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| Author(s) | Kawabata, Yasunari; Kohda, Minoru |
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STORIES IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND (3)*

— *Kanariya, Minato, and Yubiwa*

by

Yasunari Kawabata

Translated by Minoru Kohda

The Canaries (*Kanariya*, 1924)

Dear Mrs. —, ,

I am sorry I must break my promise and write to you just this once.

I can no longer keep the canaries you gave me last year. As a matter of fact, they have been under the care of my wife, and all I've had to do was to look at them—and remember you.

I remember you saying:

“You have your wife, and I my husband. Let's not meet any more. If only you were not married! Please keep these canaries as mememtoes of our old love. Look at them. They are married, you know, but it's not of their own choice. Some bird dealer must have picked out a male and a female canary and put them together in a cage. So they are not responsible for their marriage. At any rate, I hope they will remind you of me. You might think it odd to be given living things as a keepsake. But our memories are also living things. The canaries will die sooner or later. Let our memories within each of us die, too, when they must.”

Those canaries are about to die, for no one feeds them now. Poor artist and sluggard as I am, I cannot keep the helpless little birds. Let me be frank. My wife, who has taken care of them, is dead. They are doomed to die now

that my wife is dead. The idea of such a thing! Was it then my wife who has enabled me to cherish your memory?

I considered setting them free in the air. But they seem to have quickly grown weak in the wings since my wife's death. Besides the poor birds don't know the sky. Neither in this town nor in the nearby grove would they have any company to fly with. If they should get separated, each would die a solitary death. As you said, a bird dealer somewhere picked out a male and female canary quite at random and put them together in a cage,...

Still I don't like to sell them to a bird dealer, for it was you who gave them to me. Nor do I like to return them to you, for my wife has kept them. Besides I fear you would be embarrassed by the creatures you might possibly have forgotten.

Let me repeat. It was the care of my wife that has kept them alive—to remind me of you. So I would like to have them follow my wife in death. It is not only my recollections of you that I owe to my wife. How could I love you? Wasn't it my wife? Indeed she made me forget all the bitterness of life and not see its dark side. Otherwise I should have looked away or kept my eyes cast down in the presence of a woman like you.

I hope you won't object, madam, if I kill these canaries to bury them beside my wife in her grave.

The Port (*Minato*, 1924)

This is a funny port, indeed.

You are sure to have some housewife or maiden, not a woman of the gay world, coming to your inn to stay with you until your departure. She will always be at your side, getting up together, joining you in eating lunch and taking a walk, just like a couple on their honeymoon.

And yet, if you propose a trip to a spa hard by, she will tilt her head to think and become too serious. If you suggest renting a house, however, she will, if she is not married, most probably respond with delight.

"I will go as your wife, if it's not too long—not for half a year or a year."

—Early one morning, when the man was in haste preparing for his departure by boat that morning, his woman who had been helping him pack his things said,

"I wonder if you would mind writing a letter for me, please."

"What's the idea, at this moment?"

"But you see, I'm not your wife any more. So you wouldn't mind, would you? I've always been waiting on you during your stay here. I've been good to you, haven't I? But I'm not your wife any more, so..."

"I see, I see," the man said, and wrote a letter for her which was addressed to the man who seemingly had also sojourned at this very inn with her for half a month.

"Will you send me a note, too, on the morning when some man gets on board a ship—when you are no longer his woman?"

The Ring (*Yubiwa*, 1924)

A poor law student went to a spa in the mountains to do some translation.

Inside the bower in the grove three geisha girls who had come from the city were having a nap, lying on their backs with round fans over their faces.

He got out of the grove and went down the stone steps to a stream where a swarm of dragonflies were flitting about. The stream itself was divided in two by a huge rock.

In that rock was a hollow used as a bath which had formed itself through wear in the course of time, and there was a girl standing stark naked.

Gathering that she was eleven or twelve, he cast off his *yukata*** unhesitatingly on the river bank and got into the water beside her.

The girl, who apparently had felt ennui, smiled at him with an inviting air all over her glowing body. With a glance at her figure you could tell that she was a daughter of a geisha house. She had a morbid beauty which showed her precocious awareness of her future fate of providing men with sensual pleasures. He widened his amazed eye like a fan.

All of a sudden the girl raised her left hand and cried lightly,

“My! I quite forgot to remove this. Got in with it on!”

Allured by her cry, he looked up at her hand involuntarily.

“A chit of a girl!”

He felt at that moment violent disgust rather than vexation at having been taken in.

She wanted to show her ring! He did not know which was proper, to take a bath in the hot spring with a ring on or without it, but it was clear as crystal that he had been taken in by a mere child.

Perhaps he had looked more displeased than he imagined he did; the girl, blushing red, was fingering the ring. He concealed his childishness in a forced smile and said casually.

“Nice ring, isn’t it? Let me have a look.”

“Opal.”

As expected, she said this with delight and squatted in the bath. She lurched in trying to put out her ringed hand to him, and rested it on his shoulder.

“Opal?”

He echoed her word as she had sounded rather premature to him.

“Yes. My finger’s still too slender, you know. I had it made to measure of gold. The stone’s too large, they said.”

He was playing with her little fingers. The stone, showing a soft warm iridescent play of egg yellow and purple, came to look very beautiful. She was complacent, as she drew near facing him and looked into his eyes.

The little girl might not mind being hugged naked on his knees if she could only give him a better look at her ring.

* This is the third installment of my translations of Kawabata’s short short stories. The preceding ones were published in *The Reeds*, vols. 13(1972), 14(1976).

** A plain cotton kimono one wears after taking a bath in which to cool oneself or sleep.