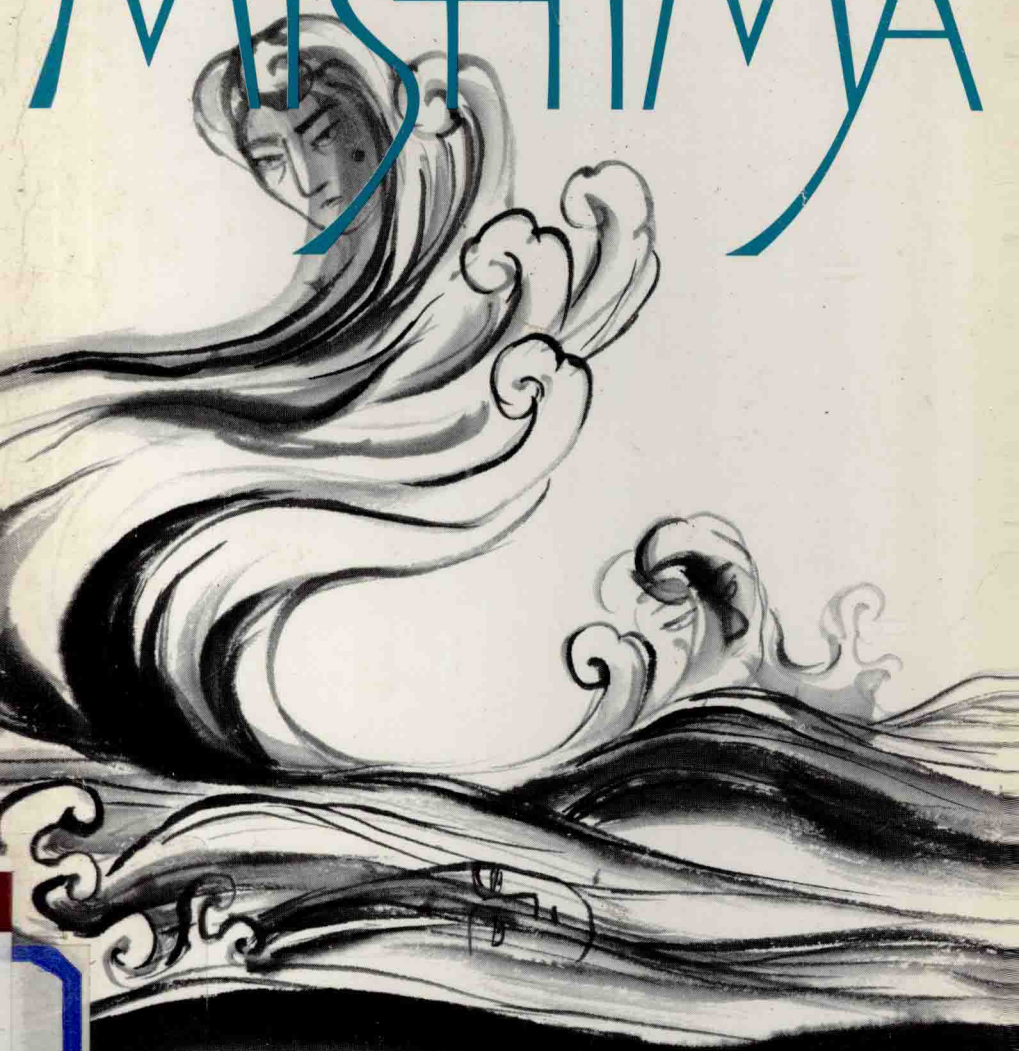


YUKIO  
MISHIMA



THE SAILOR WHO FELL  
FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA

*from Grace with the Sea*

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by YUKIO MISHIMA

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PART ONE

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*SUMMER*



## CHAPTER ONE

SLEEP well, dear."

Noboru's mother closed his bedroom door and locked it. What would she do if there were a fire? Let him out first thing—she had promised herself that. But what if the wooden door warped in the heat or paint clogged the keyhole? The window? There was a gravel path below; besides, the second floor of this gangling house was hopelessly high.

