Appendix 3

Extensive Reading Pack for the Treatment Group – Short Stories

1.

“Reunion” by John Cheever

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station. I was going from my grandmother's in the Adirondacks to a cottage on the Cape that my mother had rented, and I wrote my father that I would be in New York between trains for an hour and a half, and asked if we could have lunch together. His secretary wrote to say that he would meet me at the information booth at noon, and at twelve o'clock sharp I saw him coming through the crowd. He was a stranger to me - my mother divorced him three years ago and I hadn't seen him since - but as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom. I knew that when I was grown I would be something like him; I would have to plan my campaigns within his limitations. He was a big, good-looking man, and I was terribly happy to see him again. He struck me on the back and shook my hand. “Hi, Charlie,” he said. “Hi, boy. I'd like to take you up to my club, but it's in the Sixties, and if you have to catch an early train I guess we'd better get something to eat around here.” He put his arm around me, and I smelled my father the way my mother sniffs a rose. It was a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woolens, and the rankness of the mature male. I hoped that someone would see us together. I wished that we could be photographed. I wanted some record of our having been together.

We went out of the station and up a side street to a restaurant. It was still early, and the place was empty. The bartender was quarrelling with a delivery boy, and there was one very old waiter in a red coat down by the kitchen door. We sat down, and my father hailed the waiter in a loud voice. “Kellner!” he shouted. “Carbon! Cameriere! You!” His boisterousness in the empty restaurant seemed out of place. “Could we have a little service here!” he shouted. “Chop-chop.” Then he clapped his hands. This caught the waiter's attention, and he shuffled over to our table.

“Were you clapping your hands at me?” he asked.

“Calm down, calm down, sommelier,” my father said. “If it isn't too much to ask of you--if it wouldn't be above and beyond the call of duty--we would like a couple of Beefeater Gibsons.”

“I don't like to be clapped at,” the waiter said.

“I should have brought my whistle,” my father said. “I have a whistle that is audible only to the ears of old waiters. Now, take out your little pad and your little pencil and see if you can get this straight: two Beefeater Gibsons. Repeat after me: two Beefeater Gibsons.”

“I think you'd better go somewhere else,” the waiter said quietly.

“That,” said my father, “is one of the most brilliant suggestions I have ever heard. Come on, Charlie, let's get the hell out of here.”

I followed my father out of that restaurant into another. He was not so boisterous this time. Our drinks came, and he cross-questioned me about the baseball season. He then struck the edge of
his empty glass with his knife and began shouting again. “Garcon! Kellner! Cameriere! You! Could we trouble you to bring us two more of the same.”

“How old is the boy?” the waiter asked.

“That,” my father said, “is none of your God-damned business.”

“I'm sorry, sir,” the waiter said, “but I won't serve the boy another drink.”

“Well, I have some news for you,” my father said. “I have some very interesting news for you. This doesn't happen to be the only restaurant in New York. They've opened another on the corner. Come on, Charlie.”

He paid the bill, and I followed him out of the restaurant into another. Here the waiters wore pink jackets like hunting coats, and there was a lot of horse tack on the walls. We sat down, and my father began to shout again. “Master of the hounds! Tallyhoo and all that sort of thing. We'd like a little something in the way of a stirrup cup. Namely, two Bibson Geefeaters.”

“Two Bibson Geefeaters?” the waiter asked, smiling.

“You know damned well what I want,” my father said angrily. “I want two Beefeater Gibsons, and make it snappy. Things have changed in jolly old England. So my friend the duke tells me. Let's see what England can produce in the way of a cocktail.”

“This isn't England,” the waiter said.

“Don't argue with me,” my father said. “Just do as you're told.”

“I just thought you might like to know where you are,” the waiter said.

“If there is one thing I cannot tolerate,” my father said, “it is an impudent domestic. Come on, Charlie.”

The fourth place we went to was Italian. “Buon giorno,” my father said. “Per favore, possiamo avere due cocktail americani, forti, forti. Molto gin, poco vermut.”

“I don't understand Italian,” the waiter said.

“Oh, come off it,” my father said. “You understand Italian, and you know damned well you do. Vogliamo due cocktail Americani. Subito.”

The waiter left us and spoke with the captain, who came over to our table and said, “I'm sorry, sir, but this table is reserved.”

“All right,” my father said. “Get us another table.”

“All the tables are reserved,” the captain said.

