



The Kurodahan Press Translation Prize

It gives us great pleasure to announce the Kurodahan Press Translation Prize, awarded for excellence in translation of a selected Japanese short story into English. We hope that it will be possible to continue this prize as an annual event.

Kurodahan Press was established to preserve and circulate contemporary and historical observations of Asia, and to produce informative and entertaining translations. The Japanese literary world needs no help from us in producing outstanding works, but they cannot be introduced to a broader, global audience without skilled translators capable of rendering delicate nuances and atmospheres into another language.

The Kurodahan Press Translation Prize is held to help locate and encourage these translators.

The short story to be translated is 笛塚 by 岡本綺堂, and is about 9500 characters in length.

Submissions will be accepted through September 30, 2008, Japan time.

Three judges will select the winning entry (alphabetical order by surname):

- Juliet Winters Carpenter, Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts
- Meredith McKinney, Visiting Fellow, Japan Centre, Australian National University
- Royall Tyler

The winning entry will receive a cash prize, and an additional payment for first English publication rights in the upcoming *kaiki* anthology. Submissions will not be returned, but translators will retain all applicable rights to their work.

For additional information and a complete contest package download, please see our website:

<http://www.kurodahan.com/mt/e/khpprize/>

or write us at:

Kurodahan Press
3-9-10-403 Tenjin
Chuo-ku, Fukuoka
810-0001 JAPAN

This document is in two parts. The first part refers to the technical specifications we expect to see in documents submitted to us. The second part covers conventions of usage we prefer to see. As one might expect, the first part is less open to modification than the second part.

Part One: Technical Specifications

Word processing:

Please submit documents in Microsoft Word DOC format if possible. RTF or TXT files are also acceptable, but DOC files are preferred. If you would like to use a different file format please contact us in advance.

Document formatting:

Use a common font (such as Times) at 10 or 12 point size.

As much as possible, use only one font at one size throughout your document. See part two for a discussion of special accented characters.

Use bold for titles and subtitles; use italics for emphasis.

Do not start paragraphs with tabs, and do not insert an extra return between paragraphs.

If there is a blank line in the source text, use "***blank line" in the document.

You can use headers and footers if you wish, but do not put important information in headers or footers if it does not also appear somewhere else. If possible (depending on your software), put page numbers and your name in either the header or footer on every page.

Document layout:

On the first page of your document, include the following information in the following order. Please put

(1) Your name. (This line can also include the translator's assertion of copyright.) You may of course specify a pseudonym for public release if you prefer, but please make it very clear which is which.

(2) Your contact information (current mailing address, telephone number and email). This information will be kept confidential from everyone except KHP administrative personnel and Japanese tax authorities. Specifically, it will not be released to other contestants, judges or the general public. It is required for Japanese tax purposes, however.

File name conventions:

Please give the file your own name, without spaces and using only letters and numerals. If your name is Fred Smith, for example, name your file something like FredSmith.doc. Please add the correct extension for the file type if you are using a Macintosh, UNIX or other non-Windows system.

In general:

Avoid fancy formatting of all types. The contest judges your translation and writing abilities, not your artistic skills.

Make your document plain and simple. It may not be as attractive as you might like, but it will keep problems and file sizes to a minimum.

Part Two: Style Conventions

In general:

For the sake of convenience and to aid in mutual understanding, Kurodahan Press turns to the Chicago Manual of Style to answer questions as they arise. We will not always follow the Chicago Manual's advice, but we will start there to explain what we prefer to see in print.

For information on handling uniquely Japanese situations, we refer to the style guide of Monumenta Nipponica, which is available as a downloadable PDF from

http://monumenta.cc.sophia.ac.jp/MN_Style.html

Kurodahan Press uses American English as the basis of its own documents and most of its publications. If

a translator prefers to use a different set of spelling and usage conventions, we will not object, but we will insist on internal consistency. Punctuation will follow American usage as outlined in the Chicago Manual. We also use the following general reference works as authorities: Encyclopaedia Britannica (2006 CD-ROM edition); for U.S. spelling, the Oxford American Dictionary; for non-U.S. spelling, the Collins Gem Dictionary of Spelling and Hyphenation, supplemented by the Concise Oxford.

We view matters of style and usage as conventions, not laws, and so we are open to reasoned argument if a translator wishes to do something other than what we initially require. Please be aware that "this is right" and "this is wrong" are not in themselves convincing arguments.

Representing the source language in the translation:

While Kurodahan Press normally romanizes extended vowels with macrons, people submitting translations may have difficulty with these special characters. For that reason, while we welcome the use of macrons or circumflexes over extended vowels, they are not required and will not be considered when judging a submission.

Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names are given in Asian order (for example: Asamatsu Ken). Western names are given in Western order (for example: Edward Lipsett). The general principle we follow is this: we wish to represent names as they would be represented in the source language culture. We recognize that this gets tricky sometimes, so discussion is possible in special cases. The name of a character in a Japanese novel is not, in our view, a special case.

Recasting passages:

Recasting is often necessary to make an original text read smoothly in English. Our goal is to produce texts that will appeal to general readers: translations should read smoothly, and should not attract attention to themselves in places where their original authors did not intend to attract attention.

Allusions in the source text:

A source text will often refer to a work of art or literature, to a cultural practice, proverb, famous place, or other aspect of common culture that readers of the original can be expected to understand. In cases where English readers could be expected to follow the allusion, the translation should attempt to reproduce it as closely as possible. If the source text refers to something which would be unfamiliar to English readers, the translation should recast the passage to retain the flavor of the original as much as possible. This may involve brief, discreet definitions (something like: "Amaterasu, the sun goddess") or more substantial recasting.

Quoted titles of works in the source language:

If a work makes reference to a publication in the source language, the translator should (a) romanize the reference if the work is not available in English translation, or (b) replace it with a reference to the most recent published English translation. If the atmosphere conveyed by a title, rather than the specific text being referred to, is most important to the meaning of a passage, the translator might choose to translate the title. This applies to works of fiction intended for general readers – specialist texts, nonfiction, and bibliographies require different treatment.

Unusual dialects

This is a constant problem, and many attempts at dialect can be way off course. You should try to suggest regional accents or bumpkin-ness through a few well-chosen words and phrases, and leave most of the sentences as standard speech.

Many translators have suggested or used many different ways of doing this, but (in our considered opinion) none of them is really successful. For example, "Them people up there" as opposed to "those people" is preferable to "Them people uppa yonder." We want to suggest something of the flavor of the original, but we can't slow readers down, or make them laugh when the scene isn't funny, or (the worst) make them stop and think "that's odd." Using prohibition-era gangster slang for a yakuza speaking Osaka dialect just doesn't work.

笛塚

岡本綺堂

一

僕は北国の者だが、僕の藩中にこういう怪談が伝えられている。いや、それを話す前にかの江戸の名奉行根岸肥前守のかいた随筆「耳袋（みみぶくろ）」の一節を紹介したい。

「耳袋」のうちにはこういう話を書いてある。美濃（みの）の金森兵部少輔の家が幕府から取潰されたときに、家老のなにがしは切腹を申渡された。その家老が検視の役人にむかつて、自分はこのたび主家の罪を身に引受けて切腹するのであるから、決してやましいところはない。むしろ武士として本懐に存ずる次第である。しかし実を申せば拙者には隠れたる罪がある。若いときに旅をしてある宿屋に泊ると、相宿（あいやど）の山伏が何かの話からその太刀をぬいて見せた。それが世にすぐれた銘刀であるので、拙者はしきりに欲しくなつて、相当の価でゆずり受けたいと懇望したが、家重代（いえじゅうだい）の品であるというので断られた。それでもやはり思い切れないので、あくる朝その山伏と連れ立って人通りのない松原へ差しかかったときに、不意に彼を斬り殺してその太刀を奪い取つて逃げた。それは遠い昔のことで、幸いに今日（こんにち）まで誰にも覺られずに月日を送つて来たが、今更おもえば罪深いことで、拙者はその罪だけでもかような終りを遂げるのが当然でござると言ひ残して、尋常に切腹したということである。これから僕が話すのも、それにやや似通つているが、それよりも、さらに複雑で奇怪な物語であると思つてもらいたい。

僕の国では謡曲や能狂言がむかしから流行する。したがつて、謡曲や狂言の師匠もたくさんある。やはりそれらからの関係であらう、武士のうちにも謡曲はもちろん、仕舞（しまい）ぐらゐは舞う者もある。笛をふく者もある。鼓をうつ者もある。その一人に矢柄喜兵衛という男があつた。名前はなんだか老人らしいが、その時はまだ十九の若侍で御馬廻りをつとめていた。父もおなじく喜兵衛といつて、せがれが十六の夏に病死したので、まだ元服したばかりのひとり息子が父の名をついで、とどこおりなく跡目を相続したのである。それから足かけ四年のあいだ、二代目の若い喜兵衛も無事に役目を勤め通して、別に悪い評判もなかったのだ、母も親類も安心して、来年の二十歳（はたち）にもなつたならば、しかるべき嫁をなどと内々心がけていた。

前にいったような国風であるので、喜兵衛も前髪のころから笛を吹き習つていた。他

藩であつたら或いは柔弱のそしりを受けたかも知れないが、この藩中では全然無芸の者よりも、こうした嗜（たしな）みのある者がむしろ侍らしく思われるくらいであつたから、彼がしきりに笛をふくことを誰もとがめる者はなかつた。

むかしから丸年（まるどし）の者は齒並みがいいので笛吹きに適しているとかいう俗説があるが、この喜兵衛も二月生れの丸年であるせいか、笛を吹くことはなかなか上手で、子供のときから他人（ひと）も褒める、親たちも自慢するというわけであつたから、その道楽だけは今も捨てなかつた。

天保（てんぽう）の初年のある秋の夜である。月のいいのに浮かされて、喜兵衛は自分の屋敷を出た。手には秘蔵の笛を持つてゐる。夜露をふんで城外の河原へ出ると、あかるい月の下に芒（すすき）や芦（あし）の穂が白くみだれている。どこやらで虫の声もきこえる。喜兵衛は笛をふきながら河原を下（しも）の方へ遠く降つてゆくと、自分のゆく先にも笛の音（ね）がきこえた。

自分の笛が水にひびくのではない、どこかで別に吹く人があるに相違ないと思つて、しばらく耳をすましてゐると、その笛の音が夜の河原に遠く冴えてきこえる。吹く人も下手ではないが、その笛がよほどの名笛であるらしいことを喜兵衛はさとして、彼はその笛の持主を知りたくなつた。

笛の音に寄るのは秋の鹿ばかりではない。喜兵衛も好きの道にたましいを奪われて、その笛の方へ吸ひ寄せられてゆくと、笛は河しにも茂る芒のあいだから洩れて来るのであつた。自分とおなじように今夜の月に浮かれて出て、夜露にぬれながら吹き楽しむ者があるのか、さりととは心憎いことであると、喜兵衛はぬき足をして芒叢（すすきむら）のほとりに忍びよると、そこには破綻（やれむしろ）を張つた低い小屋がある。いわゆる蒲鉾（かまぼこ）小屋で、そこに住んでいる者は宿無しの乞食であることを喜兵衛は知つていた。

そこからこういう音色の洩れて来ようとは頗る意外に感じられたので、喜兵衛は不審そうに立停まつた。

「まさかに狐や狸めがおれをだますのでもあるまい。」

こつちの好きに付け込んで、狐か川獺（かわうそ）が悪いはずをするのかとも疑つたが、喜兵衛も武士である。腰には家重代の長曾弥虎徹（ながそねこてつ）をさしている。なにかの変化（へんげ）であつたらば一刀に斬つて捨てるまでだと度胸をすえて、彼は

ひと叢しげる芒をかきわけて行くと、小屋の入口のむしろをあけて、ひとりの男が坐りながら笛を吹いていた。

「これ、これ。」

声をかけられて、男は笛を吹きやめた。そうして、油断しないような身構えをして、そこに立っている喜兵衛をみあげた。

月のひかりに照らされた彼の風俗はまぎれもない乞食のすがたであるが、年のころは二十七八で、その人柄がここに巢を組んでいる普通の宿無しや乞食のたぐいとはどうも違っているらしいと喜兵衛はひと目に見たので、おのずと詞もあらたまつた。

「そこに笛を吹いてござるのか。」

「はい。」と、笛をふく男は低い声で答えた。

「あまりに音色が冴えてきこえるので、それを慕つてここまでまいつた。」と、喜兵衛は笑みを含んで言った。

その手にも笛を持っているのを、男の方でも眼早く見て、すこしく心が解けたらしい。彼の詞も打解けてきこえた。

「まことにつたない調べで、お恥かしゅうござります。」

「いや、そうでない。せんこくから聴くところ、なかなか稽古を積んだものと相見える。勝手ながらその笛をみせてくれまいか。」

「わたくし共のもてあそびに吹くものでござります。とてもお前さま方の御覧に入るようなものではござりませぬ。」

とは言つたが、別に否（いな）む気色（けしき）もなしに、彼はそこらに生えている芒の葉で自分の笛を丁寧（ていねい）に押しぬぐつて、うやうやしく喜兵衛のまえに差出した。

その態度が、どうしてただの乞食でない。おそらく武家の浪人が何かの子細で落ちぶれたのであらうと喜兵衛は推量したので、いよいよ行儀よく挨拶した。

「しからば拝見。」

彼はその笛を受取つて、月のひかりに透かしてみた。それから一応断つた上で、試みにそれを吹いてみると、その音律がなみなみのものでない、世にも稀なる名管（めいかん）であるので、喜兵衛はいよいよ彼を唯者（ただもの）でないと見た。自分の笛ももちろん相当のものではあるが、とてもそれとは比べものにならない。喜兵衛は彼がどうしてこんなものを持っているのか、その来歴を知りたくなつた。一種の好奇心も手伝つて、彼はその笛を

戻しながら、芒を折敷いて相手のそばに腰をおろした。

「おまえはいつ頃からここに来ている。」

「半月ほど前からまいりました。」

「それまではどこにいた。」と、喜兵衛はかさねて訊いた。

「このような身の上でござりますから、どこという定めもござりませぬ。中国から京大阪伊勢路（いせじ）、近江路、所々をさまよい歩いておりました。」

「お手前は武家でござらうな。」と、喜兵衛は突然に訊いた。

男はだまつていた。この場合、なんらの打消しの返事をあたえないのは、それを承認したものと見られるので、喜兵衛は更にすり寄つて訊いた。

「それほどの名笛を持ちながら、こうして流浪していらるるには、定めて子細がござらう。御差支えがなくなればお聴かせ下さらぬか。」

男はやはり黙っていたが、喜兵衛から再三その返事をうながされて、彼は渋りながら口を開いた。

「拙者はこの笛に崇（た）められているのでござる。」

二

男は石見（いわみ）弥次右衛門という四国の武士であつた。彼も喜兵衛とおなじように少年のころから好んで笛を吹いた。

弥次右衛門が十九歳の春のゆうぐれである。彼は菩提寺に参詣して帰る途中、往来のすくない田圃（たんぼ）なかにひとりの四国遍路の倒れているのを発見した。見すごしかねて立寄ると、彼は四十に近い男で、病苦に悩み苦しんでいるのであつた。弥次右衛門は近所から清水を汲んで来て飲ませ、印籠（いんろう）にたくわえの薬を取出してふくませ、いろいろに介抱してやつたが、男はますます苦しむばかりで、とうとうそこで息を引取つてしまった。

彼は弥次右衛門の親切を非常に感謝して、見ず知らずのお武家さまが我れわれをこれほどにいたわつてくださった。その有難い御恩のほどは何ともお礼の申上げようがない。ついでには甚だ失礼であるが、これはお礼のおしるしまでに差上げたいと言つて、自分の腰から袋入りの笛をとり出して弥次右衛門にささげた。

「これは世にたぐいなき物でござる。しかし、くれぐれも心（こころ）して、わたくしのような終りを取らぬようになされませ。」

彼は謎のような一句を残して死んだ。弥次右衛門はその生国（しょうこく）や姓名を訊いたが、彼は頭（かぶり）を振って答えなかった。これも何かの因縁であろうと思っただので、弥次右衛門はその亡骸（なきがら）の始末をして、自分の菩提寺に葬ってやった。

身許不明の四国遍路が形見（かたみ）にのこした笛は、まったく世にたぐい稀なる名管であった。かれがどうしてこんなものを持っていたのかと、弥次右衛門も頗る不審に思ったが、いずれにしても偶然の出来事から意外の宝を獲たのをよるこんで、彼はその笛を大切に秘蔵していると、それから半年ほど後のことである。弥次右衛門がきょうも菩提寺に参詣して、さきに四国遍路を発見した田圃なかに差しかかると、ひとりの旅すがたの若侍が彼を待ち受けているように立っていた。

「御貴殿は石見弥次右衛門殿でござるか。」と、若侍は近寄って声をかけた。

左様でござると答えると、かれは更に進み寄って、噂にきけば御貴殿は先日このところにおいて四国遍路の病人を介抱して、その形見として袋入りの笛を受取られたということであるが、その四国遍路はそれがしの仇でござる。それがしは彼の首と彼の所持する笛とを取るために、はるばると尋ねてまいったのであるが、かたきの本人は既に病死したとあれば致し方がない、せめてはその笛だけでも所望したいと存じて、先刻からここにお待ち受け申していたのでござると言った。

藪から棒にこんなことを言いかけられて、弥次右衛門の方でも素直に渡すはずがない。彼は若侍にむかって、お身はいずこのいかなる御仁（ごじん）で、またいかなる子細でかの四国遍路をかたきと怨まれるか、それを承った上でなければ何とも御挨拶は出来ないと答えたが、相手はそれを詳しく説明しないで、なんでもかの笛を渡してくれと遮二無二（しゃにむに）彼に迫るのであった。

こうなると弥次右衛門の方には、いよいよ疑いが起って、彼はこんなことを言いこしらえて大切の笛を騙（かた）り取ろうとするのではあるまいかとも思ったので、お身の素姓、かたき討の子細、それらが確かに判らないかぎりには、決してお渡し申すことは相成らぬと手強くはねつけると、相手の若侍は顔の色を変えた。

この上はそれがしにも覚悟があると言って、かれは刀の柄に手をかけた。問答無益（むやく）とみて、弥次右衛門も身がまえした。それからふた言三言いい募った後、ふたつの刀が抜きあわされて、素姓の知れない若侍は血みどろになつて弥次右衛門の眼のまえに倒れた。

