

SEICHO MATSUMOTO

Author of Points and Lines

Translated by Adam Kabat

The Voice

江苏工业学院图书馆 藏 书 章



SEICHO MATSUMOTO

Translated by Adam Kabat

KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL Tokyo and New York

The stories included in this volume were first published in Japanese under the following titles: Kyōhansha, 1965 (The Accomplice); Kao, 1959 (The Face); Chihō-shi o kau onna, 1959 (The Serial); Sōsa kengai no jōken, 1959 (Beyond All Suspicion); Koe, 1959 (The Voice); Kantō-ku no onna, 1960 (The Woman Who Wrote Haiku).

Distributed in the United States by Kodansha International/USA Ltd., 114 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011. Published by Kodansha International Ltd., 2-2 Otowa 1-chome, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112 and Kodansha International/USA Ltd., 114 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011.

Copyright © 1989 by Kodansha International Ltd. All rights reserved. Printed in Japan. First edition, 1989

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Matsumoto, Seichō, 1909-

The Voice and other stories.

1. Matsumoto, Seichŏ, 1909– —Translations, English. I. Title.

PL856.A8A25 1989 895.6'35 88-81846 ISBN 0-87011-895-1 (U.A.) ISBN 4-7700-1395-7 (Japan)

Contents

| The Accomplice | 7 |
|---------------------------|-----|
| The Face | 27 |
| The Serial | 63 |
| Beyond All Suspicion | 91 |
| The Voice | 113 |
| The Woman Who Wrote Haiku | 161 |

The Accomplice



1

Hikosuke Uchibori believed himself to be a success. His store, which sold furniture on credit, was well known throughout Fukuoka City. Advertised as a "furniture department store," in five years his business had grown remarkably and now had a firmly established reputation, much to the amazement of the longstanding businessmen in the area.

Hikosuke's success may have been due to the skills he had acquired during his long years as a traveling salesman, although then he hadn't been selling furniture. For fifteen years he had peddled dinnerware, making the rounds of department stores and wholesalers throughout the country. The dealer he worked for had exclusive distribution rights for a well-known brand of dinnerware that was even exported to as far away as India.

Hikosuke would pass through the doors of wholesalers in every region, carrying a suitcase full of neatly arranged samples. He'd show his samples and take their orders, and he'd be given a check for any outstanding accounts. With his busy schedule, he had no time to waste before heading off to his next client. Forever consulting train timetables, that was the life he had led for fifteen years.

"Traveling around Japan all year long must take you to lots of interesting places," people had often said to him.

Hikosuke had found such ignorance irksome. He was doing his job; he wasn't on a pleasure jaunt. From the station he'd go directly to his client. Then after visiting two or three stores, he'd head back to the station and rush on to his next stop, for he had a tight schedule to keep. Even in the train he'd be filling out order slips and checking the accounts of each store, which left him little time to gaze at the scenery. When his work was over, he might stare absently out the window, but even then his head would be filled with all sorts of worries—lack of orders, outstanding accounts, bouncing checks, customer complaints, and so on—making him oblivious to the scenery.

At night he would economize by staying at the cheapest inns. If he happened to be at a famous tourist spot or hot spring resort, he'd always feel despondent. The sight of tourists having a good time would bring home the wretchedness of his own situation. They may have been fellow travelers, but they were a world apart. He'd compare himself, in his dusty clothes and carrying an aluminum suitcase, with a passerby sporting a fancy new suit, a camera dangling from one shoulder and a beautiful woman on his arm. When he lay down on his thin mattress, there were nights he couldn't sleep out of envy for some such stranger.

That was Hikosuke's life up until five years ago. Now he was worth nearly ten million yen. Even if this figure included the merchandise in his store and his accounts receivable, it was still enormous. He had reached a position in life where he could indulge in any luxury he pleased, and he looked back on his former self with nothing but pity.

However, there was more to Hikosuke's past than memories of hard-up bygone days, for it held a dark and threatening secret. Recently, this would suddenly spring out and catch him unawares.

Hikosuke's success was built on his business acumen, but his initial capital had originated from somewhere else. No traveling salesman could hope to earn that kind of money: his fifteen years of poverty were sufficient proof of this.

