

WHAT THE MAID SAW

Eight Psychic Tales



Yasutaka Tsutsui

Translated by Adam Kabat

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藏书章

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So far, Nanase had appealed only to his reason. But his mind, which had been in an abnormal state to begin with, reached such a frenzied pitch, she knew that any rational attempts to dissuade him would prove useless. In which case, why couldn't she use her power to drive him really berserk?

—From *"The Peach"*

When Nanase looked up, she saw Kikuko, the baby in her arms, consumed by a raging fire. Kikuko was standing erect in the center of the blaze, still smiling benevolently, but with her eyes opened wide as she looked down at Nanase. In her anger she chanted sutras, whether consciously or unconsciously. The force and horror of her will made it impossible for Nanase to cut her fury off from her mind.

—From *"The Saint in the Flames of Hell"*

Yet, in actuality, from inside her coffin, from inside the sealed furnace, Tsuneko was emanating a consciousness burning too strongly with anger and resentment to be considered that of the dead. And Nanase was the only one who knew that she had returned to life.

—From *"Dear Departed Mother"*



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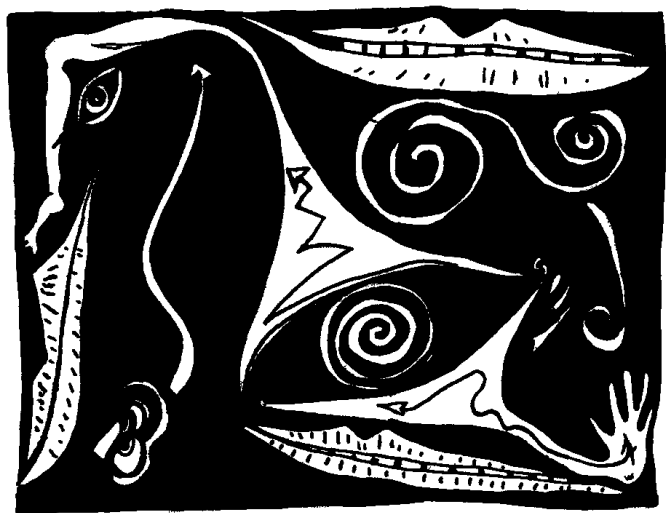
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The Plain of Emptiness

Red flowers were blooming in the front yard, but Nanase had no idea what they were: the names of flowers did not interest her.

The Ogata residence was a bright, middle-class home with a large veranda. Nanase rang the doorbell, then waited on the porch. The neighborhood was silent except for the distant whistles of suburban trains.

Sakiko Ogata opened the door. She was in her forties but her drab *kimono* made her seem much older.

"Please come in."

Nanase introduced herself, and Sakiko seemed to relax, smiling as she showed her into the living room. Nanase noted that every piece of furniture was new. Apparently it was a policy of the household to redecorate the house constantly with cheap new furnishings.

After reading Nanase's reference, Sakiko looked up at the girl and smiled again. "Mrs. Akiyama writes very highly of you."

Nanase nodded slightly. She knew what the reference said without having read it.

When Nanase applied for a new job, the mistress of the household would usually inquire into why Nanase had left her former workplace, trying to determine indirectly whether she had gone of her own free will or if she had been dismissed. Although Nanase had expected the same from Sakiko, Sakiko didn't ask a thing.

Nor did Sakiko show the house to the new maid, another common practice. She simply sat facing her, looking bored and distracted.

Nanase read Sakiko's mind. But all she could find were the odds and ends of consciousness.

The bathroom tiles are starting to chip. For tonight's dinner, I'll make stir-fried beef and green peppers with a miso sauce. There are problems with the TV's vertical tuning, and the lock on the shed is broken. I'll have to tell Nanase that the rice cooker isn't working but the store will be delivering a new one tomorrow.

Sakiko's thoughts did not extend beyond such household matters. It was debatable whether these could even be called thoughts. They were simply insignificant notions tumbling about on the plain of an empty consciousness.

Was Sakiko running away from something? Nanase had encountered this type of consciousness any number of times. It was especially common among weak, middle-aged, middle-class women who were used to being ignored and who—even while fully aware that they were despised—blocked it out of their minds.

Sakiko glanced at Nanase's suitcase, thought about how heavy it looked, imagined how tired she must be after lugging it up the hill, and then finally hit upon the idea of offering her tea.

"Let's have a cup of tea in the kitchen," she said.

Sakiko stood up and smiled once more at Nanase. Her smile was without meaning. But what surprised Nanase was that there wasn't even an *unconscious* expression of warmth.

Nanase could not recall when she first realized she had the power to read people's minds. But not once during her eighteen years had she ever thought that it was a particularly unusual ability. She even felt that there must be a lot of people with this

power, her logic being that anyone who could do this would keep it secret, as she herself had done.

For her, mind reading was neither a plus nor a minus. She thought of it as another sense, like hearing or sight. It differed slightly from the other senses only in that it required a bit of effort to use. Nanase referred to this as “unlatching,” setting it apart from other mental functions. And she was very careful to keep this “latch” fastened when she wasn’t using it. She had learned from experience that if she left the latch open, other people’s thoughts would come barreling in nonstop, leaving her unable to distinguish between what was spoken and what was thought—an extremely dangerous situation in which she might inadvertently reveal her powers.

That day, as Sakiko was explaining various things to her, Nanase occasionally undid the latch and peered into Sakiko’s mind. But each time, all she saw was care-worn everyday concerns strewn over a barren wasteland. She couldn’t even make out what feelings Sakiko had toward the members of her family.

Hisakuni Ogata, the head of the household, managed the general affairs division of a shipbuilding company. There were two children: Eiko, who was a senior at a women’s university; and Junichi, who had just started college this year. Eiko was beautiful; Junichi was pale and slender. Both had inherited their father’s hedonistic tendencies. That was about all Nanase was able to learn from Sakiko. And most of this came from Sakiko’s own lips.

The day drew to a close, but neither Hisakuni nor the children returned home. This seemed to be a common occurrence, as Sakiko was unperturbed.

After a simple dinner, Sakiko made no more attempts at conversing with Nanase. She simply looked absently at the living room TV. She wasn’t watching, merely staring at it.

Hisakuni returned shortly after eleven.

Nanase was tired, but she'd stayed awake so she could introduce herself to her new employer.

"Are the children back yet?" Hisakuni asked his wife as he entered the living room. Nanase tried to greet him, but he ignored her presence.

"No, not yet," replied Sakiko, who introduced Nanase with her usual smile.

"How do you do." Nanase bowed and undid the latch.

Hisakuni gave Nanase a quick glance, and greeted her with a perfunctory nod, all the time comparing her to the bevy of young nightclub hostesses whose company he'd just been enjoying. He seemed to have powers of observation befitting his position as general affairs manager.

"Would you like something?" asked Sakiko.

Hisakuni looked at the wall clock. "A cup of tea."

He didn't want any tea. He was concerned about Eiko, although he would never admit this, even to himself. He had convinced himself that he had long ago given up on his delinquent daughter, but he had stopped thinking about her only on the surface of his consciousness. Once he heard her excuse for coming home late, he could set his mind at rest. He knew that it would be a lie, but he still wanted to hear it.

Nanase realized this had nothing to do with paternal affection. It was jealousy.

Hisakuni thought of his wife as a domestic animal, hardly worthy of his attention. Almost ten years had passed since he last had sexual relations with her by recalling her youthful beauty. Now he didn't even talk to her. Anything said out of pity would only make him despise her, which Sakiko also sensed. As her attitude frequently made clear to him, she preferred to be ignored rather than despised.