“I get it,” my father said. “You don't desire our patronage. Is that it? Well, the hell with you. Vada all'inferno. Let's go, Charlie.”
“I have to get my train,” I said.

“I sorry, sonny,” my father said. “I'm terribly sorry,” He put his arm around me and pressed me against him. “I'll walk you back to the station. If there had only been time to go up to my club.”

“That's all right, Daddy,” I said.

“I'll get you a paper,” he said. “I'll get you a paper to read on the train.”

Then he went up to a news stand and said, “Kind sir, will you be good enough to favour me with one of your God-damned, no-good, ten-cent afternoon papers?” The clerk turned away from him and stared at a magazine cover. “Is it asking too much, kind sir,” my father said, “is it asking too much for you to sell me one of your disgusting specimens of yellow journalism?”

“I have to go, Daddy,” I said. “It's late.”

“Now, just wait a second, sonny,” he said. “Just wait a second. I want to get a rise out of this chap.”

“Goodbye, Daddy,” I said, and I went down the stairs and got my train, and that was the last time I saw my father.

2.

“**A Devoted Son**”

**By Anita Desai**

When the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them barefoot and in his pajamas, at the garden gate, then went up the steps to the verandah where his father sat sipping his morning tea and bowed down to touch his feet.
“A first division, son?” his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.

“At the top of the list, papa,” Rakesh murmured, as if awed. “First in the country.”

Bedlam broke loose then. The family whooped and danced. The whole day long visitors streamed into the small yellow house at the end of the road to congratulate the parents of this Wanderkind, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colors of a festival. There were garlands and halwa, party clothes and gifts (enough fountain pens to last years, even a watch or two), nerves and temper and joy, all in a multicolored whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened: Rakesh was the first son in the family to receive an education, so much had been sacrificed in order to send him to school and then medical college, and at last the fruits of their sacrifice had arrived, golden and glorious.

To everyone who came to him to say “Mubarak, Varmaji, your son has brought you glory,” the father said, “Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet.” This moved many of the women in the crowd so much that they were seen to raise the ends of their saris and dab at their tears while the men reached out for the betel-leaves and sweetmeats that were offered around on trays and shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary filial behavior. “One does not often see such behavior in sons any more,” they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps. Leaving the house, some of the women said, sniffing, “At least on such an occasion they might have served pure ghee sweets,” and some of the men said, “Don’t you think old Varma was giving himself airs? He needn’t think we don’t remember that he comes from the vegetable market himself, his father used to sell vegetables, and he has never seen the inside of a school.” But there was more envy than rancor in their voices and it was, of course, inevitable—not every son in that shabby little colony at the edge of the city was destined to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?

And that was only the beginning, the first step in a great, sweeping ascent to the radiant heights of fame and fortune. The thesis he wrote for his M.D. brought Rakesh still greater glory, if only in select medical circles. He won a scholarship. He went to the USA (that was what his father learnt to call it and taught the whole family to say—not America, which was what the ignorant neighbors called it, but, with a grand familiarity, “the USA”) where he pursued his career in the most prestigious of all hospitals and won encomiums from his American colleagues which were relayed to his admiring and glowing family. What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony, right at the end of the road where the rubbish vans tipped out their stinking contents for pigs to nose in and rag-pickers to build their shacks on, all steaming and smoking just outside the neat wire fences and welltended gardens. To this Rakesh returned and the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father’s feet.

As for his mother, she gloated chiefly over the strange fact that he had not married in America, had not brought home a foreign wife as all her neighbors had warned her he would, for wasn’t that what all Indian boys went abroad for? Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl she had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled in like a charm, seemingly too lazy and too good-natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done. What was more, she was pretty—really pretty, in a plump, pudding way that only gave way to fat—soft, spreading fat, like warm wax—after the birth of their first baby, a son, and then what did it matter?

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital, quickly rising to the top of the administrative organization, and was made a director before he left to set up his own clinic. He took his parents in his car—a new, sky-blue Ambassador with a rear window full of stickers and charms revolving on strings—to see the clinic when it was built, and the large sign-board over the door on which his name was printed.
in letters of red, with a row of degrees and qualifications to follow it like so many little black slaves of the regent. Thereafter his fame seemed to grow just a little dimmer—or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown accustomed to it at last—but it was also the beginning of his fortune for he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this was not accomplished in the wink of an eye. Naturally not. It was the achievement of a lifetime and it took up Rakesh’s whole life. At the time he set up his clinic his father had grown into an old man and retired from his post at the kerosene dealer’s depot at which he had worked for forty years, and his mother died soon after, giving up the ghost with a sigh that sounded positively happy, for it was her own son who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne.