「その笛は貴様に崇るぞ。」

言い終って彼は死んだ。訳もわからずに相手を殺してしまつて、弥次右衛門はしばらく夢のような心持であつたが、取りあえずその次第を届け出ると、右の通りの事情であるから弥次右衛門に咎めはなく、相手は殺され損で落着（らくちゃく）した。彼に笛をゆづった四国遍路は何者であるか、のちの若侍は何者であるか、勿論それは判らなかつた。相手を斬ったことはまずそれで落着したが、ここに一つの難儀が起つた。というのは、この事件が藩中の評判となり、主君の耳にもきこえて、その笛というのを一度みせてくれと云う上意が下（くだ）つたことである。単に御覧に入れるだけならば別に子細はないが、殿のお部屋さまは笛が好きで、価（あた）いを問わずに良い品を買い入れていることを弥次右衛門はよく知っていた。迂闊にこの笛を差出すと、殿の御所望という口実で、お部屋さまの方へ取上げられてしまうおそれがある。さりとて仮りにも殿の上意とあるものを、家来の身として断るわけにはいかない。弥次右衛門もこれには当惑したが、どう考えてもその笛を手放すのが惜しかった。

こうなると、ほかに仕様はない。年の若い彼はその笛をかかえて屋敷を出奔した。一管の笛に対する執着のために、彼は先祖伝来の家禄を捨てたのである。

むかしと違って、そのころの諸大名はいずれも内証が逼迫（ひつぱく）しているので、新規召抱えなどということほめつたにない。弥次右衛門はその笛をかかえて浪人するよりほかはなかつた。彼は九州へ渡り、中国をさまよい、京大阪をながれ渡つて、わが身の生計（たつき）を求めるうちに、病氣にかかるやら、盗難に逢うやら、それからそれへと不運が引きつづいて、石見弥次右衛門という一廉（ひとかど）の侍がとうとう乞食の群に落ち果ててしまったのである。

そのあいだに彼は大小までも手放したが、その笛だけは手放そうとしなかつた。そうして、今やこの北国にさまよつて来て、今夜の月に吹き染しむその音色を、測（はか）らずも矢柄喜兵衛に聴き付けられたのであった。

ここまで話して来て、弥次右衛門は溜息をついた。

「さきに四国遍路が申残した通り、この笛には何かの祟りがあるらしく思われます。むかしの持主は何者か存ぜぬが、手前の知っているだけでも、これを持っていた四国遍路は路ばたで死ぬ。これを取ろうとして来た旅の侍は手前に討たれて死ぬ。手前もまたこの笛のために、かような身の上と相成りました。それを思えば身の行く末もおそろしく、いつ

その笛を売却するか、折って捨てるか、二つに一つと覚悟したことも幾たびでござったが、むざむざと売却すも惜しく、折って捨てるはなおさら惜しく、身の禍いと知りつつも身を放さずにとっておきます。」

喜兵衛も溜息をつかずに聴いていらなかった。むかしから刀についてはこんな奇怪な因縁話を聴かないでもないが、笛についてもこんな不思議があるとは思わなかったのである。

しかし年のわかい彼はすぐにそれを否定した。おそらくこの乞食の浪人は、自分にその笛を所望されるのを恐れて、わざと不思議そうな作り話をして聞かせたので、実際そんな事件があったのではあるまいと思った。

「いかに惜しい物であろうとも、身の禍いと知りながら、それを手放さぬというのは判らぬ。」と、かれは話（な）じ）るように言った。

「それは手前にも判りませぬ。」と、弥次右衛門は言った。「捨てようとしても捨てられぬ。それが身の禍いとも祟りともいうのでござろうか。手前もあしかけ十年、これには絶えず苦められております。」

「絶えず苦しめられる……。」

「それは余人にはお話のならぬこと。またお話し申しても、所詮（しよせん）まこととは思われずまい。」

それぎりで弥次右衛門は黙（だま）ってしまった。喜兵衛も黙っていた。ただ聞こえるのは虫の声ばかりである。河原を照らす月のひかりは霜をおいたように白かった。

「もう夜がふけました。」と、弥次右衛門はやがて空を仰ぎながら言った。

「もう夜がふけた。」

喜兵衛も鸚鵡（おうむ）がえしに言った。彼は気がついて起ちあがった。

三

浪人に別れて帰った喜兵衛は、それから一刻（とき）ほど過ぎてから再びこの河原に姿をあらわした。彼は覆面して身軽によそおっていた。「仇討（かたきうち）檻樓錦（つづれのにしき）」の芝居でみる大晏寺堤（たいあんじづみ）の場という形で、彼は拔足をして蒲鉾小屋へ忍び寄った。

喜兵衛はかの笛が欲しくて堪らないのである。しかし浪人の口ぶりでは、所詮それを素直に譲ってくれそうもないので、いっそ彼を闇討にして奪い取るのほかはないと決心

したのである。勿論、その決心をかためるまでには、彼もいくたびか躊躇したのであるが、どう考えてもかの笛がほしい。浪人とはいえ、相手は宿無しの乞食である。人知れずに斬ってしまえば、格別にむずかしい詮議もなくてすむ。こう思うと、彼はいよいよ悪魔になりすまして、一旦わが屋敷へ引つ返して身支度をして、夜のふけるのを待つて、再びここへ襲ってきたのであった。

嘘かほんとうか判らないが、さっきの話によると、かの弥次右衛門は相当の手利きであるらしい。別に武器らしいものを持っている様子もないが、それでも油断はならないと喜兵衛は思った。自分もひと通りの剣術は修業しているが、なんといつても年が若い。真剣の勝負などをした経験は勿論ない。卑怯な闇討をするにしても、相当の準備が必要であると思ったので、彼は途中の竹藪から一本の竹を切出して竹槍をこしらえて、それを掻い込んで窺い寄ったのである、葉ずれの音をさせないように、彼はそつと芒をかきわけて、まず小屋のうちの様子をうかがうと、笛の音はやんでいる。小屋の入口には錠をおろして内はひっそりとしている。

と思うと、内では低い唸（うな）り声がきこえた。それがだんだに高くなって、弥次右衛門はしきりに苦しんでいるらしい。それは病苦でなくて、一種の悪夢にでもおそわれているらしく思われたので、喜兵衛はすこしく躊躇した。かの笛のために、彼はあしかけ十年のあいだ、絶えず苦められているという、さっきの話も思いあわされて、喜兵衛はなんだか薄気味悪くもなったのである。

息をこらしてうかがっていると、内ではいよいよ苦しみもがくような声が激しくなつて、弥次右衛門は入口の錠をかきむしるようにはねのけて、小屋の外へころげ出して来た。そうして、その怖ろしい夢はもう醒めたらしく、彼はほっと息をついてあたりを見まわした。

喜兵衛は身をかくす暇がなかった。今夜の月は、あいにく冴え渡っているので、竹槍をかい込んで突つ立っている彼の姿は、浪人の眼の前にありありと照らし出された。

こうなると、喜兵衛はあわてた。見つけられたが最後、もう猶予は出来ない。彼は持っている槍を取直してただひと突きと繰出すと、弥次右衛門は早くも身をかわして、その槍の穂をつかんで強く曳いたので、喜兵衛は思わずよろめいて草の上に小膝をついた。

相手が予想以上に手剛いので、喜兵衛はますます慌てた。彼は槍を捨てて刀に手のかげようとする、弥次右衛門はすぐに声をかけた。

「いや、しばらく……。御貴殿は手前の笛に御執心か。」

星をさされて、喜兵衛は一言もない。抜きかけた手を控えて暫く躊躇していると、弥次右衛門はしずかにいった。

「それほど御執心ならば、おゆずり申す。」

弥次右衛門は小屋へはいって、かの笛を取り出して来て、そこに黙ってひざまずいている喜兵衛の手に渡した。

「先刻の話をお忘れなさるな。身に禍いのないように精々お心を配りなされ。」

「ありがたいござる。」と、喜兵衛はどもりながら言った。

「人の見ぬ間に早くお帰りなされ。」と、弥次右衛門は注意するように言った。

もうこうなつては相手の命令に従うよりほかはない。喜兵衛はその笛を押しただいて殆んど機械（からくり）のように起ちあがつて、無言で丁寧（えいしやく）に会釈（えいしやく）して別れた。

屋敷へ戻る途中、喜兵衛は一種の慚愧（ざんき）と悔恨（かい）とに打たれた。世にたぐいなしと思われる名管を手に入れた喜悅（きえつ）と満足（まんじつ）を感じながら、また一面には、今夜の自分の恥かしい行為が悔まれた。相手が素直にかの笛を渡してくれただけに、斬取り強盗にひとしい重々の罪悪（ざいあく）が彼のところにいよいよ強い呵責（かしやく）（かしやく）をあたえた。それでもあやまつて相手を殺さなかつたのが、せめてもの仕合せであるとも思った。

夜があけたならば、もう一度かの浪人をたずねて今夜の無礼（むれい）をわび、あわせてこの笛に対する何かの謝礼（しゃれい）をしなければならぬと決心して、彼は足を早めて屋敷へ戻つたが、その夜はなんだか眼が冴えておちおちと眠れなかつた。

夜のあけるのを待ちかねて、喜兵衛は早々にゆうべの場所へたずねて行った。その懷中には小判三枚を入れていた。河原には秋のあさ霧（きり）がまだ立ち迷つていて、どこやらで雁（がん）の鳴く声がきこえた。

芒をかきわけて小屋に近寄ると、喜兵衛はにわかにおどろかされた。石見弥次右衛門は小屋の前に死んでいたのである。彼は喜兵衛が捨てて行った竹槍（たけやり）を両手に持って、我れとわが喉（のど）を突き貫いていた。

そのあくる年の春、喜兵衛は妻を迎えて、夫婦の仲もむつまじく、男の子ふたりを儲けた。そうして何事もなく暮らしていたが、前の出来事から七年目の秋に、彼は勤め向きの失策から切腹しなければならぬことになった。彼は自宅の屋敷で最期（さいご）（さいご）

の用意にかかったが、見届けの役人にむかつて最期のきわに一曲の笛を吹くことを願い出ると、役人はそれを許した。

笛は石見弥次右衛門から譲られたものである。喜兵衛は心しずかに吹きすましていくと、あたかも一曲を終わろうとするときに、その笛は、怪しい音を立てて突然ふたつに裂けた。不思議に思つてあらためると、笛のなかにはこんな文字が刻みつけられていた。

九百九十年 終（にしておわる）

浜主

喜兵衛は斯道（しどう）（しどう）の研究者であるだけに、浜主の名を知っていた。尾張（おわり）の連（むらじ）（むらじ）（はまぬし）はわが朝に初めて笛をひろめた人で斯道の開祖として仰がれている。今年（ことし）は天保九年で、今から逆算すると九百九十年前は仁明天皇の嘉祥元年、すなわちかの浜主が宮中に笛を奏したという承和十二年から四年目に相当する。浜主は笛吹きであるが、初めのうちは自ら作つて自ら吹いたのである。この笛に浜主の名が刻まれてある以上、おそらく彼の手に作られたものであらうが、笛の表ならば格別、細い管（くだ）のなかにどうしてこれだけの漢字を彫つたか、それが一種の疑問であつた。

さらに不思議なのは、九百九十年にして終（はつ）という、その九百九十年目（とちゅう）があたかも今年に相当するらしいことである。浜主はみづからその笛を作つて、みづからその命数を定めたのであらうか。今にして考えると、かの石見弥次右衛門の因縁話（いんえんわ）も嘘（うそ）ではなかつたらしい。怪しい因縁（いんえん）を持つたこの笛は、それからそれへとその持主に禍（わざ）いして、最後の持主のほろぶる時に、笛もまた九百九十年の命数を終つたらしい。

喜兵衛は、あまりの不思議におどろかされると同時に、自分がこの笛と運命を共にするのにも逃れがたき因縁（いんえん）であることを覺つた。彼は見届けの役人に向つて、この笛に関する過去の秘密（ひみつ）を一切うち明けた上で、尋常（じんじょう）に切腹した。

それが役人の口から伝えられて、いずれも奇異の感に打たれた。喜兵衛と生前親しくしていた藩中の誰かがその遺族（いぞく）らと相談の上で、二つに裂けたかの笛をつぎあわせて、さきに石見弥次右衛門が自殺（じく）したと思われる場所にうずめ、標（しるし）（しるし）の石をたてて笛塚（ふエ）の二字（ふたご）を刻ませた。その塚（かみ）は明治の後までも河原に残っていたが、二度の出水（みづ）のためには跡方（あと）もなくなつたように聞いている。

Submission No. 1

The Flute Barrow

One

I am from the north. There is a strange tale that was told in the feudal domain that formerly made up this area. Before recounting the tale, however, let me first mention another story, this one included in the miscellany *Mimibukuro* by the famous Edo magistrate Negishi Yasumori. When the house of Kanamori Hyōbu Shōsuke of Mino Province was stripped of its status by the military government, a certain senior retainer of the clan was ordered to commit *seppuku*. The retainer declared to the official in charge that, since he would be accepting responsibility for the crimes of his lord's house, he had no qualms about killing himself; on the contrary, as a samurai, the sentence was fully in accord with his wishes. He went on to say, though, that in truth he had his own secret crime to atone for. Once, while travelling during his younger days, he had put up at an inn at which a mountain ascetic was also staying. In the course of telling some story, the ascetic showed him his sword. It was the work of a master swordsmith and of unsurpassed quality, and the retainer keenly desired to have it for himself. He pleaded with the ascetic to sell it and offered him a suitable sum of money. The ascetic refused the offer, however, explaining that the sword was a family heirloom. The next morning, still unable to give up the idea of possessing the sword, the retainer accompanied the ascetic as he left the inn. When they found themselves alone in a grove of pine trees, the retainer attacked his companion and killed him. He then took the sword and made his escape. This happened a long time ago, and fortunately for the retainer the years passed without anyone being aware of what he had done. Now, however, he realized the gravity of his crime, and for that reason alone he was prepared to accept his present fate. Having delivered these parting words, the retainer calmly committed *seppuku*. I mention this story because it bears a certain resemblance to the tale I am about to tell. At the same time, I am sure the reader will agree that my tale is not only more complicated it is, if anything, even more mysterious.

In my home province the arts of Noh and Kyōgen had been popular since long ago. There were thus many Noh and Kyōgen masters. Probably for that reason there were also those among the samurai class who practiced Noh chanting or who performed the Noh dances known as *shimai*. There were still others who played the flute or practiced the art of the Noh drum. One such samurai was Yagara Kihei. From the sound of his old-fashioned name, you might think him an old man. At the time of my tale, however, he was a young samurai of nineteen who served as an outrider in his lord's entourage. His father, too, had been called Kihei, and when, in the summer of the boy's sixteenth

year, the father died, the son took his father's name and, even though he had yet to go through the coming of age ceremony, duly succeeded to his father's position. For the next four years Kihei performed his duties without incident. That there was nothing in the young man's behavior to cast a shadow on his reputation was a relief to his mother and relatives. They therefore quietly turned their attention to his future. The next year Kihei would turn twenty, and it would be time for him to take a bride.

As mentioned, it was a peculiarity of this domain that the samurai were wont to practice one or other of the Noh arts. This was true also of Kihei, who since childhood had studied the flute. Whereas in other domains this might have earned him censure for what could be seen as a weakness, in this domain a man with such an accomplishment was considered more samurai-like than one without. There was therefore none who found fault with Kihei's devotion to his flute playing.

There is a common belief that those born early in the year will have good teeth and thus be better suited to playing the flute. Perhaps this is why Kihei, who was born in the second month, excelled at the instrument and received praise for his playing. His parents, too, were proud of his accomplishment, and thus Kihei did not abandon this pastime, even when he grew older.

One evening during the early years of the Tempō era (1830-1844), drawn by the light of a splendid autumn moon, Kihei stepped out of his house. In his hand he held his cherished flute. He made his way over ground already moist with the evening dew to the riverbed outside the castle grounds. The silvery heads of the pampas grass and reeds shimmered in the moonlight. Somewhere in the distance insects could be heard chirping. As he played his flute he continued his way downstream until up ahead he could hear the sound of another flute.

Kihei was certain that what he had heard was not the sound of his own instrument echoing off the water but that of another flute player. Stopping to listen carefully, he could hear the distinct sound of flute music coming from somewhere far downstream. The player was not unskilled, but it was the sound of the instrument itself, surely the work of a master flute maker, that most struck Kihei. He became filled with a desire to meet the owner of the flute.

It is thus not only the autumn deer who are drawn to the sound of flute playing. As if under a spell, Kihei was pulled in the direction of the mysterious flute. The sound, it turned out, was emanating from a thick bush of pampas grass downstream. Perhaps, like Kihei himself, the flute player had been enticed by the beauty of the moon to disregard the evening dew and take up his instrument. True or not, Kihei found the notion pleasing. Stealthily, he moved closer. In the middle of the thicket was a low hut, a simple structure covered with torn straw matting. Kihei knew it to be the haunt of beggars.

That the beautiful flute music he had heard was coming from such a place seemed highly improbable. Kihei grew suspicious and hesitated.

“Surely I can’t have been bewitched by a fox or a *tanuki*,” he thought. He suspected that it might indeed be some fox or even a river otter playing on his fondness for flute music. But Kihei was a samurai, and at his side hung his family’s heirloom, the sword known as Nagasonekotetsu. Telling himself that if it were an apparition he could easily dispose of it with one stroke of his sword, Kihei plucked up his courage, pushed his way through the overgrown thicket, and pulled aside the straw mat covering the entrance to the hut. Inside sat a man playing the flute.

“You there!”

Thus addressed, the man stopped his flute playing. As he looked up at Kihei he seemed to be on his guard. By the light of the moon Kihei could see that the man had the outward appearance of a beggar, but he was young, probably only twenty-seven or twenty-eight. One glance was also enough to suggest to Kihei that he was not the usual sort of beggar or vagabond wont to haunt the area. He thus addressed him more formally.

“You are playing the flute?”

“Yes,” answered the man in a low voice.

“The tone of your flute was so beautiful that I was moved to follow the sound to its source,” explained Kihei with a smile.

The man quickly discerned that Kihei, too, held a flute in his hands, and this seemed to put him somewhat at ease. His voice also lost some of its reserve. “My playing is so unskilled; it’s an embarrassment to think you were listening.”

“Not at all,” replied Kihei. “Judging from what I heard, you’ve learned well. Excuse me for being so forward, but would you permit me to have a look at your flute?”

“It’s merely the type of thing we beggars play for our own amusement. Surely it could be of no interest to a gentleman like you.”

Despite these words, the man gave no indication that he would refuse. Taking a blade from a nearby stalk of pampas grass, he carefully wiped his flute and reverently handed it to Kihei.

Kihei concluded from the man’s attitude that he was definitely not a mere beggar. Most likely he was a *rōnin*, a masterless samurai, who for some reason or other had fallen on hard times. He thus addressed him even more politely.