It was all his own fault. It would never have happened if he hadn't let the chief persuade him to sneak out of the house that night. There had been endless questions afterward, but he hadn't revealed the chief's name.

They lived at the top of Yado Hill in Yokohama, in a house his father had built. After the war the house had been requisitioned by the Occupation Army and toilets had been installed in each of the upstairs bedrooms:

being locked in at night was no great discomfort, but to a thirteen-year-old the humiliation was enormous.

Left alone one morning to watch the house and in need of something to vent his spite on, Noboru began to rummage through his room.

A large chest of drawers was built into the wall adjoining his mother's bedroom. He pulled out all the drawers, and as he was dumping their contents onto the floor he noticed a trickle of light spilling into one of the empty compartments of the chest.

He thrust his head into the space and discovered the source of the light: strong summer sunlight was reflecting off the sea into his mother's empty bedroom. There was plenty of room in the chest. Even a grownup might squeeze in up to his belly if he lay flat. Peering at his mother's bedroom through the peephole, Noboru sensed something new and fresh about it.

The shiny brass beds his father had ordered from New Orleans were set against the wall on the left side just as they had been before his death. A bedspread was smoothed neatly over one of them, and on the white cloth a large letter "K"—Kuroda was the family name. A blue straw sun hat, trailing a long pale-blue ribbon, lay on the bed. On the night table stood a blue electric fan.

Across the room, near the window, there was a dressing table fitted with an oval three-piece mirror. The mirror was not quite closed; the upper edges of the

glass glinted through the cracks like splinters of ice. In front of the mirror rose a small city of bottles: eau de Cologne, perfume sprays, lavender toilet water, a Bohemian glass goblet, facets glittering in the light . . . a crumpled pair of brown-lace gloves lay withering like cedar leaves.

A couch and two chairs, a floor lamp, and a low, delicate table were arranged directly under the window. An embroidery frame, the beginnings of a pattern needled into the silk, was propped on the couch. The vogue for such things had passed long ago, but his mother loved all kinds of handicraft. The pattern seemed to be the wings of some gaudy bird, a parrot maybe, on a background of silver-gray. A pair of stockings lay in a heap next to the embroidery. The shocking embrace of sheer nylon and the imitation damask of the couch gave the room an air of agitation. She must have noticed a run on her way out and changed in a hurry.

Only dazzling sky and a few fragments of cloud, hard and glossy as enamel in the light bouncing off the water, could be seen through the window.

Noboru couldn't believe he was looking at his mother's bedroom; it might have belonged to a stranger. But there was no doubt that a woman lived there: femininity trembled in every corner, a faint scent lingered in the air.

Then a strange idea assailed him. Did the peephole



just happen to be here, an accident? Or—after the war—when the soldiers' families had been living together in the house. . . . He had a sudden feeling that another body, larger than his, a blond, hairy body, had once huddled in this dusty space in the wall. The thought soured the close air and he was sickened. Wriggling backwards out of the chest, he ran to the next room. He would never forget the queer sensation he had when, flinging open the door, he burst in.

Drab and familiar, the room bore no resemblance to the mysterious chamber he had seen through the peephole: it was here that he came to whine and to sulk—*it's time you stopped coming into Mother's room so often with that excuse about wanting to watch the ships; you're not a child any more, dear*—here that his mother would put aside her embroidery to help him with his homework while she stifled yawns, or would scold him for not tying his necktie straight, or would check the ledgers she brought home from the shop. . . .

He looked for the peephole. It wasn't easy to find. Cunningly hidden in the ornately carved wainscot, in a spot on the upper border where the rippled pattern overlapped to conceal it—a very small hole.

Noboru stumbled back to his room, gathered the scattered clothing, and stuffed it back into the drawers. When everything was as it had been, he vowed never to do anything that might attract the grownups' attention to the chest.

Shortly after he made this discovery, Noboru began spying on his mother at night, particularly when she had nagged or scolded him. The moment his door was closed he would slip the drawer quietly out of the chest, and then watch in unabating wonder while she prepared for bed. On nights when she was gentle, he never looked.