For it had to be admitted—and the most unsuccessful and most rancorous of neighbors eventually did so—that Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humor his wife and show concern equally for his children and his patients, but there was actually a brain inside this beautifully polished and formed body of good manners and kind nature and, in between ministering to his family and playing host to many friends and coaxing them all into feeling happy and grateful and content, he had actually trained his hands as well and emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon. How one man—and a man born to illiterate parents, his father having worked for a kerosene dealer and his mother having spent her life in a kitchen—had achieved, combined and conducted such a medley of virtues, no one could fathom, but all acknowledged his talent and skill.

It was a strange fact, however, that talent and skill, if displayed for too long, cease to dazzle. It came to pass that the most admiring of all eyes eventually faded and no longer blinked at his glory. Having retired from work and having lost his wife, the old father very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim. He sat huddled on his string bed most of the day and developed an exasperating habit of stretching out suddenly and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to fly around him in a flap, wailing and weeping, and then suddenly sitting up, stiff and gaunt, and spitting out a big gob of betel-juice as if to mock their behavior.

He did this once too often: there had been a big party in the house, a birthday party for the youngest son, and the celebrations had to be suddenly hushed, covered up and hustled out of the way when the daughter-in-law discovered, or thought she discovered, that the old man, stretched out from end to end of his string bed, had lost his pulse; the party broke up, dissolved, even turned into a band of mourners, when the old man sat up and the distraught daughter-in-law received a gob of red spittle right on the hem of her organza sari. After that no one much cared if he sat up crosslegged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned gray as a corpse. Except, of course, for that pearl amongst pearls, his son Rakesh.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea, not in one of the china cups from which the rest of the family drank, but in the old man’s favorite brass tumbler, and sat at the edge of his bed, comfortable and relaxed with the string of his pajamas dangling out from under his fine lawn night-shirt, and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from spitting. It was Rakesh, too, who, on returning from the clinic in the evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, as bare and desolate as a cell, and take the evening air out in the garden, beautifully arranging the pillows and bolsters on the divan in the corner of the open verandah. On summer nights he saw to it that the servants carried out the old man’s bed onto the lawn and himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, soothing him and settling him down for a night under the stars.
All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was that he even undertook to supervise his father’s diet. One day when the father was really sick, having ordered his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of soojie halwa and eaten it with a saucerful of cream, Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor, and declared, “No more halwa for you, papa. We must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little kheer, that’s light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can’t have this happening again.”

The old man who had been lying stretched out on his bed, weak and feeble after a day’s illness, gave a start at the very sound, the tone of these words. He opened his eyes—rather, they fell open with shock—and he stared at his son with disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? No, it was unheard of, it was incredible. But Rakesh had turned his back to him and was cleaning up the litter of bottles and packets on the medicine shelf and did not notice while Veena slipped silently out of the room with a little smirk that only the old man saw, and hated.

Halwa was only the first item to be crossed off the old man’s diet. One delicacy after the other went—everything fried to begin with, then everything sweet, and eventually everything, everything that the old man enjoyed.