“With your permission, then.” Taking the flute in his hands, he held it up to the moonlight and examined it. Then, having first sought leave to do so, he tried blowing it. The flute’s temperament proved that it was no common instrument but rather a rare example of master craftsmanship. Kihei became even more convinced that its owner was also no ordinary man. Kihei’s own flute was of decent quality, but it could not begin

to compare with the one he now held. He wanted to learn the history of the instrument and how it had come into the man's hands. Driven by this sense of curiosity, he handed the flute back, made a place for himself amid the pampas grass, and sat down next to the man.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"About a fortnight," replied the man.

"And where were you before that?" Kihei questioned further.

"For one such as myself there is no particular place I ought to be. My feet have taken me many places, from the southwest to Kyoto and Osaka, and then along the Ise and the Ōmi roads."

"You are a samurai, aren't you?" Kihei suddenly asked.

The man was silent.

Concluding that the lack of a denial should be taken as an affirmation, Kihei drew closer. "There are no doubt good reasons why you find yourself wandering about in possession of such a fine flute. If you have no objection, please tell me your story."

Two

The man's name was Iwami Yajimon, and he was a samurai from the island of Shikoku. Like Kihei, he had taken to the flute from an early age. One spring evening, when he was nineteen years old, Yajimon was on his way back home after a visit to the local temple, Bodaiji, when he came across a pilgrim making the rounds of the Shikoku temples. The pilgrim had collapsed along a section of the road near some rice paddies. At first Yajimon had simply walked by him, but he then retraced his steps and returned. The man appeared to be approaching his forties. He was suffering from some illness and was in great pain. Yajimon fetched some clean water from a nearby stream for the man to drink. He also took some medicine from the medicine case he carried and got the man to take it. Yajimon did what he could, but the man's condition only got worse until finally he breathed his last.

Before dying, the man had expressed his deep gratitude for Yajimon's kindness. "That you, a samurai whom I have never met, should take such pity on me leaves me at a loss how to repay you. It's hardly adequate, but please take this as a sign of my gratitude." So saying, the man reached for a flute that hung in a bag at his side and gave it to Yajimon. "This is a flute like no other in the world. But please take great care lest you come to the same end that has befallen me."

Leaving behind this cryptic warning, the man died. Yajimon had asked him his name and where he was from, but the man had only shaken his head and not answered. Believing that this silence, too, must somehow be connected with the man's unfortunate fate, Yajimon took care of the body and had it buried at his own temple, Bodaiji.

The flute that Yajiemon had received as a memento from the unknown pilgrim was indeed a rare instrument of unequalled quality. Although he was extremely curious to know why the pilgrim had been carrying it, he was at the same time pleased that such a treasure had by accident fallen into his own hands. He took great care of the flute and treated it as his prized possession.

Some six months passed and again Yajiemon made a visit to Bodaiji. When he came to the rice paddies where he had discovered the dying pilgrim, there stood a young samurai as if waiting for someone.

“You are Iwami Yajiemon, are you not?” inquired the stranger, approaching.

“I am.”

The young samurai came even closer. “I’ve heard that recently at this spot you treated a sick pilgrim, and that as a token of the man’s gratitude you received a flute in a cloth bag. That pilgrim was my enemy, and I have come a great distance to have the man’s head and the flute in his possession. Since the man has already died, there is nothing I can do about that, but I still desire the flute. That is the reason I have been standing here waiting for you.”

Suddenly addressed in this way, it could hardly be expected that Yajiemon would obediently hand over the flute.

“Without knowing who you are and where you are from, not to mention how it is that you and that pilgrim came to be enemies, I’m afraid I can’t give you any answer.”

The samurai, however, did not offer any explanation but instead continued to insist in a threatening manner that Yajiemon turn over the flute.

The more the man persisted, the more Yajiemon suspected that the man’s story was a fiction he had concocted in order to get his hands on the prized flute. Yajiemon thus became even firmer in his refusal: “Until you provide some proof of who you are and of the circumstances behind your claim, I have absolutely no intention of handing the flute over to you.”

The young samurai’s color changed. “I’m prepared to do whatever it takes,” he declared, bringing his hand to rest on the hilt of his sword.

Seeing that words were futile, Yajiemon, too, prepared to stand his ground. After exchanging a few more contentious words, the men drew their swords and clashed. Soon the unknown samurai, now covered in blood, was defeated and fell to the ground.

“That flute will curse you!” were his dying words.

Yajiemon had just killed a man for reasons he could not understand. For a moment it seemed to him as if it had all been a dream. Eventually, however, he came to his senses and reported the incident to a domain official. Given the circumstances as just recounted, no fault was found with Yajiemon’s actions, and the affair was judged a case of accidental death. As for the identities of the pilgrim who had given Yajiemon the

flute and the young samurai who had come after it, no one was the wiser.

Although the affair of the young samurai's death had been settled, Yajiemon now faced a new difficulty. Talk of the incident had spread throughout the domain and eventually reached the ear of the lord. There followed an announcement that the lord wished to be shown the flute. Were it just a case of the lord's wanting to see the flute, there would have been nothing to worry about. But Yajiemon knew that the lord's wife was herself fond of flutes and had purchased several fine specimens, paying no heed to their price. If he were carelessly to hand over the flute for the lord's inspection, there was a danger that the request was only a pretext and that the lord meant to give it to his wife. Yet, as the lord's vassal, Yajiemon could not possibly refuse his request. The dilemma caused Yajiemon much anxiety, but the more he thought about it the harder it became to bear the thought of giving up the flute.

Under the circumstances, Yajiemon was left with no other choice; with flute in hand he left his home and took flight. For the sake of his attachment to a single flute, he had turned his back on his ancestors and thrown away his hereditary stipend.

Unlike in earlier periods, the feudal lords of this time were all under severe financial constraints and unable to take any new samurai into their service. Yajiemon thus became a *rōnin*. Carrying his flute, he first crossed over to the island of Kyūshū and then traveled through the Chūgoku region to Kyoto and Osaka, doing what he could for his livelihood. Along the way he suffered one misfortune after another, including illness and encounters with bandits. In this way, the once respectable samurai Yajiemon was reduced to the level of a common beggar.

In the course of his wanderings he had sold his long and short swords, but he had not given up his flute. Now his roaming had brought him to the north, where on this moonlit night his flute playing had unexpectedly been heard by Kihei.

Concluding his story, Yajiemon let out a deep sigh. He then added, "I believe it is just as the pilgrim in Shikoku said, that there is some curse connected with this flute. I don't know who owned it before, but I do know that the man I received it from died on the road and that I ended up killing the samurai who came to get it. And now I, too, all on account of this flute, have fallen into this miserable state. When I think of it, I become afraid for my future. I don't know how many times I've resolved to either sell the flute or simply break the thing in two and throw it away. But to sell it would be a great pity, and the thought of breaking it and throwing it away is even harder to bear. I know full well that my life is cursed, but I keep the flute and go on living anyway."

Kihei had not been unmoved by Yajiemon's story. Nonetheless, though he had heard strange tales of swords that brought ill luck to their owners, he doubted whether the same could be true of a flute. He was thus inclined to dismiss the notion. "This *rōnin* beggar probably came up with his fantastic tale because he's afraid I'm after his flute,"

thought Kihei. He concluded that Yajiemon's story could not possibly be true.

"However unbearable it might be, if you know it's the cause of your misfortune, I can't understand why you don't simply get rid of it," said Kihei, as if to reproach the other man.

"I can't understand it myself," was Yajiemon's reply. "I want to get rid of it, but I can't. Perhaps that is also part of the curse. For ten years now I have lived in constant torment."

"In constant torment..." echoed Kihei.

"Other people can't understand it. Whatever I tell them, in the end they believe it can't be true."

With that Yajiemon fell silent. Kihei too did not speak. Only the sound of chirping insects broke the silence. Under the light of the moon the riverbed shone white, as if covered by a layer of frost.

Eventually Yajiemon spoke. "The night is deep," he said, looking up at the sky.

"The night is deep," parroted Kihei. Coming to his senses, he got up

Three

A short time after leaving the *rōnin* and returning home, Kihei again appeared at the riverbed. This time his face was veiled and he wore a light disguise. Like a character in the "Daianji Embankment" scene of the revenge play *Katakiuchi Tsuzure no Nishiki*, he stealthily approached the beggar's hut.

Kihei had become consumed with desire for the flute. Judging from the way Yajiemon had spoken of it, it was unlikely he would freely turn it over. Kihei had thus decided that it would be best to attack him under the cover of night and take the flute by force. To be sure, until coming to this decision he had wavered many times. But the more he thought about it, the more he wanted the flute. Besides, his *rōnin* adversary was a homeless beggar. If Kihei cut him down out of sight of any witnesses, there would not likely be much of an investigation. Aided by such thoughts, Kihei gradually fell prey to an evil power. Once back home, he had outfitted himself with a disguise and, after waiting for the night to deepen even further, come back ready to attack.

Whether true or not, according to the story he had told, Yajiemon was a skilled swordsman. He did not appear to have any weapons with him, but Kihei could not afford to be careless. As for himself, Kihei had undergone the usual training in fencing, but he was after all young and inexperienced. That he had never been involved in a real life-and-death sword fight goes without saying. Even if his nighttime attack gave him the advantage, he would still have to take proper precautions. With this thought in mind, he stopped along the way and cut a stalk of bamboo, which he fashioned into a spear. Then, carrying the spear under his arm, he moved into position to spy on his adversary.

Careful not to rustle any leaves, he quietly pushed aside the pampas grass to get a look at the hut. There was no sound of flute playing. The straw covering hung over the entrance of the hut, and all seemed quiet inside.

Or at least so Kihei thought, but soon he became aware of a low moaning sound coming from inside the hut. Gradually the moaning got louder, as if Yajiemon was in incessant pain. It did not seem to be the pain of illness, however, but rather sounded like Yajiemon was being tormented by a bad dream. Kihei recalled what the *rōnin* had said about being in constant torment for the last ten years, and the thought gave him an uncanny feeling.

Holding his breath, Kihei continued to listen. Yajiemon's groans had now become more violent and he seemed to be writhing in agony. Suddenly, grasping at the straw door, Yajiemon pushed it aside and crawled out of the hut. Having apparently awakened from his nightmare, he breathed a sigh of relief and looked around.

Kihei had had no time to hide. The moon was shining as brightly as ever, and Yajiemon could clearly see his would-be assailant as he stood before him, spear tucked under his arm.

Kihei panicked. He had been seen, and now he had no choice but to attack. He renewed his grip on the spear and lunged at his opponent. Yajiemon quickly moved aside, grabbed the end of the spear, and pulled it sharply, causing Kihei to topple forward onto his knees.

Unprepared to encounter such strength in his adversary, Kihei became even more flustered. He threw away the spear and reached for his sword.

"Wait," cried Yajiemon. "You've become infatuated with my flute, I assume."

Struck by the truth of Yajiemon's words, Kihei was silent. With his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, he hesitated.

"If you want it so badly, I'll give it to you," said Yajiemon softly. He went into the hut, got the flute, and handed it to Kihei, who was still kneeling on the ground, speechless.

"Don't forget the story I told you. Be especially careful that you don't fall under the flute's spell."

"Th-th-thank you," stammered Kihei.

"You should return home quickly while there is still no one about," cautioned Yajiemon.

Under the circumstances, Kihei could do little but obey the instruction. Clutching the flute, like a mechanical doll he got up, silently bowed, and left.

As he made his way home, Kihei was overcome with feelings of shame and remorse. While he felt satisfaction, even joy, at having gotten his hands on a flute of incomparable quality, he at the same time regretted his embarrassing behavior that

night. Though Yajiemon had handed over the flute willingly, the sense of remorse Kihei felt was as strong as if he had just committed the most heinous and violent of crimes. Nonetheless, he was happy that, even though by accident, he had at least not killed the man.

Kihei decided that at daybreak he would go back and to see Yajiemon, apologize for his behavior that night, and give the *rōnin* something as compensation for the flute. With these thoughts in mind, he quickened his pace homeward. Sleep did not come easily, however, and he lay awake most of the night.

The impatiently awaited dawn having finally come, Kihei hurried to the site of the prior night's events. In his pocket he had put three gold pieces. The riverbed was still enshrouded in the autumn morning mist. Somewhere he heard the cry of geese.

Pushing his way through the pampas grass, he approached the hut, only to receive the most unexpected shock: Yajiemon lay dead on the ground in front of the hut. In his hands he held Kihei's spear; he had pierced his own throat.

The following spring Kihei took a wife. It was a harmonious match, and the couple was blessed with two sons. They led an otherwise uneventful life. Then, in the autumn, seven years after the events just recounted had occurred, Kihei was ordered to commit *seppuku* because of a blunder he had made in the course of his duties. The *seppuku* was to be carried out at his home, and when all the preparations had been made, he turned to the official who had come to verify the act and asked permission to play one final tune on his flute. The official granted his request.

The flute was the one he had received from Yajiemon. Kihei played with his heart at ease, but then, just as he was about to finish, the flute made a strange sound and suddenly split in two. Surprised, Kihei examined the instrument and discovered the following carved on the inside: "To last for nine hundred and ninety years. Hamanushi."

Kihei was enough of a scholar of the flute to know the name of Hamanushi. Credited with having been the first to introduce the flute to Japanese court music, Owari no Hamanushi was regarded as the founder of the art. Since the current year was Tempō 9 (1838), counting back nine hundred ninety years would bring us to the reign of Emperor Ninmyō and the first year of the Kajō era (848), that is, four years after Hamanushi is known to have played the flute at court. Although a flute player, Hamanushi at first also made his own flutes. Since this flute bore his name, it was likely that it had been made by Hamanushi himself. There would have been nothing exceptional about an inscription on the outside, but why the words had been inscribed on the inside of the narrow pipe was a mystery.

Even stranger still, the end of the nine hundred and ninety years referred to in the inscription seemed to correspond exactly to the present year. Could Hamanushi have

made this flute and determined its lifetime down to the precise number of years? It began to appear that Yajiemon's story of the flute's fateful connections was not a mere fiction. Indeed, it seemed that the flute had indeed borne a curse that brought misfortune to all who possessed it, and that now, just as its final owner was about to meet his end, its allotted number of years had run out.

Kiheï was not only surprised by this turn of events, he now clearly understood the flute's karmic connection with his own fate. Turning to the official, he revealed all he knew of the instrument's secret past. He then calmly committed *seppuku*.

Starting with the official, the story spread by word of mouth, and all who heard it were amazed. A samurai who had been close to Kihei while he was still alive, after first consulting with the surviving family members, put the two pieces of the flute together and buried them at the spot where Yajiemon was believed to have killed himself. He then had a stone marker erected that bore the inscription "flute barrow." It is said the barrow could still be seen as recently as the end of the Meiji period, but that as a result of recent floods all traces of it have now vanished.

Burial Mound of the Flute
Okamoto Kidoo

Chapter one

I am from the northern part of Japan, and in my clan, there is a strange story passed on for generations, which I would like to share with you today. But before I do so, let me introduce you to part of a short-story collection called ‘mimibukuro’ written by a famous Edo magistrate, Neghishi Echizenshu.

Kanemori Shooyuu was a feudal lord (1736-1758) of Mino region (current Gifu prefecture). In 1754, to stabilize the suffering financial situation of the clan, he announced a new tax scheme to increase the agricultural product that the farmers in the area paid as tax. Despite the huge protest from the people, he pushed his plan, feigning it was an order from Edo Shogunate. This eventually led to a major riot in the region and an investigation by Shogunate. The case ended up with job losses and death sentences for an unprecedented number of high ranking local officials.

The story goes like this. When Kanemori Shooyuu was found guilty and he and his family were ousted from power, the highest ranking adviser of the Kanemori family was ordered to take his own life by conducting seppuku (stomach cutting). As he prepared for his last moment, he said to the prosecutor that he had nothing to be ashamed of since he was going to die taking the blame against his superior along with him. He even considered it rather an honorable way to go as a bushi: noble samurai. But then, he said he had something else to confess and he began talking about his hidden past.

“It was when I was young. I was traveling and one day I spent a night at a guest house. There was a peregrinator staying there that night.” he continued.

“We started chatting and during the conversation, which I do not remember what it was about, he unsheathed his sword and showed it to me. It was a very rare masterpiece and I instantly fell in love. Desperately wanted to buy it from him, I offered him a lot of money and implored him to consider selling it, but the peregrinator said it was a family treasure passed down for generations and rejected my offer. Next morning, I still could not give up, so I checked out the guest house with the peregrinator and walked with him. When we came to a less frequented pine-tree field, I suddenly slashed him with my sword and killed him. I then grabbed his sword and ran. It happened a long time ago and until today I have somehow escaped being brought to justice. I know it is kind of late to repent, but come to think of it, I have committed a terrible crime. Even disregarding all the other things I have done, I well deserve this painful death.”

He then calmly gutted himself and died.

The story I am going to tell you is somewhat similar to this but you may find it even more complicated and mysterious.

In the place I grew up, traditional arts such as *yookyoku* (traditional play: “*noh*” sang with particular rhythm and chorus) and *nohkyougen* (Japanese farce/play often accompanied by traditional musical instruments and dance) have been always quite popular. Consequently, there have also been many who teach such forms of art. It probably has something to do with the society, as it is not rare

to see people, even among samurais, who practice not just *yookyoku* but also the dance or the accompanying instruments such as the flute or the drums. Among those samurais, there was a man called Yajiri Kichibee. His name sounds like that of an old man but at that time he was only nineteen years old and he was working as a member of the cavalry in the clan. His father, who was also called Kichibee, died from sickness when young Kichibee was only sixteen. When that happened, young Kichibee, who had just had the ceremony of *genpuku*, a ceremony that publicly recognized him as an adult, inherited his father's name and the profession. After that, for nearly four years, young Kichibee worked hard without creating a particularly bad reputation, therefore, his mother was happy and quietly thinking of finding a suitable woman for him as he was going to be twenty the following year.

As I said before, the popularity towards traditional art influenced many people in the area and Kichibee was no exception. He had been practicing the flute since he was young. If it was a different clan, he may have been seen as a wimp for taking an interest in a musical instrument. But in his clan, it was even considered more samurai-like to practice some sort of art and be able to play an instrument or two. Therefore, no one stopped or bullied him for playing the flute regularly. There is a common saying that the people who are born in the year of a round number have nice teeth, and are therefore suited to playing the flute. I do not know if that is true but Kichibee, who was born in February in such year, was quite good at it. Since people constantly complimented him since he was little and his parents often boasted about their son's ability, he kept the habit of playing the flute, despite the fact that there were several other things that he had given up as he grew up.

