, I stood blindfolded at a corner at Kaminarimon Gate and spun around a few times. When I thought, It's this direction, I ran in that direction at the same speed as the rickshaw. I had no other method but to watch the time and turn down different alleys. When I believed I reached the right place, as expected, I found a bridge and streetcar tracks. This had to be the street.

The road began at Kaminarimon Gate, went around the periphery of the park, and came out

at Senzoku-cho. A narrow alley in Ryusenji-machi led to Ueno, then turned left below Kurumazaka, went seven or eight blocks down Okachi-machi street, and started to turn left. In no time, I came upon an alley.

Of course, I could see the signboard of the seal engraving shop ahead.

While keeping my eyes on the sign, I walked straight to it like I was studying the interior of a secret hidden cave. When I came out at the end of the street, I was surprised to see Shimotani Takemachi Road where I came out every night. No more than twenty feet ahead, I could see the secondhand clothes store where I sometimes bought finely patterned silk crepe.

Although the mysterious alley connected to the sides of Shamisenbori and Naka-Okachimachi, I don't remember passing here. I arrived at the front of the Seibido signboard that distressed me and lingered for a short time.

The sky of brilliant stars and the charm of the night filled with red lantern light were completely different. I was disenchanted by the sight of the row of derelict houses withered by the blazing autumn sun.

I guess the way and ran out like a dog spurred by irrepressible curiosity sniffing all the way home.

Again I crept along Asakusa-ku, turned right at Kojima-cho and right again, crossed the streetcar tracks near Suga Bridge, turned at Daichgashi to Yanagi Bridge, and came out of a wide alley in Ryogoku.

I didn't know which direction the woman chose and guessed she took a big detour. Yagenbori, Hisamatsu-cho, Hamacho, crossed Kakiyama Bridge, then had no idea where to go next.

Her house had to be on this road. I went in and out of the narrow alleys in the neighborhood for an hour.

Across from Saijo-ji Temple, the spaces between the eaves of the row of houses were tight. When I discovered an inconspicuous, tiny alley, I intuitively knew the woman's house was concealed there.

I went in. From the second-floor banister surrounded by an amazing pebble-textured fence on the second or third house on the right side, through the leaves, a woman who looked like she was dead glared down at me.

Unexpectedly, I looked up with a smirk at the second floor, an unsmiling woman gazed at me and feigned innocence. Although she was disguised, it was her. She looked different from my impression of her at night. She allowed just one request from a man and loosened the blindfold. Her expression reflected her remorse and frustration over the exposure of her secret. Quietly, she hid in the shadow of the shoji screen.

The woman was the widow of the neighborhood's rich man called Yoshino, the same name on the signboard of the seal engraving shop. The puzzle was solved. After that, I threw her away.

A few days later, I settled with the temple and moved to Tabata. My spirit gradually became dissatisfied with the lukewarm pleasure of secrets and gravitated to searching out more colorful, bloodstained pleasures.