The truth was that Hikosuke had robbed a bank to get the money, and in the process someone had been killed. The incident had occurred in an old castle town by the side of a lake in the Sanin area. He had broken into the local bank, whose old-fashioned architecture perfectly matched the town, and made off with five million yen.

However, he hadn't used all the money for capital. Half of it he had given to his partner as they had agreed beforehand. It was his partner who had insisted that they split it fifty-fifty.

Something like robbing a bank could never be achieved alone. A second person was necessary to egg one on. There's no need here to go into the reasons in detail, but a bank robbery is the type of job where you need a partner.

Hikosuke's accomplice was Takeji Machida, who was thirty-five or six, about eight years younger than Hikosuke. Takeji had a long, weasely face, a pale complexion, and a cheerless disposition. Even now, Hikosuke could recall, with a shudder of distaste, the washed-out, beady eyes and the thin, unsmiling lips.

Takeji was also a traveling salesman who carried a suitcase stuffed with samples. However, he dealt in lacquerware. The two men got acquainted because they often ran into each other at the same store.

2

It was Takeji who first came up with the idea. In that sense, he could be considered the main culprit.

The two traveling salesmen, with no prospects for the future, hatched their scheme in a cramped hotel room they shared. But it was Hikosuke who led the actual robbery. He had often used this small bank to transfer money every month, so he was familiar with the layout.

The bank manager lived on the premises in the rear of the building, and their plan hinged on this piece of information. Around 8:00 P.M. the employees working overtime turned off the lights and went home. The two broke in soon after.

When they brandished knives in the manager's face, he took

out his keys and opened the doors of the vault. But once they had stuffed two bags full of money, the manager started to make a fuss, and Takeji stabbed him in the back. The manager's wife, who had been tied up, went white, but she didn't cry out. Afterwards she fainted, which is why it took so long for the crime to be reported.

The two men fled with the bags, and when they reached a remote spot, they stopped to catch their breath. They were in a field. In the distance was a row of scattered lights. The black area before them must have been the lake. In spite of the urgency of the moment, Hikosuke felt the beauty of the scene.

After dividing the money by the flame of a lighter, they made a vow.

"This is the end of our relationship. From now on, we're like two complete strangers. We will never contact each other, not even to write a postcard. Neither of us will know the other's new address." This they solemnly swore to.

All at once, Hikosuke was seized by a chilling presentiment of doom, which led him to blurt out what he said next.

"Takeji, you're younger than I am, so you've got a lot more to enjoy in life. But from what I can gather from the newspapers, spending money wildly is a dead give-away. Women especially are taboo. Save your romancing for later, and use this money as capital to quietly start a business. No good will come from carrying on with women."

Takeji snickered in the darkness.

"I was thinking the same thing. A middle-aged man's love affairs are dangerous. You watch out yourself."

He was speaking softly as he always did, but his voice had a threatening ring to it.

"It's a relief to hear you say that. Be really careful then."

They shook hands and parted. Takeji's hand felt cold. Or was it that his own hand was burning?

Five years passed by. The police had conducted a thorough investigation of the robbery at the time but hadn't come up with anything.

Hikosuke quit his job and returned to Fukuoka, his home town. Using his two-million-odd yen as capital, he quietly began his current legitimate business. In the third year he decided it was safe to start advertising more. There were two reasons for this: one was that his business was growing steadily and showed promise; the other was that he was now confident no one would question the source of his capital. His three years of honest trade had given him a good reputation.

He had another important reason for feeling secure. He had no knowledge whatsoever of Takeji's whereabouts. Every day Hikosuke had scoured the papers, worried he'd find an article about Takeji's arrest for some crime or other. This, more than anything else, had preyed on his mind. Takeji's unstable character would seem to justify such fears, and if he was arrested, he might confess to this other, much more serious crime.

But the fears proved groundless. Takeji's name never appeared in the newspapers, and Hikosuke heard nothing at all about him. This was a good sign, for it meant that he was living a peaceful life somewhere. Probably Takeji had also used his capital to start some small legitimate business. When Hikosuke thought this far, all his anxieties were swept away. His business had been especially successful in the past two years because he had been able to concentrate totally on his work without letting anything disturb him.

Recently, however, he had once again begun to be haunted by anxiety.