It was one autumn night at the beginning of the Tempō period (1930-1943). Kichibee was drawn to the beautiful moon and left the house with the flute he treasured in his hand. The grass had already gathered dew. He stomped through the wet grass and came out to the river bank outside the castle. The randomly growing grass and reeds were glowing white under the moon light and insects were making noise somewhere far away. As he played the flute and walked down the river bank, he suddenly made out the sound of a different flute coming from the direction he was walking towards. It was certainly not the sound of his own flute bouncing back from the river. There must be someone else playing somewhere. As he thought so, he listened to it intently for a while. The sound of the flute pierced through the dark river bed from the distance. The player was quite good but it was not the player's skill that captured his attention, it was the sound of the flute. It was so pure and alluring that he was convinced it was not an ordinary flute. He wondered who possessed the instrument and wanted to find out who the person was.

The sound of the flute was often said to attract deer, but clearly it is not only deer that are drawn to it. Kichibee was so captivated by the sound that he started walking towards its direction as if he was guided by an invisible hand. It was coming out from the shrub further down the river bank. As he walked towards the sound, he wondered if the person had come out entertained by the same charming idea of playing the instrument under the moonlight catching some dew gathered on grass. As he quietly walked through the shrub, a low ceiling shack made from a

few bamboo sticks and ripped, old straw rugs came into sight. He already knew that it was in the area and the people who were living there were homeless beggars. What surprised him was that such a beautiful sound was coming out from such a miserable place. He became a little perplexed and stopped there. He mumbled to himself wondering if it was a fox or a raccoon trying to trick him taking advantage of the fact that he liked the flute. But he was a samurai, and the great sword 'Nagasonekotetsu' he inherited from his family was sitting on his waist. If it was some sort of monster, he would simply kill it with a stroke of the sword. He gathered up his courage and walked forward through the bushy ground. As he came closer to the shack, he noticed that the rug at the entrance was rolled up and there was a man sitting on the ground playing the flute.

"Excuse me, excuse me"

When Kichibee called the man, he stopped playing and looked up as he quickly took a defending posture. Judging from his appearance, revealed under the moon light, the man definitely looked like a homeless person, but it seemed he was still twenty-seven or eight years old and although he could not quite put his finger on it, Kichibee instantly noticed that there was something different from other homeless people or beggars that were living in the vicinity. Hence, he used rather formal speech and asked.

"Are you playing the flute?"

"Yes" the man replied back with a deep, low voice.

"The sound of your flute is so pure and alluring. It has drawn me here." Kichibee said as he smiled. The man had a quick glance of Kichibee and noticed that he was also carrying a flute.

"Thank you, but it is nothing worth listening to. In fact, I am quite ashamed of my poor skill." Perhaps the sight of Kichibee holding a flute helped him to relax a little, because he sounded slightly friendlier this time.

"No, not at all. I have been listening to you and I definitely see that you have been practicing it for a while. Could I have a look at your instrument, if you do not mind?"

"It is just a flute that I play around with and it is not something worth having a look at." the man replied, but he was not particularly opposed to it. He ripped some of the leaves from the plants within his reach, wiped his flute, and handed it to Kichibee with a respectful gesture. His behavior was definitely not that of a homeless person. Kichibee inferred that perhaps he was a samurai in origin and from some misfortune he had been expelled from the clan and fell into such status. As he thought so, he became even more polite and said. "Thank you, for allowing me." and took the flute. He examined it with the moon light and briefly asked for a permission to try. As he tried the instrument, his suspicion was confirmed and the extraordinary sound came out from the instrument. It was definitely a very rare masterpiece. Kichibee's own flute was one of the better ones, but the man's flute belonged to a totally different class. He further wondered who the man was and how he ended up possessing such a fine instrument. Helped by his curiosity, Kichibee broke some of the tall grass and sat down near the man as he gave the flute back to him.

"Since when have you been staying here?" Kichibee asked the man.

“I have been here around six months now” the man replied.

“And where were you before you came here?” Kichibee asked further.

“Well, I live like this as you can see, I have no fixed address. I was in the Chuugoku area, and then moved to Kyoto, Osaka, Iseji, and Omiji, I have been wondering all around.” the man said.

“You are a samurai, aren’t you?” Kichibee asked him out of the blue. Thrown by this sudden question, the man fell silent. That was enough for Kichibee to know that in fact he was a samurai. Therefore, he got closer to the man and asked further. “Having a social status that allows you to have such a superior quality musical instrument, yet you are still vagabonding around the county. There must be a good reason for it. Would you mind sharing the story with me?”

The man kept silent, but after Kichibee’s persistent persuasion, he reluctantly opened his mouth. “I am haunted by this flute” he said.

Chapter two

The man’s name was Iwami Yajiuemon, and he was a samurai, originally from the Shikoku area. Like Kichibee, he liked the flute and had been practicing it since he was young.

It was one spring evening when Yajiuemon was nineteen. He was on the way back home after praying at the local temple: Bodaiji. As he came across the rice field with only a few people around, he spotted a Shikoku peregrinator (the peregrinators travel across the eighty-eight sacred places in the Shikoku region following the path that the famous Buddhist monk, Kooboodaishi, walked) lying on the ground. Not being able to walk away without helping him, Yajiuemon approached him. He was a man close to his forties and he was seriously ill, and in agony. Yajiuemon went to fetch some water from a well in the vicinity and helped him to drink. He also gave him some medicine that he was carrying in his first aid case and tried everything else he could. But soon after, the man’s condition deteriorated. In his suffering, the peregrinator expressed his gratitude. He was deeply moved by the fact that a complete stranger, who even had samurai status, took the trouble to help him out. He said to Yajiuemon that he owed him so much and there was simply no way that he could repay him for the favor he received. As he said this, he took out a flute in a sack from his waist pocket. He asked his pardon for only being able to give back very little and handed it to Yajiuemon. The peregrinator wanted him to keep the flute as a token of his gratitude.

“This is a very rare instrument and I would like you to keep it, but please be careful not to end up like I did.” he said.

Yajiuemon further inquired about the name of the instrument and its origin, but the man was only able to shake his head. With the mysterious words, he finally died.

Because he saw the incident as some sort of fate, Yajiuemon took care of the body and buried it at the temple he frequented. The flute that the peregrinator left him was in fact a very precious masterpiece. He wondered how the man ended up having such an instrument. Whatever the case, he was genuinely pleased by this fortune and treasured the flute.

It was now about six months after the incident. As usual, Yajiuemon went to the temple and as he was returning home, he passed through the same rice field

where he had found the peregrinator, there, a young samurai in travel attire was standing as if he had been expecting him. As the samurai saw Yajiuemon, he came towards him and asked if he was Ishimi Yajiuemon. As he replied “Yes”, the man came closer and started explaining why he had been looking for him.

Apparently the young samurai heard about the incident when Yajiuemon received a flute trying to help a dying Shikoku peregrinator. According to him, the peregrinator was his adversary. He said he had travelled long way chasing the man with the determination to take his head and his possession; the flute. As he heard the actual peregrinator had already died from sickness, he had been waiting for Yajiuemon to at least receive the flute the man had left behind.

Of course, being told such a story out of nowhere, Yajiuemon could not gullibly believe what the young samurai said and give up the flute. As a response, Yajiuemon told the young samurai that he needed to know who he was and the reason why he saw the peregrinator as his adversary before he would even going to consider his request. The young samurai, however, hardly provided any of the information that Yajiuemon asked for and pressed him further to hand over the flute. Therefore, Yajiuemon became even more skeptical and suspected that the man was just making up the story in an attempt to take the valuable flute away from him. Thus, Yajiuemon rejected him and said that he would never give up the flute until the samurai revealed his identity, as well as the story behind his revengeful act against the peregrinator. As he firmly refused to give up the flute, the young samurai’s face suddenly became stern.

“If you insist on keeping the flute, I have another plan.” As he said this, the young samurai moved his hand to the grip of his sword. Sensing that there would be not much point in talking, Yajiuemon also prepared for a fight. After exchanging two or three words, both drew and crossed the swords. The young samurai dropped to the ground bleeding profusely.

“The flute will haunt you.” he said with his last breath.

Not really knowing why he had to killed this man, Yajiuemon stood there for a while feeling like he was dreaming, but first things first, he reported the incident to the authority before doing anything else. As it happened in such a circumstance where he had to defend himself, Yajiuemon was not blamed for murder and the case was closed. Of course, the identity of both the peregrinator and the young samurai remained unknown.

Although he had somehow escaped from being accused of killing the young Samurai, the incident created a further problem for Yajiuemon. Because the news circulated around his clan and had reached to the lord, there came a direct order to present the famous flute in front of him. If it was just for the lord to have a look at, so there would be no problem, but Yajiuemon knew that the lord’s concubine loved the flute, and had been going around buying all the well made, expensive flutes with very little regard to their prices. If he agreed to the order and presented it, it was most likely that the flute would be confiscated in excuse of lord’s desire and put into her collection. Being a subordinate however, of course there was simply no way that Yajiuemon could decline such an order. Yajiuemon did not know what to do, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not simply convince himself to take the risk of losing the flute. If risking giving it up was not an option,

young Yajiuemon could think of only one choice left for him. He took the flute and left the house. He abandoned the job that his family inherited for generations, all because of his obsession towards the flute.

The country's situation was quite different from that of a while ago. Regional feudal lords were not as wealthy as before and running a clan was a financially constricted business. Therefore, it was not like as one left a clan, he could simply join another. There were hardly any new positions available at any clans. Thus, Yajiuemon had not any other options but to become an outcast and a vagabond around the country. He crossed Kyushu, traveled through Chuugoku, and reached Kyoto, Osaka, constantly seeking a temporary job. As Yajiuemon was living such a life, he became ill, he was robbed, and with a string of other misfortunes, the once a proud samurai became a homeless beggar on the street. Meanwhile, he lost all his possessions, small and big, yet he had not given up the flute. As he came to wonder the northern part of Japan, and was playing the flute under the moon light that night, he happened to be found by Yajiri Kichibee.

He took a big sigh before continuing. "As the peregrinator said, I believe this flute brings bad luck. I have no idea who it originally belonged to, but only seeing the people I know, the peregrinator died on the street, the young samurai who came to take the flute was killed by my hand, and I, myself have fallen into such a disgraceful state. When I think of what could happen in the future, I become terrified. There were countless times when I thought about either selling it, or breaking it in half. But I have never managed to gather enough courage to let go of it, and even less so to destroy it. Thus, I am still holding on to it, knowing that it may inflict more misfortunes on me."

Kichibee drew a sigh sympathetically. He had heard similar mysterious stories about swords, but never thought of encountering such a story about a flute. Being young, however, Kichibee quickly denied himself from believing the whole story. He suspected that the homeless man was just making up such a strange story out of fear of the flute being taken away from him. Therefore, Kichibee reproved him and said "Even if the flute is such a masterpiece and it is hard to let go of, I do not really understand why you do not give it up knowing that it has brought you such a string of misfortunes."

"That, I do not understand either." Yajiuemon replied. "I tried to throw it away, but I couldn't. I am possessed by it. I guess that is the spell that the flute casted on me. I have been continuously tormented by it for nearly 10 years now."

"Continuous torment..." Kichibee murmured to himself, as he tried to take in the heavy meaning of Yajiuemon's words.

"It is something I should not tell to others, and even if I did, probably no one would believe me." after saying this, Yajiuemon fell silent.

Kichibee could not say anything either. There was only the sound of insects around. The moon light was cast on the river bank, which looked white and cold as if the area was frosted over.

"It is already dawn." Yajiuemon said, after a while looking up at the sky.

"It's already dawn." Kichibee repeated in a parrot like fashion. Then he realized it, and stood up.

Chapter three

Kichibee left the man at daybreak and went back home. However, with the sunset, he reappeared back at the river bank. Only this time, he was dressing light and wearing a mask. He slowly sneaked into the shack as if it was a scene from a famous Kabuki play called *Daianji Zutsumi*, where a samurai disguised as an outcast sneaks into a house at night to take revenge against his father's adversary. The reason he came back was the flute. Kichibee was so obsessed with it, and was desperate to make it his own. Judging from the story, Kichibee was quite convinced that Yajiuemon would not relinquish the flute easily. Therefore, he resolved to take a drastic measure. He decided there was no other way but to kill him, and rob the flute in the dead of night. Of course, he argued with his conscience several times before he reached to his final decision. But his urge to possess the flute was too strong to be subdued, and he became willing to take whatever the measure necessary.

"Although Yajiuemon used to be samurai, he is now a homeless outcast. If I kill him without being seen, no one would know and there would be no trial." thought Kichibee, as he doubted no more and decided to continue with the plan. Thus, he went back home to get ready, waited until the night fall, then came back to the river bank.

Kichibee was still not entirely sure if Yajiuemon was telling the truth, but according to the story, he must be quite a skilled sword man. It seemed he was not carrying a weapon then, but Kichibee still thought he had to be very careful. Yes, he had completed basic sword training, yet Kichibee was quite young and, above all, lacked experience. Of course, he had never had a real fight with a real sword. Despite the advantage that he would have from the planned cunning attack at night and taking the man by surprise, he still felt the need to take extra precautions. Therefore, he cut out a bamboo on the way, sharpened the end and made a spear. He carried it with him and cautiously approached the shack. When he quietly parted the tall grass, trying not to make the noise from rubbing leaves, and observed the area, there was no sound of the flute. The straw rug at the entrance was drawn and it was all quiet.

Kichibee was convinced that there was no movement inside and he was just about to make his move. That is when he heard a low growl came from the shack, and it gradually started to become louder. It seemed Yajiuemon was in distress, however, it did not sound like he was suffering from pain or sickness, it sounded like he was having a terrible nightmare. Kichibee hesitated a little because it reminded him what Yajiuemon said: "I have been continuously tormented by it for nearly ten years." and he felt a little eerie.

As he was listening to it holding his breath, the growling inside the shack intensified and Yajiuemon tumbled out with a thrust that almost tore the straw rug at the entrance. As he emerged from the terrifying dream, he gave a big sigh of relief and looked around. As this happened so suddenly, Kichibee had no time to hide himself. Unfortunately there was a nice moon that night and his figure standing with a bamboo spear was clearly visible in front of Yajiuemon. When this happened, it was Kichibee who could not remain calm. As he had been seen, there was no turning back. He re-gripped the bamboo spear and thrust it forward with the determination to take Yajiuemon down, but he swiftly moved sideways, grabbed

the spear and pulled it hard. The force made Kichibee to lose his balance. He stumbled a little and fell on his knees. As Yajiuemon's movement exceeded his expectation further, Kichibee lost his composure even more. He abandoned the spear and went for his sword.

"No, wait..." Yajiuemon quickly stopped him.

"You are here for the flute, aren't you?"

Kichibee was stunned by his words, and hesitated for a good few seconds. Yajiuemon continued calmly. "If you are so obsessed with this flute, I will give it to you." he then took the flute out and handed it to Kichibee, who was still kneeling down quietly on the ground.

"Do not forget the story I told you. Beware of the misfortunes that may befall on you." Yajiuemon said.

"Thank you." Kichibee stuttered.

"Now, go home before anyone sees us." he chided Kichibee.

The way things had turned out, Kichibee could not do anything but to obey him. He took the flute and stood up awkwardly. He parted from Yajiuemon with a silent, but proper bow.

On the way back home, Kichibee suddenly felt pangs of regret and remorse. On one hand, he was delighted and very content that he had finally managed to get the rare masterpiece in his possession, but on the other, he was ashamed of his deed. As Yajiuemon gave up the flute straight away, the serious crime he had in mind: homicide and robbery, further made him feel strong remorse. He thought it was fortunate that he did not end up killing Yajiuemon after all. It could have been worse, and he also felt a little relieved.

As he thought about it while walking, he concluded that he should visit the man again at dawn and at least offer an apology for his unmannerly deed, along with some sort of compensation for the flute. Once he had decided this, he walked back home quickly and went to bed. Kichibee could not sleep much that night somehow. He waited restlessly, and at daybreak, he was on his way back to see Yajiuemon again. In his chest pocket, there were three gold coins tacked in. Since it was early, the river bank was still quite misty and he heard cormorants crying somewhere. As he walked through the reeds and came to the shack, Kichibee was flabbergasted. Ishimi Yajiuemon was dead in front of the shack. Both his hands were holding the bamboo spear that Kichibee had left behind and it was pierced through his throat.

The following spring, Kichibee got married. The marriage went well, and the couple had two boys. Time passed without anything much happening. On the seventh autumn after the incident however, he had to commit a suicide by conducting seppuku because of a mishap at work.

He started preparing for his final moment at home and asked the prosecutor permission to play the flute for the last time. He was granted his wish. The flute was the one he had received from Ishimi Yajiuemon. Kichibee played calmly. It was when the first piece of music was about to end that the flute emitted a strange noise and suddenly broke in half. Surprised and intrigued, he picked up the broken pieces and looked inside. There were the following words carved inside the flute.

“It ends after nine hundred and ninety years” “By Hamanushi”

As Kichbee studied Shidoo, a religion that originated in Japan, he knew about Hamanushi. Muraji Hamanushi was from Owari, the current Aichi prefecture. He was the person who introduced the flute to our dynasty, and also respected as the founder of Shidoo.

It was Tempoo 9 (1839) that year, and if you calculated back, nine hundred and ninety years before was the first year of Kashoo, which was in the reign of Emperor Nintoku. In other words, it was four years after Shoowa 12: the year Hamanushi first played the flute at the grand palace. Hamanushi was a flute player, but at the beginning of his career, he also crafted the instrument he played. The fact that his name was carved on this flute indicated that it was most likely his creation. The mystery was that the words were carved inside the instrument rather than on the surface. How he managed to carve his name along with these words in Chinese characters inside the narrow instrument was beyond Kichibee. What was even more mysterious though, was that the nine hundred and ninetieth year seemed to indicate that year. Did Hamanushi decide the life of the instrument by creating it?

As Kichibee recalled all what had happened, the strange story that Ishimi Yajiuemon told him did not sound like a lie. It seemed that the flute that possessed a mysterious dark power brought various misfortunes as it passed through the hands of the owners and finally, with the demise of the last owner, it ended its nine hundred and ninety-year life. Kichibee was very mystified by this, but at the same time, realized and accepted that dying with this flute was an unavoidable fate brought upon him. He confessed all the secrets relating to the flute to the prosecutor and then calmly ended his life.

The story of the flute circulated around and the strangeness of it struck people. Those who were close to Kichibee in the clan got together and discussed with his family and relatives. They repaired the broken flute and buried it at the location that seemed to be where Ishini Yajiuemon had committed a suicide. The head stone read “The burial mound of the flute”. It was there till the late Meiji period (1868-1912) however, the area flooded twice afterwards, and I have heard it is now nowhere to be seen.