The meals that arrived for him on the shining stainless steel tray twice a day were frugal to say the least—dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables and, if there were a bit of chicken or fish, that was boiled too. If he called for another helping—in a cracked voice that quavered theatrically—Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and shake his head, saying, “Now, papa, we must be careful, we can’t risk another illness, you know,” and although the daughter-in-law kept tactfully out of the way, the old man could just see her smirk sliding merrily through the air. He tried to bribe his grandchildren into buying him sweets (and how he missed his wife now, that generous, indulgent and illiterate cook), whispering, “Here’s fifty paise,” as he stuffed the coins into a tight, hot fist. “Run down to the shop at the crossroads and buy me thirty paise worth of jalebis, and you can spend the remaining twenty paise on yourself. Eh? Understand? Will you do that?” He got away with it once or twice but then was found out, the conspirator was scolded by his father and smacked by his mother and Rakesh came storming into the room, almost tearing his hair as he shouted through compressed lips, “Now papa, are you trying to turn my little son into a liar? Quite apart from spoiling your own stomach, you are spoiling him as well—you are encouraging him to lie to his own parents. You should have heard the lies he told his mother when she saw him bringing back those jalebis wrapped up in filthy newspaper. I don’t allow anyone in my house to buy sweets in the bazaar, papa, surely you know that. There’s cholera in the city, typhoid, gastroenteritis—I see these cases daily in the hospital, how can I allow my own family to run such risks?” The old man sighed and lay down in the corpse position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left in the old man now (his son’s early morning visits and readings from the newspaper could no longer be called that) and those were visits from elderly neighbors. These were not frequent as his contemporaries were mostly as decrepit and helpless as he and few could walk the length of the road to visit him any more. Old Bhatia, next door, however, who was still spry enough to refuse, adamantly, to bathe in the tiled bathroom indoors and to insist on carrying out his brass mug and towel, in all seasons and usually at impossible hours, into the yard and bathe noisily under the garden tap, would look over the hedge to see if Varma were out on his verandah and would call to him and talk while he wrapped his dhoti about him and dried the sparse hair on his head, shivering with enjoyable exaggeration. Of course these conversations, bawled across the hedge by two rather deaf old men conscious of having their entire households overhearing them, were not very satisfactory but Bhatia occasionally came out of his yard, walked down the bit of road and came in at Varma’s gate to collapse onto the stone plinth built under the temple tree. If Rakesh was at home he would help his father down the steps into the garden and arrange him on his night bed under the tree and leave the two old men to chew betel-leaves and discuss the ills of their individual bodies with combined passion.
“At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you,” sighed Bhatia, having vividly described his martyrdom to piles.

“Look after me?” cried Varma, his voice cracking like an ancient clay jar. “He—he does not even give me enough to eat.”

“What?” said Bhatia, the white hairs in his ears twitching. “Doesn’t give you enough to eat? Your own son?”

“My own son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says no, papa, I weighed out the ata myself and I can’t allow you to have more than two hundred grams of cereal a day. He weighs the food he gives me, Bhatia—he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to.”

“Never,” murmured Bhatia in disbelief. “Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?”

“Let me tell you,” Varma whispered eagerly. “Today the family was having fried fish—I could smell it. I called to my daughter-in-law to bring me a piece. She came to the door and said no. . . .”

“No?” It was Bhatia’s voice that cracked. A drongo shot out of the tree and sped away. “No?”

“No, she said no, Rakesh has ordered her to give me nothing fried. No butter, he says, no oil. . . .”

“No butter? No oil? How does he expect his father to live?”

Old Varma nodded with melancholy triumph. “That is how he treats me—after I have brought him up, given him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors treat their fathers, Bhatia,” for the son’s sterling personality and character now underwent a curious sea change. Outwardly all might be the same but the interpretation had altered: his masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.

There was cold comfort in complaining to neighbors and, on such a miserable diet, Varma found himself slipping, weakening and soon becoming a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills and mixtures were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach but became a regular part of his diet—became his diet, complained Varma, supplanting the natural foods he craved. There were pills to regulate his bowel movements, pills to bring down his blood pressure, pills to deal with his arthritis and, eventually, pills to keep his heart beating. In between there were panicky rushes to the hospital, some humiliating experience with the stomach pump and enema, which left him frightened and helpless. He cried easily, shriveling up on his bed, but if he complained of a pain or even a vague, gray fear in the night, Rakesh would simply open another bottle of pills and force him to take one. “I have my duty to you papa,” he said when his father begged to be let off.

“Let me be,” Varma begged, turning his face away from the pills on the outstretched hand. “Let me die. It would be better. I do not want to live only to eat your medicines.”

“Papa, be reasonable.”

“I leave that to you,” the father cried with sudden spirit. “Leave me alone, let me die now, I cannot live like this.”

“Lying all day on his pillows, fed every few hours by his daughter-in-law’s own hand, visited by every member of his family daily—and then he says he does not want to live ‘like this,’” Rakesh was heard to say, laughing, to someone outside the door.
“Deprived of food,” screamed the old man on the bed, “his wishes ignored, taunted by his daughter-in-law, laughed at by his grandchildren—that is how I live.” But he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was an incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain. Only once, when old Bhatia had come to see him and they sat together under the temple tree, they heard him cry, “God is calling me—and they won’t let me go.”

The quantities of vitamins and tonics he was made to take were not altogether useless. They kept him alive and even gave him a kind of strength that made him hang on long after he ceased to wish to hang on. It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break, it was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying.