3

Business was flourishing, his assets were sizable, and he had established both trust and social standing as a Fukuoka merchant. Just when he realized how far he had come and felt he could sit back and enjoy the best life had to offer, he was assaulted by a new and powerful fear—a fear stemming from the reality that Takeji was undoubtedly still alive somewhere in the world.

A wide range of crimes can be committed by one person work-

ing alone. The more accomplices there are, the higher the chances of failure. He knew from reading newspaper articles how often criminals were caught through the confessions of accomplices. But what preyed on Hikosuke's nerves now was different. It was the fear that the money he had amassed might lay him open to blackmail by his former accomplice. Before his present success, such worries had never entered his head. But once he had acquired wealth and a solid position, he was obsessed by this new fear of never knowing when he might be blackmailed.

He had money, trust, and status, and these could all survive a business slump. But not so with blackmail by the accomplice who held the secret to his past. He had amassed a fortune, but his life was in the hands of this man. Once the blackmail started, it was sure to continue until his hard-earned fortune had been sucked completely dry. The glum-faced Takeji seemed perfectly capable of such a course of action.

Hikosuke couldn't rid himself of the thought that one of these days Takeji, who was out there somewhere, would learn of his success and come after him, his eyes gleaming. Out there somewhere. Where, he did not know, but one day Takeji was sure to sniff out Hikosuke's fortune and show up, gloomy face and all. Where was Takeji, and what was he doing? Gradually this began to weigh heavily on Hikosuke.

Up until then he had felt only relief that he had no knowledge of Takeji's whereabouts. Now this very ignorance had begun to eat away at him. It was fear of the unknown, the panic felt when one does not know where an enemy's attack will come from.

Recently Hikosuke, who was nearing fifty, had taken a mistress, his first affair. Careful not to let his wife find out, he had built a house for his mistress and would visit her there. He was in love with her, so he was happy beyond measure. But this happiness, too, would collapse the moment Takeji appeared. When it came right down to it, his mistress was only attracted to his money.

Someday, thanks to Takeji, all his happiness would be taken from him. Hikosuke felt doomed. He became edgy; his nerves were frayed; he was unable to sleep at night. "Darling, what's wrong? You're so pale and you always seem so depressed. You might be heading for a breakdown," said his pretty mistress. "You're working too hard. Relax at a hot spring and I know you'll feel better. I'll come with you," she coaxed him. If only that were the problem! He couldn't tell her the real reason.

But it was too early to despair. He decided to follow her advice. He went to stay at a hot spring inn called Funagoya, and while he was bathing there he had an inspiration. To what could he attribute this brilliant idea, which came to him suddenly out of the blue? Surely it was a revelation from heaven, as people used to say. Later, that was how it seemed to him.

When Hikosuke jumped energetically out of the bath, the water cascaded over the sides like a waterfall.

4

"My home town is Utsunomiya," Takeji had once let slip to Hikosuke. The key to his idea came from remembering this one sentence.

It might well be that Takeji was living in Utsunomiya, Hikosuke thought. After all, he himself had returned to his home town, Fukuoka. If he followed this line of reasoning, he could also surmise that Takeji had started a business in Utsunomiya.

This conjecture was based on the similarity in their circumstances. Their original situations were identical. There was every likelihood that Takeji had followed the same course of action as himself.

He quickly returned to Fukuoka and immediately dialed Directory Assistance.

"I'd like you to check the Utsunomiya area for a Takeji Machida. Is there any listing under that name?"

It took the operator a while before she replied that there was. Hikosuke's heart missed a beat.

"Oh, there is? Wh-What business is it?" His excitement made him stutter.

"It says 'lacquerware.'"

"Lacquerware? And his address?"

He jotted down what the operator said and then folded his arms, his mind a blank. The fact that it was exactly as he had predicted had paradoxically left him dazed.

So Takeji had opened a shop in Utsunomiya. Just like Hikosuke, Takeji had used the money from the bank robbery as capital to start a business in his home town. The two of them had acted in an identical fashion.

For the moment Hikosuke felt relieved. It was good news that Takeji had succeeded in his own way without any setbacks. There didn't seem much reason to worry about being blackmailed by him.