THE FLUTE MOUND

by

Okamoto Kido

I

There is a ghost story told in the northern province from which I come, but before telling it, I should like to recount an episode from “Mimibukuro” (“The Bag of Ears”), the essays by Negishi Yasumori, a high-ranking official of the Edo period. This is one of the stories he tells. When the clan of Kanamori Yorikane in the province of Mino was eliminated under government orders, one of the elders of the clan asked to be allowed to commit ritual suicide, or seppuku. Turning to the official investigator, the old man explained that he was atoning for the crime of his family by killing himself, and that his action should not be thought untoward; he was fulfilling his long-cherished ambition as a samurai. Yet the old man was hiding something. Once on a journey as a young man, he had lodged at an inn where a mountain priest was staying, who in the course of their conversation had shown him his sword. Being an especially fine sword the young man had coveted it eagerly for himself and begged to buy it for its actual worth, but because it was a family treasure this had not been possible. Being unable to abandon his desire so easily, next morning he accompanied the priest on his way, and on reaching a lonely pine grove, had suddenly struck and attacked the priest, making off with the sword. This had happened a very long time ago, and he had been fortunate to have lived through the intervening years without being found out by anyone. Even now he knew his crime to have been a grave one, and feeling it only natural therefore that he should kill himself, he slit his belly in the customary manner. Now the story I have to tell is not so dissimilar. Indeed, I hope you will find it even more eery and extraordinary.

In my province, noh chanting and acting have been popular since olden times, with numerous teachers of those traditional arts, and consequently a number of the local samurai who learn chanting (as one would expect of a samurai), as well as noh dancing, and the flute and *tsutsumi* drums. One such performer was a young samurai of nineteen by the rather old-fashioned name of Yagara Kihei, who served as one of his lord's horsemen. His father had also been called Kihei, and had died from an illness in the summer of his son's sixteenth year. As an only son who had just celebrated his coming of age, he succeeded to his father's name without changing it. Over the four years since then, the younger Kihei had carried out his duties without relapse or cause for complaint, taken proper care of his mother and kin, and was planning eventually to take a wife when he turned twenty the coming year.

In accordance with the custom of the province as I have mentioned, Kihei had been learning to play the flute from before the time that he had grown his samurai topknot. In another province he might have drawn some mild reproach, but in this province those graced with artistic abilities were regarded as samurai even more than those without artistic ability, and he was never criticised for his beloved hobby.

In former times it was popularly believed that people born at the time of the old New Year's (that is to say, between late January and late February depending on the year) would have well-aligned teeth which suited them to playing the flute. Since Kihei had been born at such a time, he was naturally rather good at the instrument, had been praised for his abilities as a child, idolised indeed by his parents, and had never abandoned the hobby.

One autumn night in the first year of the Tenpo era (or 1830 in the Western calendar), Kihei went out of his house to enjoy the autumn moon, discretely taking his flute along with him. He made his way through the dew to a riverbank outside the castle

wall, a place where the reeds and pampas grass danced in the moonshine. Kihei played his flute along the path that he trod, far along the bank. In the direction he was heading could be heard the sound of another flute.

Thinking that as the sound of his own flute did not cross water, there must be someone else somewhere playing their flute, he paused to listen for a moment. The sound was clearly audible along the riverbank. Although the player was not unskilled, it was the undoubted superiority of his instrument that made Kihei wish to know who was playing it.

It is not only a deer in autumn that is drawn by the sound of a flute. Kihei too was sucked mysteriously along the path of his longing, as the sound emanated from betwixt the pampas grass. Just as Kihei had been drawn out of his house by the autumn moon, he wondered whether or not there might be some other dew-drenched soul making music; perhaps it was something more sinister. Creeping along the verge of the grass, he found a low hut bound together with torn matting. It was humpbacked in shape, the abode Kihei realised of a beggar.

Kihei felt somewhat surprised to have been drawn to such a lowly dwelling by the sound of a flute. He halted suspiciously.

“This must surely be a fox or a racoon out to trick me.”

Like the samurai he was, Kihei suspected that a fox or an otter was playing some fiendish trick on him. He reached for the precious family Nagasone *kotetsu* dagger at his waist, and prepared himself to despatch the creature with a single stroke at the moment anything unusual happened. Beating a path through the thick grass, he came to the hut's entrance, where a man was sitting playing a flute.

“Hello there,” he called out. The man stopped playing, then relaxing his concentrated posture, looked up at Kihei.

By the light of the moon, the man seemed to have the unmistakable manner of a beggar. He was twenty-seven or twenty-eight years in age, and yet Kihei could tell at one glance that he was probably not the kind of vagabond or beggar to make his home in a hovel like this one. He spoke again.

“You play the flute?”

“I do,” the man answered in a low voice.

“You make a fine sound. I just had to find out where it was coming from.” Kihei smiled as he spoke.

The man seemed to relax a little as he noticed that his visitor too held a flute in his hands. He spoke more intimately.

“I do apologise for my mediocre playing.”

“Not at all. Listening to you from back there, I could tell you were an experienced player, but if you don’t mind, I would like to have a look at that flute of yours.”

“I just use it for my personal pleasure, but you are welcome to look at it.”

Without showing any apparent objection, he respectfully placed the flute on some pampas grass, gesturing to Kihei to take it.

The man did not seem like a mere beggar. Kihei guessed that he was probably a masterless samurai who had got into trouble over some trifling matter, and he acknowledged the gift with heightened respect.

“This is most kind of you.”

Kihei took the flute, and held it against the light of the moon. Then, after one failed attempt, he managed to get a sound out of it, although it was not a rich one. Kihei realised that the only person capable of playing such a remarkable instrument was its owner. His own flute, although of course of similar design, could hardly be compared for quality. Curious as to how the man had come to possess such an instrument, Kihei

gave back the flute and, making a space for himself in the grass, sat down beside his new companion.

“How long is it since you came here?”

“About half a year.”

Kibei pressed him again. “Where were you before then?”

“Not unlike here, although never for so long. I have been wandering from one place to another, from Chugoku to Kyoto and Osaka, along the Ise and Konoe roads.”

Kibei inquired abruptly, “I suppose you are of a samurai family.”

The man was silent. Perceiving that the man was unable to answer to the contrary, Kibei asked him again.

“You must be a man of character for such a fine flute to have passed into your hands. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like you to play it for me.”

The man said nothing as before, prompting Kibei to ask for a third time, before replying at last with some reluctance.

“This flute has been a curse on me.”

II

The man was a samurai from Shikoku called Iwami Iyajieimon, who like Kibei had enjoyed playing the flute since his childhood.

One evening in the spring of his nineteenth year, Iyajieimon had been on his way back from a visit to the temple of Bodaiji, when he discovered someone in the conventional dress of a pilgrim to the eighty-eight temples of Shikoku who had fallen down in a rice field. On closer inspection, the man appeared to be of about forty, and in the agonies of some illness. Iyajieimon made him drink some fresh water from nearby, and proceeded to treat him with some medicine from a little box. Yet the man only got worse, eventually breathing his last.

The pilgrim was extremely grateful for Iyajieimon's kindness: that a samurai he had never met before should treat him in this way, and that he was ashamed he could not repay his deep gratitude. Feeling it was the very least he could do, he produced a flute from his girdle, which he presented to Iyajieimon in its bag as a token of his gratitude.

"There is no flute like this in the whole world, but be sure to take good care of it lest you end up like me."

So he died with this riddle on his lips. Iyajieimon had wanted to know the man's name and birthplace, but the man had shaken his head and said nothing. Supposing that in the man's silence lay an answer to the riddle, Iyajieimon took the body and had it buried at his own temple of Bodaiji.

The flute bequeathed to Iyajieimon by the mysterious pilgrim was indeed an instrument of incomparable value. Iyajieimon was highly suspicious as to how it had come into the man's possession, but also pleased to have acquired this great treasure by what only could be accounted a chance happening, and he kept great care of it. Some half a year later, Iyajieimon was again on his way to Bodaiji when he reached the paddy field where he had previously discovered the pilgrim, and found waiting for him there a young samurai, who also appeared to be on a journey.

The young samurai approached him and cried out, "Are you Iwami Iyajieimon?"

When Iyajieimon said that he was, it transpired that the young samurai was an enemy of the dying pilgrim from whom Iyajieimon had received the flute. He said that he had come all the way to kill the pilgrim and take his flute, but since the former was impossible if he was already dead, it was the flute he coveted above all else, and it was for this reason he had been lying in wait.

The young man was brandishing a stick from a bush to make his point, but Iyajieimon could not passively hand over the flute. Turning to the young man, he

politely inquired as to who he was, where he came from and what kind of grudge he had borne against the pilgrim, since without this information he was unable to exchange formal greetings. Yet the young man was not forthcoming, and would only pursue Iyajieimon with his brash request for the flute.

Iyajieimon's suspicions had been well aroused by now, and he maintained his diplomatic approach in order to avoid letting go of the precious flute. Determined as he was to resist all efforts to hand it over so long as he remained ignorant of the man's origins and motive, it was the young samurai whose complexion altered.

He was ready to fight, he said, and took his sword by the hilt. Iyajieimon saw that it was useless to argue, and also prepared to fight. After two or three words, the two swords had joined, and the mysterious young samurai was covered with blood, prostrate before Iyajieimon's eyes.

"That flute is a curse on you," the man uttered, and died. Having no idea why he had killed the man, Iyajieimon stood for a moment in a dreamlike state, but presently recovered himself. Since, as I have suggested, Iyajieimon was above reproach in the matter, only

the man could take responsibility for his death. Of course he had no idea of the identity of

the pilgrim who had given him the flute, nor of this young samurai.

Yet although the death of the young man was settled, there was still one more little difficulty to surmount, which was that the incident would have to be brought before the local domain. If his lord got to hear what had happened, he would be sure to ask to see the flute. That would not be a particular problem if it were just a matter of seeing the instrument, but if one of the lord's retinue took a liking to the flute, Iyajieimon knew

for sure they would get him something nice in return without asking its real worth. If he were to hand over the flute in perfunctory obedience to his lord's wishes, there was a danger that it would be snatched by some court lackey, and there was nothing he as a mere subject could do to refuse his lord's wishes. Iyajieimon was perturbed about what to do; whichever way he looked at the matter, he could not bear to hand over the flute.

There was nothing else he could do. Being still young, he absconded with the flute in hand, and in his dedication to the instrument, threw away his family register on which were written the names of his ancestors.

Unlike in former times, the lords of this age were hard men, which made it most unusual for a samurai to be able to seek reemployment. Iyajieimon had little choice but to live the life of a masterless samurai with his flute. He went to Kyushu, then on to Chugoku, and through Kyoto and Osaka, and it was while eking out a bare livelihood in this way that he became ill and fell on hard times. One misfortune piled upon another, and the samurai Iwami Iyajieimon eventually sank into the life of a beggar.

Despite the extremities to which he was reduced, the one thing with which he would never part was his flute, and thus it was that he came to the north country, where he caught the ear of Yagara Kihei with the immeasurably beautiful sound of his flute.

It was at this point in his tale that Iyajieimon paused for breath.

“Just as the pilgrim warned, there does seem to be a kind of curse on the flute. I don't know who owned it previously, and even if I did, the pilgrim who had it before me died on the roadside, and the samurai who tried to take it from me I killed. This is the state to which the flute has reduced me. You can imagine the terrible decision I have been faced with ... should I sell the flute, or break it in two and throw it away? How many times have I gritted myself for the inevitable, when I knew that to sell it was

hateful, however easy, to throw it away even worse. The more deeply I reflect on my misfortune, the more I cling to it.”

Kihei also was breathless as he listened. Of course he had heard tales like this to do with swords before, but he had never heard such an incredible story about a flute.

Young as he was, though, he was soon raising questions in his mind. No doubt the poor beggar was afraid of other people coveting his flute, and had deliberately made up a strange-sounding story when in fact nothing of the sort had happened.

He taunted the man saying, “However bitter a tale, and whatever your misfortune, I can’t understand why you don’t just get rid of it.”

“I can’t understand either,” said Iyajieimon. “Even if I do try to get rid of it, I cannot. Is that just my bad luck or is it the curse? I will still be grieving over this matter in ten years’ time.”

“Still grieving ...?”

“What I have said is not for others to hear. If I repeat it, people will think I am lying.”

Iyajieimon was silent once more. Kihei said nothing either. Only the sound of the insects could be heard. In the meadow the light of the moon shone white against the dew.

“The night is getting on,” said Iyajieimon, looking up at the sky.

“Yes, it is,” Kihei repeated like a parrot, and rose to look.

III

Detaching himself from his companion, Kihei went out on to the meadow again for a moment, nimbly donning his mask. He crept by the little hut, just like in the Daianji temple bank scene in the kabuki drama *Katakiuchi tsuzure no nishiki* (“Vendetta by a samurai in rags”).

Kihei wanted that flute, but from what the man had said, it didn't look as if he was going to get it by asking politely, and so he decided that there was no other way but to steal it. Of course he had hesitated a number of times before coming to that conclusion, but whichever way he looked at it, it was the flute he wanted. The man may have been a samurai, but he was after all a homeless beggar. He would just knock him off on the sly, no questions asked. Such villainous thoughts gradually took hold of him, and it wasn't long before he decided to return to his home and wait for morning before coming back again to attack.

He couldn't tell whether Iyajieimon had been lying or not, but if what he had said was true, he was a man of no small talents. He didn't seem to be armed as such, but, thought Kihei, neither was he careless about his appearance. Kihei for his part had been thoroughly trained in the martial skills, although he was still young and had never got into a serious fight before. Even if he were to pounce on Iyajieimon and kill him in a cowardly fashion, he would still need to make the necessary preparations. Along the way he cut a branch from a bamboo grove out of which he crafted a stave, with which he poked his way quietly through the grass, so as not to make a sound. He checked the hut first. The playing had stopped. He drew aside the mat at the hut's entrance; inside was dark.

Or so he thought, but inside could be heard a low groan, which got louder. Iyajieimon seemed to be in pain. Kihei hesitated a moment. He felt uneasy as he remembered Iyajieimon saying that he would suffer ten years on account of that flute.

Kihei held his breath, and out of the amplifying groans a voice struggled to assert itself. Iyajieimon scratched aside the mat door, and rolled out out the hut. He seemed to have wakened from some terrible dream, and his breathing relaxed as he looked around.

Kihei had no time to hide himself. The moon had yet to set, dramatically exposing Kihei before Iyajieimon's very eyes with his bamboo thrust forward.

Kihei was in a fluster. Found out like this, there was no escape. He lunged at Iyajieimon with his stave. Iyajieimon dodged the blow with alacrity and yanked Kihei down sharply by the tip of the stave. Kihei lurched forward instinctively onto his knees.

His opponent was unexpectedly strong, which perturbed Kihei even more. He discarded the stave and reached for his sword, at which Iyajieimon cried out.

"Just a moment Does that flute matter to you so much?"

In the light of the stars, Kihei had nothing to say. Iyajieimon folded his arms and hesitated for a moment before saying softly.

"If you really want it so badly, I will let you have it."

He entered the hut, and returned with the flute, which he handed in silence to the kneeling Kihei.

"Don't forget what I told you. Take care not to bring misfortune on yourself."

"I am deeply obliged," stuttered Kihei.

"Go home quickly before anyone sees you," cautioned Iyajieimon.

Kihei had no choice but to obey. He stood up almost mechanically, cradling the flute, and bowing formally without a word, he departed.

On his way back, Kihei was stricken with a deep sense of shame and remorse. Whilst both relieved and overjoyed to have the beautiful instrument in his hands, at the same time he felt guilty at his shameful behaviour that evening; extreme remorse as if he had actually robbed and killed the man welled up within him, which is not to say that he was at least able to take comfort in the fact he had not killed Iyajieimon.

As he waited for morning, Kihei returned swiftly to the place from which he had set out the previous evening. There were three gold coins in his pocket. The autumnal

morning mist had yet to rise along the river bank. From somewhere the sound of a wild goose could be heard.

Making his way through the pampas grass toward the hut, Kihei was suddenly taken by surprise. Iwami Iyajieimon was lying dead in front of the hut. He was holding in both hands the bamboo stave that Kihei had discarded, having used it to cut his throat.

The spring of the next year Kihei took a wife, who produced two sons, and they lived happily together without incident until seven autumns following the events of this story, when he was forced to commit suicide due to some lapse in his official duties. Having made his final preparations at his house, he turned to the official supervising the punishment to ask if he might play one final tune on his flute, and the wish was granted.

The flute was the one he had been given by Iwami Iyajieimon. Kihei played to his heart's content, but when it sounded as if the piece was about to end, the flute issued a strange sound and suddenly broke in two. When the puzzled Kihei tried to put the instrument back together, he found the following words engraved on the inside.

“The end will come in 990 years. Hamanushi.”

Now, being a student of his art, Kihei knew the name of Hamanushi, who in ancient times had first popularised the flute as Owari no Muraji Hamanushi, and was revered as a master of the way. This year being the ninth year of Tenpo, 990 years went back to the first year of Emperor Ninmyo, the fourth year of the Jowa era (or 837), when Hamanushi had entertained the court with his flute playing. Hamanushi was a flute player, who had always made his own flutes for himself to play. In this flute was inscribed Hamanushi's name, and so it was probably made by Hamanushi himself. Yet the words inscribed on the back of the remarkable, slender wooden tube represented something of an enigma.

What was even stranger was why the end should come after 990 years, when the 990th year seemed to correspond to the present. Hamanushi had made the flute and had determined the number of years himself. In retrospect, this story of Iwami Iyajieimon did not appear to be a lie after all. This flute had been mysteriously destined to bring misfortune to one master after another, and with the fall of its final owner the 990 years also would come to an end.

Kihei was not especially surprised to realise that the flute's bad luck would disappear with his own. Turning to the official, he at once confided the mystery of the flute's past, and so committed seppuku.

Everyone who heard this story from the official was struck with wonder. A former friend of Kihei consulted with the family, the broken flute was reassembled and buried in the place on the river bank where Iwami Iyajieimon was thought to have killed himself, and a stone erected with the word *fuezuka* ('the flute mound') inscribed on it. The mound survived into the Meiji era, although has now disappeared without trace due to two great floods.