He discovered that it was her habit, though the nights were not yet uncomfortably hot, to sit completely naked for a few minutes before going to bed. He had a terrible time when she went near the wall mirror, for it hung in a corner of the room he couldn't see.

She was only thirty-three and her slender body, shapely from playing tennis every week, was beautiful. Usually she got right into bed after touching her flesh with perfumed water, but sometimes she would sit at the dressing table and gaze into the mirror at her profile for minutes at a time, eyes hollow as though ravaged by fever, scented fingers rooted between her thighs. On those nights, mistaking the crimson of her bundled nails for blood, Noboru trembled.

Never had he observed a woman's body so closely. Her shoulders, like the shoreline, sloped gently downward. Her neck and arms were lightly tanned, but at her chest, as if an inner lamp were burning, began a zone of warm, fleshy white. Her haughty breasts inclined sharply away from her body; and when she kneaded them with her hands, the rosy nipples danced

apart. He saw the trembling belly. And the scar that meant she had borne children. A dusty red book in his father's study had taught him that; he had discovered it on the highest shelf, turned the wrong way, sandwiched between a gardening book and a pocket business manual.

And the zone of black. The angle was bad somehow, and he strained until the corners of his eyes began to ache. He tried all the obscenity he knew, but words alone couldn't penetrate that thicket. His friends were probably right when they called it a pitiful little vacant house. He wondered if that had anything to do with the emptiness of his own world.

At thirteen, Noboru was convinced of his own genius (each of the others in the gang felt the same way) and certain that life consisted of a few simple signals and decisions; that death took root at the moment of birth and man's only recourse thereafter was to water and tend it; that propagation was a fiction; consequently, society was a fiction too: that fathers and teachers, by virtue of being fathers and teachers, were guilty of a grievous sin. Therefore, his own father's death, when he was eight, had been a happy incident, something to be proud of.

On moonlit nights his mother would turn out the lights and stand naked in front of the mirror! Then he would lie awake for hours, fretted by visions of empti-

ness. An ugliness unfurled in the moonlight and soft shadow and suffused the whole world. If I were an amoeba, he thought, with an infinitesimal body, I could defeat ugliness. A man isn't tiny or giant enough to defeat anything.

As he lay in bed, ships' horns often screeched like nightmares through his open window. When his mother had been gentle, he was able to sleep without looking. On those nights, the vision appeared in his dreams instead.

He never cried, not even in his dreams, for hard-heartedness was a point of pride. A large iron anchor withstanding the corrosion of the sea and scornful of the barnacles and oysters that harass the hulls of ships, sinking polished and indifferent through heaps of broken glass, toothless combs, bottle caps, and prophylactics into the mud at harbor bottom—that was how he liked to imagine his heart. Someday he would have an anchor tattooed on his chest.

The most ungentle night of all came toward the end of summer vacation. Suddenly: there was no way of knowing it would happen.

His mother left early in the evening, explaining that she had invited Second Mate Tsukazaki to dinner. To thank him, she said, for having shown Noboru around his ship the day before. She was wearing a kimono of

black lace over a crimson under-robe; her obi was white brocade: Noboru thought she looked beautiful as she left the house.

At ten o'clock she returned with Tsukazaki. Noboru let them in and sat in the living room with the tipsy sailor, listening to stories about the sea. His mother interrupted at ten-thirty, saying it was time for him to go to bed. She hurried Noboru upstairs and locked the bedroom door.

The night was humid, the space inside the chest so stuffy he could scarcely breathe: he crouched just outside, ready to steal into position when the time came, and waited. It was after midnight when he heard stealthy footsteps on the stairs. Glancing up, he saw the doorknob turning eerily in the darkness as someone tried the door; that had never happened before. When he heard his mother's door open a minute later, he squeezed his sweating body into the chest.