In the evening, that summer, the servants would come into his cell, grip his bed, one at each end, and carry it out to the verandah, there sitting it down with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. In answer to his agonized complaints they said the doctor sahib had told them he must take the evening air and the evening air they would make him take—thump. Then Veena, that smiling, hypocritical pudding in a rustling sari, would appear and pile up the pillows under his head till he was propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache.

“Let me lie down,” he begged. “I can’t sit up any more.”

“Try, papa, Rakesh said you can if you try,” she said, and drifted away to the other end of the verandah where her transistor radio vibrated to the lovesick tunes from the cinema that she listened to all day.

So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket, in danger of getting one of their hard-spun balls in his eye, and at the gate that opened onto the dusty and rubbish-heaped lane but still bore, proudly, a newly touched-up signboard that bore his son’s name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago.

At last the sky-blue Ambassador arrived, the cricket game broke up in haste, the car drove in smartly and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag from him, others to escort him up the steps. “Will you have tea?” his wife called, turning down the transistor set. “Or a Coca-Cola? Shall I fry you some samosas?” But he did not reply or even glance in her direction. Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken, at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son. But he stopped gobbling air with his uncontrolled lips and set his jaw as hard as a sick and very old man could set it.

“Papa,” his son said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.

Old Varma tucked his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the yellow air of the summer evening.

“Papa, I’m home.”

Varma’s hand jerked suddenly, in a sharp, derisive movement, but he did not speak.

“How are you feeling, papa?”

Then Varma turned and looked at his son. His face was so out of control and all in pieces, that the multitude of expressions that crossed it could not make up a whole and convey to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him, his skill, his art. “I’m dying,” he croaked. “Let me die, I tell you.”
“Papa, you’re joking,” his son smiled at him, lovingly. “I’ve brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, papa.”

Varma’s mouth worked as hard as though he still had a gob of betel in it (his supply of betel had been cut off years ago). Then he spat out some words, as sharp and bitter as poison, into his son’s face. “Keep your tonic—I want none—I want none—I won’t take any more of—of your medicines. None. Never,” and he swept the bottle out of his son’s hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective.

His son jumped, for the bottle was smashed and thick brown syrup had splashed up, staining his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running. All around the old man was hubbub once again, noise, attention.

He gave one push to the pillows at his back and dislodged them so he could sink down on his back, quite flat again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling, like some dire prophet, groaning, “God is calling me—now let me go.”

3.

“A Family Supper”  
By Kazuo Ishiguro

Fugu is a fish caught off the Pacific shores of Japan. The fish has held a special significance for me ever since my mother died through eating one. The poison resides in the sexual glands of the fish, inside two fragile bags. When preparing the fish, these bags must be removed with caution, for any clumsiness will result in the poison leaking into the veins. Regrettably, it is not easy to tell whether or not this operation has been carried out successfully. The proof is, as it were, in the eating.

Fugu poisoning is hideously painful and almost always fatal. If the fish has been eaten during the evening, the victim is usually overtaken by pain during his sleep. He rolls about in agony for a few hours and is dead by morning. The fish became extremely popular in Japan after the war. Until stricter regulations were imposed, it was all the rage to perform the hazardous gutting operation in one's own kitchen, then to invite neighbours and friends round for the feast.

At the time of my mother's death, I was living in California. My relationship with my parents had become somewhat strained around that period, and consequently I did not learn of the circumstances surrounding her death until I returned to Tokyo two years later. Apparently, my mother had always refused to eat fugu, but on this particular occasion she had made an exception, having been invited by an old schoolfriend whom she was anxious not to offend.

It was my father who supplied me with the details as we drove from the airport to his house in the Kamakura district. When we finally arrived, it was nearing the end of a sunny autumn day,

'Did you eat on the plane?' my father asked. We were sitting on the tatami floor of his tea-room.

'They gave me a light snack.'

'You must be hungry. We'll eat as soon as Kikuko arrives.'

My father was a formidable-looking man with a large stony jaw and furious black eyebrows. I think now in retrospect that he much resembled Chou En-lai, although he would not have cherished such a comparison, being particularly proud of the pure samurai blood that ran in the family. His general presence was not one which encouraged relaxed conversation; neither were things helped much by his odd way of stating each remark as if it were the concluding one. In fact, as I sat opposite him that afternoon, a boyhood memory came back to me of the time he had struck me several times around the head for 'chattering like an old woman'. Inevitably, our conversation since my arrival at the airport had been punctuated by long pauses.

'I'm sorry to hear about the firm,' I said when neither of us had spoken for some time. He nodded gravely.