Fuedzuka

Okamoto Kidô

****blank line**

1

I come from the northern part of this country, and this is but an uncanny story told in that region. Yet, before I start telling it, I feel like presenting an excerpt of a literary work called *Mimibukuro*, written by the noted magistrate Negishi, warden to the region of Hizen and vassal to the distant Edo shogunate. *Mimibukuro*, which tells of a collection of, among others, fantastic and ghost stories, contains this one story in its entirety. When the House of the Kanamori, which held the title of second assistant to the minister of military in the region of Mino, was forfeited of land and dismissed by the shogunate, its chief retainer was sentenced to commit hara-kiri. Facing the official who was there to attest to his death, he declared “I will undertake my master’s guilt, albeit innocent, for this is the cherished death of a samurai. However, to tell you the truth, there is a crime I committed and have hidden until now. Once, when traveling, I put up at an inn with an ascetic mountain monk who was versed in the ways of the martial arts. There he told me of this long sword, which he unsheathed and showed me. It was an amazing blade, inscribed with the name of a very famous sword smith and thus I became eagerly interested in it. I pleaded with him, offering to pay a considerable sum of money for it, but my request was denied. He told me the sword was a family inheritance. However, I couldn’t stop thinking about it and then, the next morning, I walked along with the monk, waiting for a place empty of people. Then, finally, when nearing a pine forest, I surprised him with a deadly blow. The cut took his life, and I his sword. After that I just fled. This is long past and, fortunately, no

one has ever learned the truth about it, what has granted me living throughout the years. However, thinking of it now, the crime itself was serious indeed and I do deserve this end.” Having said these words, he accepted the honorable death. The story I will be telling here resembles this previous one to some degree, but it is more complex and eerie than that.

In my native land noh songs and noh farces have been popular since long ago. Consequently, there are many artistic masters there. Obviously thanks to that, there are many warriors among the samurai who practice singing and even those who perform dancing in plays. There are also the ones who play the flute and the ones who play the hand drum. One of these people was a man by the name of Yagara Kihee. The name sounds somewhat old, but at the time he was a young escort samurai, only nineteen years old. His father, who was also called Kihee, had fallen ill and died in his son’s sixteenth summer. That is why the only son, who had just attended the ceremony of manhood, took his father’s name and promptly succeeded him as the head of the family. Four calendar years had passed since then, and the young Kihee of the second generation not only fared well in his job, but also sustained a good reputation. His mother and kin were content and he wished, inwardly, to take a woman for wife when he turned twenty years old.

As mentioned before, many arts were part of the land’s custom and Kihee had his portion of it, learning and playing the flute since boyhood. If it were in another place, he would possibly be accused of being effeminate. Yet, in this province, the ones who were experienced in arts were regarded to be closer to what a samurai should be, rather than the ones who lacked artistic talent. Therefore, there was not anyone who would scold him for constantly playing the flute.

Since former times there is a popular saying that children born closely after New Year would have more time to grow up,¹ developing an even set of teeth, and thus being more fitting for playing the flute. Being born in the second calendar month, Kihee fulfilled this requisite and, maybe thanks to it, was quite good at flute playing. When still small, people complimented him on it and his parents were proud of him. Hence he never disposed of this one indulgence.

It happened in an autumn night of Tenpô 1 (1830). Carried away by a magnificent moon, Kihee left his home. In his hands, a treasured flute. Stepping on the night dew, he reached the riverside outside his master's properties, where pampas grass and reed bud spread white under the bright moon. There one could hear the nearby insects' song. While playing his flute, Kihee walked far down the lower part of the riverbank. Soon, he could also hear the tone of a flute crossing his path.

This is not my flute reverberating on the water surface. I am sure someone else is also playing, Kihee thought to himself. Straining his ears for a moment on the night riverbank he could clearly hear it: the sound was coming from far away. The flutist was not bad, Kihee could tell. But not only that, he could also tell that flute appeared to be no common one, standing out from others. Thus, he became very interested in the owner of such an exquisite instrument.

Autumn is the deer mating season. Knowing that, hunters take advantage of the doe with a flute that imitates the stags' mating cry. But this night it was not only the doe that were attracted by flute notes. Soul completely absorbed by the sound he

¹ According to the *age reckoning* used in old-time Japan, newborns would start life at one year old, having each passing New Year the addition of one year to their age. Thus, different from the ones born closely before New Year, children born closely after it would have an entire year to grow up before becoming two years old; as a result, their growth would be regarded as a more complete one.

appreciated so much, Kihee went as if dragged to its source: the river's lower reaches, where the flute sound leaked through the thickly grown pampas grass. Privately he thought it would be sheer coincidence that someone else would, just like him, be led outside home by the moon in the very same night. That someone else, as well as he, would be getting wet with night dew while relishing the flute. Meanwhile, he walked stealthily, hiding behind bushes, peering out to discover a poor and round-shaped hut, made with bamboo and torn straw mat. By looking at the small hut, he knew whoever was there had to be homeless, surely a beggar.

Believing it extremely unlikely that the wonderful timbre was coming from that place, Kihee stood still where he was, wearing a mistrustful look.

"This is not possible! Some fox, raccoon dog or any other magical creature must be trying to play a trick on me."

He feared that a fox or maybe an otter, knowing of his liking for flute music, would be up to some mischief. However, Kihee was a samurai. On his waist rested a piece of his family inheritance: a sword crafted and signed by the great sword maker Nagasone Kotetsu. Should any shape changing animal cross his way, he would only need to get rid of it with but one sword blow. Saying these words to himself, he summoned up his courage and pushed his way through the bush and overgrown pampas grass, toward the small hut. When in front of the entrance, he lifted the straw mat to find a man sitting on the ground playing a flute.

"Well, well," Kihee said.

The man stopped playing the moment he was addressed. Then, adopting an attentive attitude, looked up to stare at Kihee.

Bathed by the moonlight, Kihee could see the man had the unmistakable appearance of a beggar. As for the age, the man seemed no older than twenty seven or twenty eight. Yet, Kihee had a feeling that that man was somehow different from the average beggars and homeless people who wandered in that region. So, of his own accord, he decided to adopt a more polite posture toward the man.

“So, you are the one playing the flute.”

“Yes,” the man answered in a low voice.

“I heard its clear sound and appreciated it. That is why I came here,” Kihee said with a smile.

A quick glimpse told the man that Kihee was also carrying a flute in his hands. That seemed to ease him a trifle and so his words too became warmer.

“Oh, but I am rather unskillful when playing my music. It is even embarrassing.”

“Not in the least. Judging from what I heard a while ago, you must have practiced it quite hard. By the way, would you mind showing me your flute?”

“Oh, but this one I use is nothing really much. It would not be something deserving of your attention,” the man answered.

However, he did not show any other sign of refusal. Making use of the nearest springing foliage, he carefully cleaned the flute, and reverentially offered it to Kihee.

Inwardly, Kihee reflected. *These are definitely not the manners of a common beggar. I wonder if this man was once a samurai and, by some particular reason, lost his master's favor and became a wanderer, descending into poverty in the meanwhile.* Still bearing that in mind, Kihee respectfully accepted the man's offer.

“So I will have a look.”

After receiving the flute, he held it against the moonlight. When done contemplating it, he tentatively blew the flute. Its tone was no ordinary thing. It was indeed an unmatched, exceptional instrument. For this reason, he was becoming more and more convinced that the man was not an ordinary person. Surely Kihee's flute was a very decent one, but it could not be compared in the least to the other man's. So he felt eager to learn why that man would have such an instrument and how had he put his hands onto it. Compelled by his curiosity, Kihee smoothed some grass down and sat next to the man while returning him his flute.

"Since when have you been here?"

"I came but half a month ago."

"And where were you before that?" Kihee added to his inquiry.

"For some personal matters, I have not settled for long anywhere. From the Chûgoku region onwards, I have passed through Kyoto, Osaka, Iseji, Ômiro... It is from place to place that I have been wandering."

Abruptly, Kihee inquired "You must be a samurai, I wonder."

The man fell silent. In this situation, the lack of a negative answer could only mean acknowledgment, so Kihee moved even closer to the man and continued:

"There must be indeed a particular reason for you to be roaming around while in possession of such an amazing instrument. If it does not bother you, would you mind telling me what that is?"

The man still held his silence; however, as Kihee persistently urged an answer from him, he reluctantly mouthed a few words.

"I am cursed by this flute."

The man's name was Iwami Yajiemon, and he was a samurai from Shikoku. Just like Kihee, he had taken a liking for flute playing during childhood, keeping it to that day. The story Yajiemon decided to tell had happened on a spring evening, when he was nineteen. He was returning from a visit to his family temple when he saw a collapsed Shikoku pilgrim in a deserted road that crossed a rice field. Unable to overlook him, he decided to approach and check on the man. He was near his forties and seemed to be severely suffering from some painful disease. Yajiemon then brought fresh water from a nearby spring and made the man drink it. He did what he could to take good care of the man; he even made the man chew on some remedy he had stored in his own medicine case. Yet, the man's suffering only worsened and he passed away at last. Before dying, however, the pilgrim felt extremely grateful for Yajiemon's kindness. So he gathered whatever energy he still had left and said: "You took such gentle care of a perfect stranger like me, my young samurai lord, that there is no means for me to express my gratefulness or repay my debt to you. I know it is but a great discourtesy, but I wish to offer you this gift as a token of my gratitude nonetheless." As he finished these words, he reached for the pouch attached to his waist and took out a flute, which he offered to Yajiemon.

"This flute is a very exceptional one. However, I bid you to be sure you will not have an end like mine."

This enigmatic warning was the last thing the man ever said. Yajiemon still asked the pilgrim for his homeland and name, but all the man could manage to do was to shake his head. Believing this encounter had not happened by simple coincidence, but

thanks to a link in their fates, Yajiemon decided to see to it that the man would have a decent burial, therefore taking him into his own family temple.

The memento left by the mysterious pilgrim from Shikoku was indeed extraordinary a flute. But why would such a man possess this incomparable instrument? Yajiemon found that awfully odd, yet he felt content to have obtained such a treasure, even from a completely unexpected event. He had cherished his new precious possession for a six-month period, when he went to visit his family temple once more. However, as he approached the rice field where he had met the pilgrim from Shikoku, he spotted a young samurai dressed in traveler clothes. The samurai stood on the way as if waiting for him to come.

“Are you Iwami Yajiemon, my lord?” The young samurai asked, while coming closer to Yajiemon.

As he answered positively, the samurai approached him all the more. “According to the rumors,” the samurai began, “you met with a sick pilgrim from Shikoku in this very location some time ago, taking care of him. Not only that, but rumor also has it that you got hold of a flute he carried inside his pouch. What happens is that that pilgrim was a foe of mine. I have been looking for him, asking everywhere about his whereabouts in order to have his head and the flute he possessed. I came from over a great distance, but since illness took him before me, there is not much left for me to do. I have been waiting for you to appear, so that at the very least I could make his flute mine.”

Yajiemon did not have any intentions of obeying meekly someone who came out of the blue, claiming a flute that did not belong to him. Face to face with the samurai, he gave his answer: “Where are you from? What manner of person are you? What kind

of grudge did you bear against the Shikoku pilgrim? For what reasons were you foes? Not before hearing answers to these questions will I take any position.” The young samurai, however, gave him no answer at all. All he did was to urge Yajiemon to hand the flute over.

This situation made suspicion rise inside Yajiemon’s mind. *Is he trying to swindle me, in order to get my precious flute?* Thus, he blurted incisively, “While I am not acquainted with your origins or why you desired to take revenge on your foe, I shall never give this flute away!” At this, all the color was drained from the other man’s face.

The young samurai then placed a hand over his sword hilt. “I have made a resolution to have it. I am prepared for anything,” he declared. Knowing now any form of dialogue was futile, Yajiemon also stood ready. After a few more words of insistence, two blades were simultaneously unsheathed. The samurai whose identity was unknown to Yajiemon tumbled down in front of his very eyes, his garments drenched with blood.

“This cursed flute will be your ruin.”

Saying these last words the samurai lost his life. Without even knowing why, Yajiemon had killed a man. For a brief moment, he felt as if he was part of some sort of dream. Nonetheless, he would have to report what had passed there to some authority. But, as seen previously, Yajiemon was not to be blamed for it; circumstances had compelled him to act as he did, for the young samurai had attempted to kill him first. The intriguing point was that he did not have the slightest idea of who was the Shikoku pilgrim who entrusted him with the flute, or the young samurai who followed him later.

With these thoughts, the killing of the other man was put to rest inside Yajiemon's mind. However, still a difficulty upset him. The knowledge of the incident would spread across his home province. Soon, word of it would reach his master and then he would most likely be ordered to show the flute he now possessed. Yajiemon thought it would not be much of a problem to just show the instrument, but he very well knew that his master's mistress was rather fond of flutes and that she was always greedy to obtain more fineries and goods, regardless of the price she would have to pay for them. So Yajiemon feared that, should he tender his flute carelessly, the mistress would take it away with the pretext that his master wished it. It was not a servant's place to deny an order from his master. He felt uneasy about it, but, at the same time, could not help but think it would be the most regrettable thing to relinquish the flute.

He knew there was no other escape from this situation. So, with the flute cautiously held, the young Yajiemon ran away from his home. Already his new obsession for the one flute had driven him away from even his family inheritance.

Different from days long passed, that was a time when many daimyo faced hardship. Therefore, possibilities of being newly hired were very unlikely to happen, and so Yajiemon could do no better than to merely wander around. He crossed Kyushu, meandered in Chûgoku, wandered in Kyoto and Osaka. Self-consciousness filled him, "In my incessant search for a living, I have been plagued by illness, robbed by men and chased by misfortune. And this is why the respectable samurai once known as Iwami Yajiemon ultimately descended into poverty, becoming nothing more than a beggar."

Yajiemon had already lost or traded away all he formerly possessed, even his pair of a large and a small sword. The only thing he would not leave behind was his flute. That

was how he lived up to now, when he ended up in northern lands. Until the very night when he enjoyed playing tunes on his flute under the moon sky and was unexpectedly overheard and interrupted by Yagara Kihee.

Yajiemon, who had told his own story, paused and sighed.

“The Shikoku pilgrim warned me, and now I do believe there is something like a curse attached to this flute. What do I know about its previous owner? Nothing, apart from the fact that he was a pilgrim from Shikoku and that he perished in the middle of a path in a rice field. And then a traveling samurai appears, intending to have the flute for himself. What happens to him? He is struck dead by me. Finally, as the flute becomes positively mine, I descend to this that you see now. Thinking of these facts altogether, I can only fear it will bring me to my end. I would sooner have it sold or broken and disposed of! I have prepared myself many times to take one of these two actions; however, I cannot help but to think how regretful it would be to sell or, what is even worse, break it. Even knowing it to be my ruin I just cannot relinquish it.”

Kihee also could not listen to this without sighing. It was not the first time he had heard an eerie story of linked fates connected by and to an object, but in the old tales he knew it was always a sword that acted as such an item. Not even once had he heard of a flute serving that purpose, and so he assumed it could not be as he was told.

However, these thoughts were soon chased away by the young Kihee. *This beggar probably fears I desire his flute for myself, thus deliberately forging a tale of make-believe when in reality nothing actually happened.*

“I cannot really comprehend. If you acknowledge the flute to be the source of your own ruin, why can you not yield it? Thinking of the disposal as regrettable should not be enough to prevent you from doing it.” Kihee said in a rebuking tone.

“I cannot comprehend it myself,” Yajimon started. “It does not matter how strongly I resolve to cast it aside, I just cannot do it. I wonder if this is also part of the curse. I have constantly suffered this torment for about ten years now.”

“Constantly...”

“People tend to regard it as a petty talk when they first hear about it. And then, eventually grow to believe it a lie.”

After saying these words Yajimon fell silent. So did Kihee. The only sound one could hear then was the insects’ song. The illumination the moon shed on the river and its surroundings was frost white.

“Already it grows late,” Yajimon suggested while briefly glancing at the sky.

“So it does.”

Kihee echoed. When realization came to him, he stood up.

3

Kihee, who had left the wanderer and returned home, took no longer than an instant to go yet again to the lower reaches of the river. He had only spent time enough at home to cover up his face and get prepared for leaving. Just like one sees in the “Daianji Riverbank” scene, well known from the kabuki play *Vendetta by a Samurai in Rags*, Kihee now walked stealthily, gradually creeping closer and closer to the poor and small bamboo and mat hut.

Kihee could not control himself, every inch of his body screamed for the flute. However, judging by the way the wanderer had talked before, Kihee knew there would be no honest or even friendly means of obtaining the flute. He decided then that the only choice left for him was to commit murder and snatch the desired instrument. Obviously he did not come to this resolution in an easy fashion. Hesitation touched

him many times, but his determination to have the flute overgrew it. Although there was the barrier that was the wanderer, he was no more than a homeless beggar. *If I strike him surreptitiously, everything will conspire in my favor. Should no one see who the murderer is, they will just not concern themselves about a dead beggar.* **With this conclusion in mind, Kihee had taken on a devilish aspect. This is it. I went back home to change outfits and wait for the late hours of night. Now I am here again, ready to assault. I do not know whether this is true or false, but, according to Yajiemon's earlier story, he should be quite skilled an opponent. And though I doubt he has any weapons by now, I must not underestimate him. I do have an average sword skill, yet I am still young in my years. Naturally, I do not have any real fighting experience. Even if I am to try and commit a sneaky murder, careful preparation must be undertaken.** **Considering this, Kihee stopped midway at a bamboo grove and plucked one of the bamboos free, shaping it into a spear. After studying it for a brief moment he held it firmly and resumed his pace, watchful not to rub against any leaves which would provoke unwelcome noise. Quietly, he pushed his way through the vegetation. When he approached the hut, he listened carefully, but no flute sound could be heard. Then, he pushed aside the entrance straw mat to find what he thought was a hut empty of any presence.**

However, almost immediately, the sound of a moan started to fill up the air. As it grew louder, it became clear it was the moaning of incessant suffering, most likely, Yajiemon's. It did not seem to be a moaning born from someone diseased, but from someone who was haunted by a dreadful nightmare. That slightly wavered Kihee's determination. He could not help but remember the story he had been told. For the flute, Yajiemon had suffered continuously for ten long years. Nervousness crept into his being.

Holding his breath, Kihee peeped inside the small hut again. The voice screamed with increasing pain, as if its body violently writhed. Suddenly Yajiemon rose, nearly tearing the straw mat up while pushing the entrance aside and getting out of the hut. And then, as if woken up from the horrifying dream, he took a deep breath and glanced around.

There had been no time at all for Kihee to hide himself. The moon was shining inopportunistically brightly that night, and thus the shape of the man who stood carrying a bamboo spear was plainly discernible to the wanderer's eyes.

Caught in this situation, Kihee instantly panicked. That was it; he had no more time to spare. He steadied his grip on the spear and attempted a single thrust, which was skillfully dodged by Yajiemon. A lot quicker than Kihee, he also managed to seize the spear tip, tugging at it with all his might. Involuntarily Kihee staggered forward, ending up falling to his knees, on top of grass.

Since his opponent was significantly tougher than he had expected, Kihee panicked all the more. Finally, as he gave up on the spear, he attempted to reach his sword, but was stopped halfway through it by Yajiemon's cry.

"No, wait... It is my flute! You are ensorcelled by my flute, are you not?"