The moonlight, shining in from the south, was reflected back from one pane of the wide-open window. Tsukazaki was leaning against the window sill; there were gold-braid epaulets on his white short-sleeved shirt. His mother's back came into view, crossed the room to the sailor: they embraced in a long kiss. Finally, touching the buttons on his shirt, she said something in a low voice, then turned on the dim floor lamp and moved out of sight. It was in front of the clothes closet, in a corner of the room he couldn't see, that she

began to undress. The sharp hiss of the sash unwinding, like a serpent's warning, was followed by a softer, swishing sound as the kimono slipped to the floor. Suddenly the air around the peephole was heavy with the scent of Arpège. She had walked perspiring and a little drunk through the humid night air and her body, as she undressed, exhaled a musky fragrance which Noboru didn't recognize.

The sailor was still at the window, staring straight at Noboru. His sunburned face was featureless except for the eyes that glittered in the lamplight. By comparing him with the lamp, which he had often used as a yardstick, Noboru was able to estimate his height. He was certainly no more than five feet seven, probably a little less. Not such a big man.

Slowly, Tsukazaki unbuttoned his shirt, then slipped easily out of his clothes. Though he must have been nearly the same age as Noboru's mother, his body looked younger and more solid than any landsman's: it might have been cast in the matrix of the sea. His broad shoulders were square as the beams in a temple roof, his chest strained against a thick mat of hair, knotted muscle like twists of sisal hemp bulged all over his body: his flesh looked like a suit of armor that he could cast off at will. Then Noboru gazed in wonder as, ripping up through the thick hair below the belly, the lustrous temple tower soared triumphantly erect.

The hair on his rising and falling chest scattered

quivering shadows in the feeble light; his dangerous, glittering gaze never left the woman as she undressed. The reflection of the moonlight in the background traced a ridge of gold across his shoulders and conjured into gold the artery bulging in his neck. It was authentic gold of flesh, gold of moonlight and glistening sweat. His mother was taking a long time to undress. Maybe she was delaying purposely.

Suddenly the full long wail of a ship's horn surged through the open window and flooded the dim room—a cry of boundless, dark, demanding grief; pitch-black and glabrous as a whale's back and burdened with all the passions of the tides, the memory of voyages beyond counting, the joys, the humiliations: the sea was screaming. Full of the glitter and the frenzy of night, the horn thundered in, conveying from the distant offing, from the dead center of the sea, a thirst for the dark nectar in the little room.

Tsukazaki turned with a sharp twist of his shoulders and looked out toward the water.

It was like being part of a miracle: in that instant everything packed away inside Noboru's breast since the first day of his life was released and consummated. Until the horn sounded, it was only a tentative sketch. The finest materials had been prepared and all was in readiness, verging on the unearthly moment. But one element was lacking: the power needed to transfigure those motley sheds of reality into a gorgeous palace.

Then, at a signal from the horn, the parts merged into a perfect whole.

Assembled there were the moon and a feverish wind, the incited, naked flesh of a man and a woman, sweat, perfume, the scars of a life at sea, the dim memory of ports around the world, a cramped breathless peephole, a young boy's iron heart—but these cards from a gypsy deck were scattered, prophesying nothing. The universal order at last achieved, thanks to the sudden, screaming horn, had revealed an ineluctable circle of life—the cards had paired: Noboru and mother—mother and man—man and sea—sea and Noboru. . . .

He was choked, wet, ecstatic. Certain he had watched a tangle of thread unravel to trace a hallowed figure. And it would have to be protected: for all he knew, he was its thirteen-year-old creator.

"If this is ever destroyed, it'll mean the end of the world," Noboru murmured, barely conscious. *I guess I'd do anything to stop that, no matter how awful!*



## CHAPTER TWO

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**S**URPRISED, Ryuji Tsukazaki woke up in an unfamiliar bed. The bed next to his was empty. Little by little, he recalled what the woman had told him before she had fallen asleep: Noboru was going swimming with friends in Kamakura in the morning; she would get up early and wake him, and would come back to the bedroom as soon as he left . . . would he please wait for her quietly. He groped for his watch on the night table and held it up to the light that filtered through the curtains. Ten minutes to eight: probably the boy was still in the house.

He had slept for about four hours, after falling asleep at just the time he would ordinarily be going to bed after night watch. It had been hardly more than a nap, yet his head was clear, the long pleasure of the night still coiled inside him tight as a spring. He stretched and crossed his wrists in front of him. In the