'In fact the story didn't end there,' he said. 'After the firm's collapse, Watanabe killed himself. He didn't wish to live
with the disgrace.'
'I see.'
'We were partners for seventeen years. A man of principle and honour. I respected him very much.'
'Will you go into business again?' I asked.
'I am - in retirement. I'm too old to involve myself in new ventures now. Business these days has become so different. Dealing with foreigners. Doing things their way. I don't understand how we've come to this. Neither did Watanabe.'
He sighed. 'A fine man. A man of principle.'
The tea-room looked out over the garden. From where I sat I could make out the ancient well which as a child I had believed haunted. It was just visible now through the thick foliage. The sun had sunk low and much of the garden had fallen into shadow.
'I'm glad in any case that you've decided to come back,' my father said. 'More than a short visit, I hope.'
'I'm not sure what my plans will be.'
'I for one am prepared to forget the past. Your mother too was always ready to welcome you back - upset as she was by your behaviour.'
'I appreciate your sympathy. As I say, I'm not sure what my plans are.'
'I've come to believe now that there were no evil intentions in your mind,' my father continued. 'You were swayed by certain -influences. Like so many others.'
'Perhaps we should forget it, as you suggest.'
'As you will. More tea?'
Just then a girl's voice came echoing through the house.
'At last.' My father rose to his feet. 'Kikuko has arrived.'
Despite our difference in years, my sister and I had always been close. Seeing me again seemed to make her excessively excited and for a while she did nothing but giggle nervously. But she calmed down somewhat when my father started to question her about Osaka and her university. She answered him with short formal replies. She in turn asked me a few questions, but she seemed inhibited by the fear that her questions might lead to awkward topics. After a while, the conversation had become even sparser than prior to Kikuko's arrival. Then my father stood up, saying: 'I must attend to the supper. Please excuse me for being burdened down by such matters. Kikuko will look after you.'
My sister relaxed quite visibly once he had left the room. Within a few minutes, she was chatting freely about her friends in Osaka and about her classes at university. Then quite suddenly she decided we should walk in the garden and went striding out onto the veranda. We put on some straw sandals that had been left along the veranda rail and stepped out into the garden. The daylight had almost gone.
'Then why didn't you smoke?'
'She made a furtive gesture back towards the house, then grinned mischievously.
'Oh I see,' I said.
'Guess what? I've got a boyfriend now.'
'Oh yes?'
'Except I'm wondering what to do. I haven't made up my mind yet.'
'Quite understandable.'
'You see, he's making plans to go to America. He wants me to go with him as soon as I finish studying.'
'I see. And you want to go to America?'
'If we go, we're going to hitch-hike.' Kikuko waved a thumb in front of my face. 'People say it's dangerous, but I've done it in Osaka and it's fine.'
'I see. So what is it you're unsure about?'
We were following a narrow path that wound through the shrubs and finished by the old well. As we walked, Kikuko persisted in taking unnecessarily theatrical puffs on her cigarette.
'Well. I've got lots of friends now in Osaka. I like it there. I'm not sure I want to leave them all behind just yet. And Suichi – I like him, but I'm not sure I want to spend so much time with him. Do you understand?' 'Oh perfectly.'
She grinned again, then skipped on ahead of me until she had reached the well. 'Do you remember,' she said, as I came walking up to her, 'how you used to say this well was haunted?'
'Yes, I remember.'
We both peered over the side.
'Mother always told me it was the old woman from the vegetable store you'd seen that night,' she said. 'But I never believed her and never came out here alone.'
'Mother used to tell me that too. She even told me once the old woman had confessed to being the ghost. Apparently she'd been taking a short cut through our garden. I imagine she had some trouble clambering over these walls.'

Kikuko gave a giggle. She then turned her back to the well, casting her gaze about the garden.

'Mother never really blamed you, you know,' she said, in a new voice. I remained silent. 'She always used to say to me how it was then-fault, hers and Father's, for not bringing you up correctly. She used to tell me how much more careful they'd been with me, and that's why I was so good.' She looked up and the mischievous grin had returned to her face. 'Poor Mother,' she said.

'Yes. Poor Mother.'

'Are you going back to California?'

'I don't know. I'll have to see.'

'What happened to - to her? To Vicki?'

'That's all finished with,' I said. 'There's nothing much left for me now in California.'

'Do you think I ought to go there?'

'Why not? I don't know. You'll probably like it.' I glanced towards the house. 'Perhaps we'd better go in soon. Father might need a hand with the supper.'