Illuminated by the stars, Kihee could not say a word. His hands, stopped in mid-movement, were laid off at last. As he still seemed hesitant, Yajiemon remained silent for a moment.

"If you are ensorcelled this bad, I shall yield it up to you."

Yajiemon then entered the hut, in order to bring the flute. When back outside, he passed it on to Kihee.

"Never forget our previous conversation. Be as careful as possible not to let it bring

disgrace upon you.”

“Thank you much,” Kihee stammered.

“And return to your home swiftly, so that no one sees you.” Yajiemon added, in a tone that spoke of caution.

In the situation he faced, Kihee could do no better than to obey the other man. After accepting the flute in a respectful fashion, Kihee stood up almost as stiff as a machine, offered a silent bow and finally took his leave.

On his way back home Kihee was struck by feelings of shame and regret. It was almost paradoxical. He felt overwhelmed by joy and satisfaction for placing his hands onto an instrument that he believed to be unequaled by any other, yet, on the other hand, he repented his shameful earlier conduct. The knowledge that he had almost committed a serious crime such as a brutal robbery made him suffer with deep remorse, especially because the other had given him the flute so freely. At the very least, he felt very fortunate that he had actually missed his blow and consequently not managed to kill the man.

When dawn comes I will visit the wanderer once again and then I will apologize for my rudeness this night. I will also need to compensate him somehow. But even as Kihee decided to do that and hastened back home, once there he could not sleep at all, knowing only how to be wide awake.

He waited impatiently for dawn, leaving quite early to the place he had been to the previous night. Together with him he took three *koban*, the period gold coins. Over the riverbank the autumnal morning mist still drifted idly. From somewhere nearby, the honking sound of a wild goose could be heard.

Kihee pushed his way through pampas grass to arrive at the hut. There he froze with

shock. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead in front of the hut. Holding the bamboo spear Kihee had discarded the previous night with both hands, Yajiemon had pierced his own throat.

In the spring of the following year, Kihee married a woman and started a harmonious relationship with her. He sired her two sons and spent a peaceful life with his family. However, in the seventh autumn following to the flute incident, he was sentenced to commit hara-kiri, due to faulty conduct when performing his duties. He was already seeing to the last preparations of his death ritual, at his own dwelling, when he turned toward the government official in charge of insuring his death and pleaded for a last wish. Kihee desired to play one last flute song, and had his plea granted.

The flute he used was the one that had once belonged to Iwami Yajiemon. Kihee played it serenely and when he was ready for the last note, the flute suddenly produced a queer sound, splitting up into two. It was an odd incident and, as Kihee tried to mend the two halves, he noticed there were some inscriptions in its inner side:

To end in 990 years. Hamanushi

Since Kihee was a scholar in this field, he knew about the name Hamanushi. Member of the Owari no Muraji, a socially high ranked and respected family, Hamanushi had been the one to spread the flute across our country, being revered as the initiator of this art. The year Kihee was living in was Tenpô 9 (1838). Calculating backward, nine hundred and ninety years before had been the commencement of the Kashô era (848), when Emperor Ninmyô ascended to power. In other words, four years after Jyôwa 12 (844), when Hamanushi had splendidly performed on the flute for the imperial court. In spite of the fact that Hamanushi was a flutist, in his very beginning he also handcrafted his own flutes. And since the flute was inscribed with his name, it was

possible that it had been crafted by his own hands. Surely its outside was exceptional, but why would Hamanushi have engraved the words he did into its narrow inner side? That remained an open question.

Even more mysterious was the meaning of the inscribed words, *To end in 990 years*. It was as if the nine hundred and ninetieth year had just expired, in that very moment. As if Hamanushi had not only created the flute, but also determined its span of life. At that point Kihee started to consider that what Iwami Yajiemon had said about linked fates was actually not a lie. A queer linked fate that flute had. It brought disgrace and misfortune upon every holder it had, only to achieve its final possessor and, at his perishing moment, encounter its own end. The end of a nine hundred and ninety years cycle.

Even as Kihee was overwhelmed by amazement, he suddenly knew he had always shared an unavoidable destiny together with the flute. He then faced the government official once more. And, after revealing all the secrets related to the flute's past to him, accepted the hara-kiri without any measure of resistance.

Since this all was made known by the government official who insured Kihee's death, it caused an odd sentiment in everyone who heard it. And after all those who were closely related to Kihee during his lifetime had had a debate with his bereaved family, a decision was taken. The two split up parts of the flute were to be put together again and buried in the exact location where they believed Iwami Yajiemon had committed suicide. When that was done, they marked the place with a stone atop of it. That stone had two characters carved in its surface. They read *Fuedzuka*, or *The Flute Mound*. And that mound remained by the riverside even after the Meiji era. However, two floods were cause enough to swallow any trace of its existence – or so we are told

today.

The Flute Mound

Okamoto Kidō

1

I am from the north, and this is a ghost story told among my clan. Before I tell it, however, I would like to acquaint you with a passage from *Mimibukuro*, the essays written by the famous Edo magistrate Negishi Hizen no kami. In *Mimibukuro* there is a tale in which a certain chief retainer is ordered to perform seppuku when the house of Mino no Kanamori, second assistant to the Minister of the Military, is abolished by the Shogunate. To the official overseeing his death, the chief retainer says, "I have absolutely nothing of which to be ashamed, as I have taken on the crimes of my master's house in performing seppuku. Indeed, I consider this the ultimate honour as a samurai. Yet, to speak truthfully, I have my own hidden crime. During the travels of my youth, I was staying in a certain inn, where in the course of conversation the itinerant monk with whom I was sharing my lodging drew his sword and showed it to me. As it was an exceptionally fine inscribed blade, I began to covet it deeply. I entreated the monk to allow me to purchase it for a proper price, but he refused on the ground that it was an heirloom. Still I was unable to give up, so the next morning I accompanied the monk to a deserted pine grove, where without warning I cut him down, took his sword, and fled. This was a long time ago, and fortunately I have gone many years, until today, without anybody finding out about it. In retrospect, however, it was a sinful act, and for that crime alone, it is only natural that I should reach such a demise as this." With those final words, he performs seppuku in the usual manner. What I am about to tell you is quite similar to that story, but I hope that you will agree that my tale is even more complex and strange.

Where I come from, noh songs and kyōgen plays have long been popular, and consequently there are many masters of both. It is perhaps in some way related, then, that even among samurai there are of course those who sing, and even some who dance. Some play the flute; others the drum. One of these was a man named Yagara Kihei. His name may seem like that of an old man, but at the time he was still nineteen, a young samurai serving as a mounted guard to his lord. His father, also called Kihei, had died of illness in the summer when the son was sixteen, so this only son, who had just celebrated his coming of age, took on his father's name and

succeeded him without interruption. For roughly the next four years, the young Kihei the Second performed his duties without incident and, as his reputation was not particularly bad, his mother and relatives were relieved, and he had promised himself that he should have a suitable wife when he turned twenty.

Being the regional custom, as I have mentioned, Kihei had been learning to play the flute since before his coming of age. Had it been another clan, he might have been rebuked for being effeminate, but as in this clan a person with such tastes was indeed considered more of a samurai than one with no talent at all, nobody reproached his eager flute-playing.

It has long been folklore that a person born in the first few months of the year will have well-arranged teeth and so be suited to playing the flute. Perhaps because he was born in the second month, Kihei too was fairly skilled at playing the flute, and had been praised by others and the source of his parents' pride since childhood, so even now he had not given up this one pastime.

Kihei left his estate one autumn evening in 1830, the first year of the Tenpō era, enthralled by the beauty of the moon. In his hand he carried his treasured flute. He trod over the evening dew to the riverbank beyond the castle walls, where the ears of the pampas grass and reeds stretched white beneath the bright moon. From somewhere he could hear the sound of insects. Kihei had travelled far downriver, playing his flute all the while, when he heard the sound of another flute coming from the direction in which he was heading.

Certain that this was not his own flute resounding off the water, but that somewhere else there was another person playing, he listened closely for a time and could clearly hear the distant sound of that flute. Whoever was playing it was not unskilful, and, realising that the flute was one of some quality, he wanted to know its owner.

It is not only deer in autumn, the mating season, that come to the sound of a flute. Kihei too, captivated by his favourite pursuit, was drawn towards the flute, the sound of which was trickling out from among the thick pampas grass downriver. He wondered whether, like himself, someone else had been enthralled by the moon that evening and was enjoying the flute in the damp of the evening dew – what a remarkable thing that would be! Stealing noiselessly up alongside the thicket of pampas grass, he found a low hut across which was spread straw matting. It was a

kamaboko hut, so called for its resemblance to the semicircular *kamaboko* fish paste cake, and Kihei knew that the person living there would be a homeless beggar.

Because he felt it very unusual that such a sound should emanate from that place, Kihei stopped in disbelief.

“Surely the creatures of the night would not play tricks on me?”

Although he was apprehensive that the night creatures were playing on his pastime to torment him, Kihei was a samurai. At his hip was sheathed his family heirloom, a Nagasone Kotetsu sword. He gathered his courage, telling himself that if this was some goblin, it would take just one stroke to bring it down. He pushed his way through the thick pampas grass and raised the matting over the entrance to the hut, revealing a man seated and playing the flute.

“Say there!”

The man stopped playing when addressed. Remaining vigilantly on guard, he looked up at Kihei standing in front of him.

Although his appearance, illuminated by the moonlight, was unmistakably that of a beggar, his age was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and as Kihei could tell at a glance that his character was somehow different from the ordinary homeless folk and beggars who haunted the area, he found himself correcting his language.

“You are playing the flute there?”

“I am,” replied the flautist in a low voice.

“As I could hear the sound so clearly, I was drawn here in search of it,” said Kihei with a smile.

Alertly noticing that Kihei also held a flute, the man seemed to relax a little. His speech also began to sound less reserved.

“I’m embarrassed at my truly poor playing.”

“Not at all. From what I have just heard, you seem to be well practised. I know it is forward of me, but would you show me that flute?”

“I just play it to amuse myself. It’s not worth your attention, sir.”

Despite his words, he showed no signs of refusal, carefully wiping down his flute with a blade of pampas grass growing nearby and respectfully presenting the flute to Kihei.

With that demeanour, this was no mere beggar. Kihei, guessing that perhaps the man was a rōnin, a masterless samurai who had through some twist of fate been reduced to poverty, at last addressed him politely.

“In that case, I would be pleased to examine it.”

Kihei took the flute and held it up to the moonlight. After first seeking the man’s leave, he trialled the flute by playing it. As it was an extremely fine and rare instrument, with an extraordinary temperament, Kihei finally realised that this was no ordinary man. While his own flute was, of course, a respectable one, it was nothing compared to this. Kihei became interested to know how the man came to possess such an item. Aided by a kind of curiosity, as he returned the flute, he tore out and laid down some pampas grass and took a seat beside the other man.

“How long have you been here?”

“I arrived about half a month ago.”

“Where were you before that?” Kihei inquired further.

“I had no fixed abode, in a state such as this. I wandered all over – from Chūgoku to Kyoto and Osaka, the Ise Road, and the Ōmi Road.”

“You are a samurai, are you not?” asked Kihei suddenly.

The man was silent. As it could be assumed that in this case, his failure to give any kind of negative response indicated an acknowledgement, Kihei moved closer and inquired further.

“There must be more than meets the eye for you to have such a fine flute while drifting about like this. If it is not too much trouble, would you be so kind as to tell me?”

The man remained silent, but after being again pressed by Kihei for an answer, he reluctantly began to speak.

“With this flute I am cursed.”

The man was a samurai from Shikoku named Iwami Yajiemon. Like Kihei, he had been fond of playing the flute since he was a boy.

On the way home from visiting his family temple one spring evening when Yajiemon was nineteen, he came across a pilgrim of the 88 temples of Shikoku, who had collapsed in the middle of a lonely rice paddy. Unable to ignore this, he approached the pilgrim, a man close to forty who was wracked by the pains of sickness. Yajiemon nursed the man in various ways, collecting fresh water from nearby, having the man drink it, and giving him medicine from the case he always carried, but the man merely became ever more pained and finally came to his last breath.

The pilgrim was extremely grateful for Yajiemon's kindness. "You, a samurai I have never before met, have been so good to me. I cannot begin to express my gratitude for such kindness. While it is exceedingly discourteous, I would like to give you this as a token of my thanks," said the man, taking from his hip a pouched flute and offering it to Yajiemon.

"This is the only one of its kind in the world. Be very careful, however, not to come to such an end as I."

With these words, like a riddle, the pilgrim died. Although Yajiemon had asked the man his homeland and background, he had shaken his head and not replied. Thinking this too must have some significance, Yajiemon prepared the man's remains and interred them in his own family temple.

The flute, left as the bequest of the unidentified pilgrim to Shikoku, certainly was a unique instrument. Yajiemon found it extremely strange that the pilgrim should have possessed such an item, but in any event he was pleased to have obtained an unanticipated treasure from a chance happening, and dearly cherished the flute. About half a year later, again after visiting his family temple, Yajiemon came to the rice paddy in which he had previously discovered the pilgrim. Standing there, as if expecting Yajiemon, was a young samurai in travel dress.

The young samurai drew near and addressed him. "Be you Iwami Yajiemon, sir?"

When Yajiemon replied that he was, the samurai came closer still.

"Sir, it is rumoured that some time ago you nursed a sick Shikoku pilgrim here and received from him a pouched flute as a bequest. That pilgrim was my enemy. I have

come all the way here to take his head and the flute he carried. It cannot be helped if that enemy of mine has already died from illness, but I would ask for his flute at least, having awaited it here for some time,” he said.

Confronted with such words out of the blue, Yajiemon was not about to meekly hand over the flute. “I have nothing to say to you unless you relate to me just who you are, whence you come, and on what pretext you have made said pilgrim your enemy,” he replied to the young samurai, but without explaining those matters, the other simply insisted forcefully that he hand over the flute.

It was here that Yajiemon finally began to have his doubts, thinking that it was exceedingly unlikely that the samurai would invent such a story to trick him out of the valuable flute, so he firmly and absolutely refused to hand over the flute without properly knowing the samurai’s background and the reason for his vendetta. At this, the young samurai’s countenance changed.

Saying that he too was prepared for such an eventuality, the samurai placed his hand at the hilt of his sword. Yajiemon saw that any argument would be in vain and squared himself too. After the two had exchanged a few heated words, there was a clash of swords, and the unidentified young samurai, covered in blood, collapsed at Yajiemon’s feet.

“That flute shall curse you!”

With these words, he died. Having killed his opponent without knowing why, for a time Yajiemon felt like he was dreaming, but when he reported the event, he received no rebuke, given the preceding circumstances, and the man’s death was held to be blameless. Of course, he knew the identity of neither the Shikoku pilgrim who had bequeathed him the flute, nor that of the subsequent young samurai.

Although his killing of the man was thereby resolved, it was here that a difficulty arose. The incident had become well-known among his clan, and came to the attention of the lord, who ordered that the flute be shown to him. Although there was no particular problem with the lord simply seeing it, Yajiemon well knew that the lord’s mistress liked the flute and bought fine ones regardless of cost. If he were to carelessly present the lord with his flute, there was a risk that it would be taken by the mistress under the pretext that it was wished for by the lord. Even still, a retainer

such as he could not very well refuse the will of his lord. Although torn by this, there was no way Yajiemon was giving up that flute.

In such circumstances, he was left with no choice. Flute in hand, the young Yajiemon fled the estate. Thanks to his obsession with a single flute, he had thrown away the stipend passed down in his family for generations.

Unlike in years gone by, at that time each of the various daimyo was in stringent financial circumstances, so it was exceedingly rare to find a new master. Yajiemon had no option but to take the flute and become a rōnin. In search of a livelihood, he crossed over to Kyushu, wandered through Chūgoku, and drifted across Kyoto and Osaka, during which time he met all manner of misfortune – being afflicted by illness, falling prey to robbery – before finally, the respectable samurai that was Iwami Yajiemon descended into the ranks of beggars.

During that time he parted with everything, but the flute alone he would never relinquish. It was thus that he now found himself having wandered to the north and Yagara Kihei unexpectedly heard him enjoying playing that tone underneath the moon this night.

After explaining up to this point, Yajiemon sighed.

“As the Shikoku pilgrim said before he died, it seems that there is some sort of curse on this flute. I know not its original owner; the little I do know is that the Shikoku pilgrim who carried it died at the roadside. The travelling samurai who came intending to take it was killed by me. Because of this flute, I too came to be like this. With that in mind, I fear for my own fate. Should I sell off this flute? Should I snap it and discard it? Countless times I have resigned myself to do either, but I cannot bear to let myself sell it off, and snapping it and discarding it is harder still, so while I know it to bring me misfortune, I refuse to part with it and carry it still.”

Kihei too was unable to listen without drawing a sigh. Certainly he had heard such bizarre and fateful tales before in relation to swords, but he had not imagined that such a mystery could surround a flute.

But the young Kihei quickly dispelled these thoughts. As it was quite possible that this penniless rōnin, fearing that Kihei wanted the flute, had purposely invented and related this curious tale, he strongly doubted that such events had ever occurred.

"No matter how valuable it may be, I cannot understand why you would not part with it, despite knowing it to bring you misfortune," he said as if rebuking the man.

"Nor do I understand," said Yajiemon. "I cannot discard it even if I try. Perhaps that is my misfortune, or my curse. For around ten years I have been constantly tormented by this."

"Constantly tormented?"

"It is something that I cannot explain to anybody else. Or, even if I were to explain it, it would never be believed to be true."

With that, Yajiemon fell silent; Kihei did the same. All that could be heard was the buzz of insects. In the light of the moon, the riverbank was illuminated white, as if covered in frost.

"The hour is late," said Yajiemon presently, looking up at the sky.

"The hour is late," parroted Kihei. Coming to his senses, he rose to his feet.

3

A short time after parting with the rōnin and returning home, Kihei again appeared at the riverbank. He wore a mask and was dressed lightly. Like the scene by the riverbank at Daianji temple in the kyōgen play "Vendetta by a Samurai in Rags", he stealthily crept up to the *kamaboko* hut.

Kihei wanted that flute more than he could bear. Judging from the way the rōnin spoke, however, there was no way that he was about to relinquish it meekly, so Kihei had resolved that he was left no choice but to attack under the cover of darkness and steal it away. Of course, he had wavered many times before reaching that resolution, but he wanted that flute no matter what. Although its owner might be a rōnin, he was also a homeless beggar. If Kihei were to kill him without anybody knowing, he would be spared any particularly difficult inquiries. With that in mind, he at last became possessed, and after first returning to his estate and outfitting himself, had waited for the night to deepen before striking out once more.