But when Hikosuke thought it over more carefully, he realized it was still too early for him to relax. Was Takeji's business going well? What was his life like now? What if his store was on the verge of bankruptcy, or he was leading a dissipated life? How could Hikosuke afford to ignore such possibilities? For if Takeji was in a situation where he was "pinched for money," he'd have a clear motive for blackmail.

Hikosuke realized the urgency of checking into Takeji's current situation. No, not just current. From here on, he'd have to watch over him. Who could say when his circumstances might change? It was vital that he be informed of each and every development.

Having thought this far, Hikosuke was able to feel peace of mind at last. It was the relief that came from spotting the enemy's hiding-place. Now he would have to turn this relief into something more substantial.

After several days of thought, Hikosuke put his plan into action. First he applied at the post office for a private box under the name "Business Information Services." Next, he got hold of the name of a local newspaper in Utsunomiya and sent the following "Help Wanted" ad.

Looking for talented part-time reporter. Must be Utsunomiya resident. Good salary. Send photograph and résumé. Age: 25-40. Applicants will be notified by mail. Business

Information Services. Post Box No. XXX, Fukuoka Post Office.

The name "Business Information Services" implied that the company was putting out a trade paper without saying so directly—and that was enough.

He received a pile of résumés and photographs. He had forgotten how many unemployed there were in the world. Almost every applicant enclosed a letter detailing his own straitened circumstances.

Hikosuke hired one of them. From the photograph the man looked tactful and honest. He wore glasses but didn't seem smartalecky. According to his résumé, he had graduated from a private university and been employed at a company, but he had had the bad luck to lose his job through a cutback in staff. His name was Ryoichi Takeoka. He was twenty-eight and was married.

Hikosuke sent off the following letter to his new reporter.

"Twice a month you are to report on the business activities and any unusual personal developments of the following Utsunomiya residents. It is essential that these parties remain unaware of your investigations. Your salary will be 15,000 yen a month and all correspondence should be limited to your reports."

He had requested information on three or four people, including Takeji. The others were merely names he had chosen at random from a business directory issued by a newspaper. These were decoys to dispel suspicion. All he really needed to know were the movements of one Takeji Machida.

It took a lot of hard thinking before Hikosuke came up with this plan. He had considered using a detective agency but realized that that wouldn't be sufficient. It would be necessary to employ somebody exclusively to keep a continuous watch over Takeji. But he had to make sure that the man he hired didn't get suspicious about his motives. That was why he had played it safe by advertising as what seemed to be the news service of a trade paper. It was also why he had requested reports on the other men.

Hikosuke believed that Takeji was now firmly in his grasp.

Nothing he did would ever escape his notice. His fear of the unknown had been removed. He'd be aware of every development in Takeji's life as it happened. And if Takeji started to sniff him out, he'd have plenty of time to think up some countermove. The reporter's monthly fee of 15,000 yen was nothing compared to the peace of mind it bought.

5

Ryoichi's first report arrived at the post box. The new reporter had gone about his job enthusiastically.

Hikosuke read the report carefully. He couldn't care less about the other people—Takeji's summary was the only one that mattered.

"Takeji Machida has a prosperous lacquerware business here, with assets estimated at roughly three million yen. He is somewhat of a loner and is not adept at dealing with people, but he has achieved a reputation for reliability in his business. He has a wife and two children. His hobby is playing go. He drinks moderately. There is no gossip of extramarital affairs."

This was the gist of the report.

Takeji's life seemed to be going smoothly. His being a loner and his ineptness at dealing with people matched his gloomy disposition. That was the only point that troubled Hikosuke, but it wasn't any big deal. There's always something to worry about if you look hard enough. Hikosuke praised Ryoichi for the quality of his report and asked him to continue sending the summaries.

When Hikosuke thought about it, this man Ryoichi Takeoka had hit upon a great job. For a mere two reports a month, he was receiving a salary of 15,000 yen.

It was only natural, then, for Ryoichi to be grateful. He wrote a long letter expressing his thanks, addressed to Hikosuke Uchibori, president of Business Information Services. The upshot was that he wanted to come from Utsunomiya to the main office in Fukuoka to introduce himself.

Hikosuke was flustered. It's not convenient for you to come;