But my sister was once more peering down into the well. 'I can't see any ghosts,' she said. Her voice echoed a little.

'Is Father very upset about his firm collapsing?'

'Don't know. You can never tell with Father.' Then suddenly she straightened up and turned to me. 'Did he tell you about old Watanabe? What he did?'

'I heard he committed suicide.'

'Well, that wasn't all. He took his whole family with him. His wife and his two little girls.'

'Oh yes?'

'Those two beautiful little girls. He turned on the gas while they were all asleep. Then he cut his stomach with a meat knife.'

'Yes, Father was just telling me how Watanabe was a man of principle.'

'Sick.' My sister turned back to the well.

'Careful. You'll fall right in.'

'I can't see any ghost,' she said. 'You were lying to me all that time.'

'But I never said it lived down the well.'

'Where is it, then?'

We both looked around at the trees and shrubs. The light in the garden had grown very dim. Eventually I pointed to a small clearing some ten yards away.

'Just there I saw it. Just there.'

We stared at the spot.

'What did it look like?'

'I couldn't see very well. It was dark.'

'But you must have seen something.'

'It was an old woman. She was just standing there, watching me.'

We kept staring at the spot as if mesmerized.

'She was wearing a white kimono,' I said. 'Some of her hair had come undone. It was blowing around a little.'

Kikuko pushed her elbow against my arm. 'Oh be quiet. You're trying to frighten me all over again.' She trod on the remains of her cigarette, then for a brief moment stood regarding it with a perplexed expression. She kicked some pine needles over it, then once more displayed her grin. 'Let's see if supper's ready,' she said.

'We found my father in the kitchen. He gave us a quick glance, then carried on with what he was doing.'

'Hardly a skill I'm proud of,' he said. 'Kikuko, come here and help.'

For some moments my sister did not move. Then she stepped forward and took an apron hanging from a drawer.

'Just these vegetables need cooking now,' he said to her. 'The rest just needs watching.' Then he looked up and regarded me strangely for some seconds. 'I expect you want to look around the house,' he said eventually. He put down the chopsticks he had been holding. 'It's a long time since you've seen it.'

As we left the kitchen I glanced back towards Kikuko, but her back was turned.

'She's a good girl,' my father said quietly.

I followed my father from room to room. I had forgotten how large the house was. A panel would slide open and another room would appear. But the rooms were all startlingly empty. In one of the rooms the lights did not come
on, and we stared at the stark walls and tatami in the pale light that came from the windows.

'This house is too large for a man to live in alone,' my father said. 'I don't have much use for most of these rooms now.'

But eventually my father opened the door to a room packed full of books and papers. There were flowers in vases and pictures on the walls. Then I noticed something on a low table in the corner of the room. I came nearer and saw it was a plastic model of a battleship, the kind constructed by children. It had been placed on some newspaper; scattered around it were assorted pieces of grey plastic.

My father gave a laugh. He came up to the table and picked up the model.

'Since the firm folded,' he said, 'I have a little more time on my hands.' He laughed again, rather strangely. For a moment his face looked almost gentle. 'A little more time.'

'That seems odd,' I said. 'You were always so busy.'

'Too busy perhaps.' He looked at me with a small smile. 'Perhaps I should have been a more attentive father.'

'I laughed. He went on contemplating his battleship. Then he looked up. 'I hadn't meant to tell you this, but perhaps it's best that I do. It's my belief that your mother's death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments.'

We both gazed at the plastic battleship.

'Surely,' I said eventually, 'my mother didn't expect me to live here forever.'

'Obviously you don't see. You don't see how it is for some parents. Not only must they lose their children, they must lose them to things they don't understand.' He spun the battleship in his fingers. 'These little gunboats here could have been better glued, don't you think?'

'Perhaps. I think it looks fine.'

'During the war I spent some time on a ship rather like this. But my ambition was always the air force. I figured it like this. If your ship was struck by the enemy, all you could do was struggle in the water hoping for a lifeline. But in an aeroplane - well - there was always the final weapon.' He put the model back onto the table. 'I don't suppose you believe in war.'

'Not particularly.'

He cast an eye around the room. 'Supper should be ready by now,' he said. 'You must be hungry.'

Supper was waiting in a dimly lit room next to the kitchen. The only source of light was a big lantern that hung over the table, casting the rest of the room into shadow. We bowed to each other before starting the meal.

There was little conversation. When I made some polite comment about the food, Kikuko giggled a little. Her earlier nervousness seemed to have returned to her. My father did not speak for several minutes. Finally he said: 'It must feel strange for you, being back in Japan.'

'Yes, it is a little strange.'

'Already, perhaps, you regret leaving America.'

'A little. Not so much. I didn't leave behind much. Just some empty rooms.'

'I see.'

I glanced across the table. My father's face looked stony and forbidding in the half-light. We ate on in silence.

Then my eye caught something at the back of the room. At first I continued eating, then my hands became still. The others noticed and looked at me. I went on gazing into the darkness past my father's shoulder.

'Who is that? In that photograph there?'

'Which photograph?' My father turned slightly, trying to follow my gaze.

'The lowest one. The old woman in the white kimono.'

My father put down his chopsticks. He looked first at the photograph, then at me.

'Your mother.' His voice had become very hard. 'Can't you recognize your own mother?'

'My mother. You see, it's dark. I can't see it very well.'

No one spoke for a few seconds, then Kikuko rose to her feet. She took the photograph down from the wall, came back to the table and gave it to me.

'She looks a lot older,' I said.

'It was taken shortly before her death,' said my father.

'It was the dark. I couldn't see very well.'

I looked up and noticed my father holding out a hand. I gave him the photograph. He looked at it intently, then held it towards Kikuko. Obediently, my sister rose to her feet once more and returned the picture to the wall.

There was a large pot left unopened at the centre of the table. When Kikuko had seated herself again, my father reached forward and lifted the lid. A cloud of steam rose up and curled towards the lantern. He pushed the pot a little towards me.
'You must be hungry,' he said. One side of his face had fallen into shadow.
'Thank you.' I reached forward with my chopsticks. The steam was almost scalding. 'What is it?'
'Fish.'
'It smells very good.'
In amidst soup were strips of fish that had curled almost into balls. I picked one out and brought it to my bowl.
'Help yourself. There's plenty.'
'Thank you.' I took a little more, then pushed the pot towards my father. I watched him take several pieces to his bowl. Then we both watched as Kikuko served herself.
My father bowed slightly. 'You must be hungry,' he said again. He took some fish to his mouth and started to eat. Then I too chose a piece and put it in my mouth. It felt soft, quite fleshy against my tongue.
'Very good,' I said. 'What is it?'
'Just fish.'
'It's very good.'
The three of us ate on in silence. Several minutes went by.
'Some more?'
'Is there enough?'
'There's plenty for all of us.' My father lifted the lid and once more steam rose up. We all reached forward and helped ourselves.
'Here,' I said to my father, 'you have this last piece.'
'Thank you.'
When we had finished the meal, my father stretched out his arms and yawned with an air of satisfaction. 'Kikuko,' he said. 'Prepare a pot of tea, please.'
My sister looked at him, then left the room without comment. My father stood up.
'Let's retire to the other room. It's rather warm in here.'
I got to my feet and followed him into the tea-room. The large sliding windows had been left open, bringing in a breeze from the garden. For a while we sat in silence.
'Father,' I said, finally.
'Yes?'
'Kikuko tells me Watanabe-San took his whole family with him.'
My father lowered his eyes and nodded. For some moments he seemed deep in thought. 'Watanabe was very devoted to his work,' he said at last. 'The collapse of the firm was a great blow to him. I fear it must have weakened his judgement.'
'You think what he did - it was a mistake?'
'Why, of course. Do you see it otherwise?'
'No, no. Of course not.'
'There are other things besides work.'
'Yes.'
We fell silent again. The sound of locusts came in from the garden. I looked out into the darkness. The well was no longer visible.
'What do you think you will do now?' my father asked. 'Will you stay in Japan for a while?'
'To be honest, I hadn't thought that far ahead.'
'If you wish to stay here, I mean here in this house, you would be very welcome. That is, if you don't mind living with an old man.'
'Thank you. I'll have to think about it.'
I gazed out once more into the darkness.
'But of course,' said my father, 'this house is so dreary now. You'll no doubt return to America before long.'
'Perhaps. I don't know yet.'
'No doubt you will.'
For some time my father seemed to be studying the back of his hands. Then he looked up and sighed.
'Kikuko is due to complete her studies next spring,' he said. 'Perhaps she will want to come home then. She's a good girl.'
'Perhaps she will.'
'Things will improve then.'
'Yes, I'm sure they will.'
We fell silent once more, waiting for Kikuko to bring the tea.