Although he did not know if it was truth or lies, according to the tale he had been told earlier, this Yajiemon seemed to be quite a swordsman. There was no particular indication that he had anything that could serve as a weapon, but even still, Kihei knew that he had to be vigilant. He had been trained in general swordsmanship

himself, but after all, he was still young, and of course he had never fought with a real sword. He knew that even though he was launching a cowardly night attack, he needed to be adequately prepared, so he cut down a bamboo shaft from a grove along the way and crafted a spear from it. Claspings it closely, he approached, softly pushing through the pampas grass so as not to rustle the leaves. When he surveyed the hut, the sound of the flute had stopped. The matting was down over the entrance and the inside was silent.

Suddenly, he heard a low groaning from within the hut. The groaning grew louder and louder; it seemed that Yajiemon was suffering terribly. As it sounded not like the pains of sickness, but rather that he was caught in some kind of nightmare, Kihei hesitated a little. Thinking back to Yajiemon's earlier tale – that for around ten years he had been constantly tormented by that flute – Kihei started to feel quite uncomfortable.

As Kihei listened, holding his breath, the voice from within the hut grew ever more violent, like Yajiemon was writhing in pain, until the rōnin pushed aside the matting over the entrance as if tearing at it and came tumbling out of the hut. Having seemingly awoken from his terrible dream, he breathed a sigh of relief and looked around.

Kihei had no time to conceal himself. As the moonlight that night was unfortunately so clear and broad, his figure, standing still and clasping the bamboo spear close, was vividly highlighted for the rōnin.

Kihei panicked. Now that he had been discovered, there was no time to lose. He brandished the spear he was holding and made a single lunge forward, but Yajiemon was quick to dodge, catching the tip of the spear and tugging it strongly, forcing Kihei off-balance and onto his knees on the grass.

His opponent being tougher than he had expected, Kihei grew increasingly flustered. He discarded the spear and went to draw his sword, immediately upon which Yajiemon shouted out to him.

"Please, wait! Be you obsessed with my flute, sir?"

The game was up; Kihei had nothing to say. As he withdrew his hand from his half-drawn sword and wavered briefly, Yajiemon spoke quietly.

“If indeed you are so obsessed, I shall relinquish it.”

Yajiemon entered the hut, brought out the flute, and placed it in the hands of the silent Kihei, still on his knees.

“Do not forget my earlier words. Take the utmost care that misfortune does not befall you.”

“My thanks,” Kihei stammered.

“Return home before you are seen,” cautioned Yajiemon.

With things as they were, Kihei had no choice but to follow the other’s orders. He held up the flute in gratitude and rose to his feet almost like a machine before bowing politely and leaving without a word.

On his way back to the estate, Kihei was struck by a kind of shame and regret. While feeling the joy and satisfaction of obtaining this fine flute, probably the only one of its kind, at the same time he felt sorry for his own shameful actions that night. The overwhelming guilt of having Yajiemon hand over the flute so meekly was exactly as if he had killed the rōnin and robbed him of it, and brought ever greater remorse upon him. Still, he considered that the one saving grace was that he had not accidentally murdered Yajiemon.

He resolved that after daybreak he must again call on the rōnin, apologise for his rudeness that night, and at the same time offer something in gratitude for the flute. He hurried back to his estate but he was wide awake and could not sleep peacefully that night.

Unable to wait for day to break, Kihei returned early to the scene of the previous night. In his pocket he carried three *koban*, the coin of the realm. The autumn morning fog was still drifting along the riverbank, and from somewhere he could hear the cries of wild geese.

Pushing through the pampas grass, Kihei drew near the hut, where he was taken aback. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead in front of the hut. With both hands he gripped the bamboo spear that Kihei had discarded and left behind, and had used it to pierce right through his own throat.

Kihei was wed the following spring. His married life was happy and the couple bore two boys. He led his life uneventfully, but in the autumn seven years after the

preceding incident he was forced to commit seppuku because of a mistake in his duties. Making his final preparations back at his estate, he requested of the overseeing official that in his final moments he be able to play one last piece on the flute, to which the official consented.

The flute was that which Iwami Yajiemon had relinquished to him. Kihei played serenely, and just as he was finishing the piece, the flute let out an ominous sound and suddenly broke in two. Thinking this bizarre, Kihei examined the flute and found these characters carved into its interior:

At its end after 990 years Hamanushi

Being a student of the subject, Kihei knew the name Hamanushi. Owari no Muraji Hamanushi was the first person in the country to popularise the flute and was revered as the father of the discipline. It was the ninth year of the Tenpō era, so counting backwards from the present, 990 years ago would have corresponded with the date four years after Hamanushi began playing the flute for the imperial court, which was the twelfth year of the Jōwa era – in other words, the first year of the Kashō era, during the reign of Emperor Ninmyō. Hamanushi was a flautist who began by making and playing his own instruments. Given that Hamanushi's name was carved into this flute, it was most likely to have been handmade by him. Still, although an inscription on the flute's exterior would not have been so unusual, it was somewhat puzzling as to why these kanji characters were carved within the thin shaft.

More mysterious still was that the period referred to in "at its end after 990 years" appeared to correspond to this very day. Could Hamanushi have made the flute and then determined its lifespan himself? In retrospect, it seemed that perhaps Iwami Yajiemon's fateful tale was not a concoction after all. This flute, with its shadowy destiny, had brought misfortune to one owner after another, and had apparently finished its own 990-year lifespan as its final owner was to perish.

Kihei, while astonished at such mystery, realised that it was his inescapable destiny that he should share the fate of this flute. After confiding all the secrets of the flute's past to the overseeing official, he performed seppuku in the usual manner.

This tale was conveyed by the official to the wonder of all who heard it. A member of the clan who had been close to Kihei while he was still alive, upon consulting Kihei's family, pieced back together the flute that had been broken in two and buried it in the

place where Iwami Yajiemon was thought to have committed suicide, erecting a stone marker on top into which were carved the two characters reading “*fuezuka*” – the flute mound. That mound remained at the riverside even after the Meiji era, but I have heard that two floods have removed any trace of it today.

Fuezuka, The Flute's Tomb
By Okamoto Kidou

Chapter 1

Although I am a person of the northern province, this is a ghost story that has been passed down through my clan. But before I start, I would like to present to you a passage from an essay called '*Mimibukuro, bag of ears*,' written by Negishi Hizennokami, a great magistrate of Edo. The following story is written in the essay *Mimibukuro*. When the house of the second assistant to the Minister, Kanamori, of Mino was taken over by the shogunate, the chief retainer was ordered to commit *Hara-kiri*, suicide by disembowelment. The chief retainer told an overseer of the procedure that he did not feel any guilt over taking the blame for his master's offenses. Rather, that as a samurai, it had been his long-cherished ambition to commit *Hara-kiri*. However, to tell the truth the chief retainer had a hidden crime. During his travels in his youth, he stayed at an inn where he met a Buddhist monk who also happened to be staying there. After conversing for a while, the monk pulled out a sword and showed it to him. The chief retainer came to yearn for it strongly as it was a famous sword bearing the signature of its maker. He begged to purchase it from the monk for a considerable price, however, the monk refused as it was a family heirloom. Yet the chief retainer could not give up on the idea of possessing the sword. The following morning he joined the monk for a walk. As they approached a deserted field of pine trees, he suddenly stabbed the monk with his own sword, killing him, and ran away with the prized sword. It happened a long time ago, and until this day, he had fortunately lived without anybody knowing about it. However, thinking about it now, he felt that it was a deeply sinful act. For that crime, he felt it just that he should come to an end like this. Without further ado, he committed suicide. The following story that I am about to tell is quite similar to this one in many ways, but I'd like it to be thought of as much more complex and mysterious.

In my province, classical Japanese performances, such as *Yokyoku*, *Noh* and *Kyogen*, have been popular since the old days. Thus, there are many masters of these songs and plays. Of course, even among the samurais there were performers of *Yokyoku*. Some could also perform the '*Shimai, Noh performance without costumes or masks*.' Some played flutes and others played drums. One of these performers was Yagara Kihei. His name sounds like that of an older person, although, he was only nineteen years old at that time. He was a retainer of the shogun and his father who was also called Kihei, died of an illness in summer when his son was sixteen. Thus the only son, who had just celebrated his coming of age, inherited his father's name and vocation in life. Four years had passed, and the second generation young Kihei successfully completed his duty as a retainer of the shogun. His mother and relatives were relieved, as his reputation was not so bad. They were secretly planning on finding him an appropriate bride for when he turned twenty the next year.

Ever since Kihei's youth, he had learned how to play the flute, as was the practice in his province. Perhaps if he were in another clan he might have been considered effeminate, but in his clan, people with these talents were highly regarded for a samurai, more so than those without any talents. So nobody blamed him for constantly playing the flute. Since early times, there was a myth that those who were born in February of a certain year had good teeth alignment, and were typically suited to be flute players. Kihei was also born in February of that year and his flute skills were quite exceptional. He had been praised for his talent since he was a boy. His parents were also very proud of him. Thus, to this day he never gave up on the flute.

One night in the autumn of the first year of the *Tempo* era, the beautiful moon inspired Kihei to go outside. With his flute held secretly in his hand, he stepped out into the night dew and headed to the river outside of the castle grounds. The pampas grass and reeds appeared white under the bright moonlight, and the sound of insects could also be heard. Kihei was going down to the riverside playing his flute, when he heard the sound of another flute up ahead.

The sound of a flute reverberating through the water was not coming from his flute. The sound came from somewhere else. As he stayed silent, he heard the clear sound coming from the far side of the river. The player of the flute was not bad, but Kihei sensed that the flute was of excellent quality, and he became curious as to whom the owner was. It wasn't only the autumn deer that had gathered to listen to the flute, but Kihei's soul was also taken in and drawn up by the resonance of the tune coming from the overgrown pampas grass. Was there someone other than himself who had been drawn out by the moon to play the flute, while getting damp in the night dew? If so, then it was certainly a curious matter. Kihei stealthily crept closer into the pampas grass, when he spotted a hut covered by straw mats. It was a small dome-shaped hut. Kihei knew that the people who lived in that kind of place were homeless beggars.

Suspiciously, Kihei stopped in his tracks for he felt it unusual to hear such a tune coming from such a place.

"I don't think that a fox or raccoon would trick me."

Initially Kihei suspected that it was a fox or an otter playing tricks with his curiosity. Yet he was a samurai warrior and on his waist he kept a *Nagasonokotetsu*, a sword of excellence, that had been handed down in his family. If it were a monster, he would surely strike it down with a single slash. Kihei plucked up his courage and stepped forward through the pampas grass. The matted straw entrance of the hut was wide open and a man was sitting there, playing the flute.

"Hey!"

The man stopped playing upon being called out and assumed a defensive posture, so as not to be caught off guard. He looked up at Kihei standing there.

Under the moonlight, the man's appearance was like that of a beggar's. Yet he looked only about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. Kihei thought that his decorum was different to that of the usual homeless people or beggars who stay around there, and so he changed the tone of voice.

"Were you playing the flute?"

"Yes," replied the man with the flute in a deep voice.

"The music was so clear, that I followed the sound all the way here," Kihei said with a smile.

The man seemed to open his heart after glancing at the flute in Kihei's hand. He also seemed to open up to Kihei too.

"I'm embarrassed by my poor skills."

"No, not at all. I was just listening to your music before and I believe that you must have practiced a lot. If you don't mind, could I take a look at the flute?"

"This flute is played only when I have fun with other people. It is not really much to look at."

Even saying so, he did not seem to refuse showing it. He carefully wiped the flute on a pampas leaf growing there and reverentially presented it to Kihei.

His attitude was definitely not like that of a beggar's. Kihei assumed that he was a *Ronin*, a masterless samurai, and for some reason was reduced to being a beggar. Thus Kihei greeted him politely.

"Then let me see this."

Kihei picked up the flute and examined it through the light of the moon. He gave it a try, after getting permission to do so, and found that the tune was extraordinary. It was an extremely rare flute and this was definitely no ordinary man. Kihei's flute was also a pretty good one, but this flute was in no comparison to his own. Kihei curiously wanted to know why the man possessed such a flute. He returned the instrument to the man as he sat down beside him on the pampas grass.

"When did you come here?"

"About half a month ago."

"And where were you before that?" Kihei continued.

"As you can see from my appearance, nowhere in particular. I wandered from place to place. From the Chugoku area to Kobe and Osaka, Iseji and Ohmiji."

"You used to be a samurai, right?" Kihei asked suddenly.

The man was silent. In this case, not answering the question implied yes. Kihei got closer to him and asked more questions.

"You must have tales as you wandered about with such a great flute. If you don't mind, could you tell me your story?"

The man was still silent, but as Kihei repeatedly asked the question, the man reluctantly spoke.

"I'm cursed by this flute."

Chapter 2

The man's name was Iwami Yajiuemon, a samurai of Shikoku, who had also played the flute for his own pleasure since his childhood, just as Kihei did.

One spring evening when Yajiuemon was nineteen, on his way home from his family's temple he found a Shikoku pilgrim lying in a deserted rice field. He couldn't just turn a blind eye, so he stopped and went in closer. The man was close to forty years old, and was suffering from a disease. Yajiuemon got some water from nearby and gave it to him to drink. He took some medicine from his own pillbox and let the man have it.

Yajiuemon took care of him in various ways, but the man still suffered and finally passed away there.

The man had been extremely appreciative of Yajiuemon's kindness. As an unknown samurai being very kind to him, he didn't know what to say. The man, noting that it may be rude to Yajiuemon, wanted him to have something as a token of his appreciation. The man took out a flute in a pouch from his waist, and gave it to Yajiuemon.

"This is an extremely rare object. However, please take good care of yourself, so as not to meet an end as I have."

He died leaving this mysterious phrase. Yajiuemon had asked him for his name and birthplace, but he strongly refused to answer by shaking his head. Yajiuemon, thinking that this must be some kind of fate, disposed of the body by burying it at his family temple.

The memento from the unidentified Shikoku pilgrim was an extremely rare flute. Yajiuemon felt suspicious as to why the man possessed such a flute. Nevertheless, he was happy to unexpectedly receive this chance fortune, and greatly treasured the flute. Half a year passed. Yajiuemon was visiting his family temple, as usual, when he came across the rice field where he had found the Shikoku pilgrim. This time, a young samurai wearing travel attire was standing there as if waiting for Yajiuemon.

"Are you Iwami Yajiuemon?" The young samurai asked approaching closer.

After Yajiuemon confirmed this, the young samurai got even closer. He said that according to rumor, Yajiuemon had taken care of a sick Shikoku pilgrim and had

received a flute in a pouch as a memento. But actually, that pilgrim was the young samurai's enemy and he had come here to collect his head and possessions. Seeing that there was nothing he could do, as the pilgrim was already dead, the young samurai thought that he could at least have the flute that he had been waiting for.

Straight out of the blue like that, Yajiuemon could not simply hand the flute over without protest. Yajiuemon asked the young samurai as to who he was and why he resented the Shikoku pilgrim so, and that without any answers, he could not comply to anything. However, the young samurai did not explain any further just desperately pleaded for the flute.

At this point, Yajiuemon suspected that the young samurai might try to take the precious flute from him. Thus, Yajiuemon strongly objected, saying that unless he could find out the young samurai's identity and reasons for revenge, he would not comply with the request. At that point, the young samurai got serious.

The young samurai said that he was prepared for such, and put his hand on the grip of his sword. Realizing that there would be no further discussion, Yajiuemon prepared himself to fight. They exchanged a few words, after which, they drew their swords. The unidentified young samurai getting covered with blood, dropped in front of Yajiuemon. "The flute will curse you."

Upon saying this, the young samurai died. Yajiuemon felt as if he were in a dream, as he had just killed a man without any good reason. For the time being, he reported the incident and the circumstances surrounding it. As the situation proved, there was no fault on Yajiuemon's behalf and so the case was settled. However, Yajiuemon was unable to find out who the Shikoku pilgrim was, who had given him the flute, and the identity of that young samurai.

Although the case of killing a man had been settled, another problem arose. The incident gained reputation in the clan. Even his master had heard about it, and as such, requested to see the flute that was passed down to Yajiuemon. Just showing the flute was not a problem, however, Yajiuemon knew that the master's ladies were attracted to purchasing good things, no matter the price. If he carelessly held out the flute, it may well be taken from him, using the master's desire as an excuse. Nevertheless, being the master's retainer, he could not refuse the request. Yajiuemon was bewildered. He did not want to completely lose the flute.

Thinking about it, there was no other way. The young man ran away from his residence with the flute. He abandoned his ancestral legacy of payment just for the sake of keeping the flute.

Compared to the old days, feudal lords had tighter financial conditions, so they could rarely employ new servants. Thus, Yajiuemon simply had no other choice but to become a Ronin, keeping the flute. He made his way to Kyushu, wandered the Chugoku area and then to the Kobe-Osaka area, all the while looking for a way to make a living. He got sick, was the victim of a theft, and his bad luck continued until finally Iwami Yajiuemon, a full-fledged samurai, became one of the beggars.

In the meantime, he had parted with his long and short swords, but he never let go of the flute. He had just wandered to the northern area, where he was enjoying playing the flute under the moon, when Yagara Kihei unexpectedly overheard its song.

Yajiuemon heaved a sigh after telling the story up to this point.

"Just as the Shikoku pilgrim had once said, I also believe that this flute is cursed by something. I don't know who owned this flute a long time ago, but as far as I know, every Shikoku pilgrim who has owned the flute died by the roadside. I killed any samurai who came to take this flute. I have become like this because of the flute.

Thinking about it, my future will likely be horrible. I made up my mind many a time to

either sell the flute or dump it after destroying it, yet I didn't want to just sell it. Smashing it up and throwing it away was even more difficult, so I still have it, although I know it brings much misfortune."

Kihei could not listen to the story without sighing. Since early times, there were these kinds of mysterious fate linked stories surrounding swords, but he didn't think that there was one about a flute.

However, Kihei immediately denied this possibility. He was young, and as such, perhaps this *Ronin* beggar had intentionally made up this mysterious story, telling it to him, to ward off any desire for the flute, for surely in reality there was no such thing.

"It doesn't make any sense to me that, even if it is very precious, you wouldn't want to part with it, as you know that it brings misfortune," said Kihei reproachfully.

"It doesn't make sense to me either," said Yajiuemon. "Although I tried, I couldn't just throw it away. This in itself may be a sort of misfortune or curse. I've been suffering from this for ten years."

"Continuously suffering..."

"You must not tell this to anyone. Even if you did, they wouldn't believe that the story is real anyway."

That being said, Yajiuemon was silent and so was Kihei. Only the sound of the insects could be heard. The moonlight shining on the shore was white as if covered by frost.

"It's already late," Yajiuemon said at last, looking up at the sky.

"It is late."

Kihei repeated his words and then noticing it so, he got up.

Chapter 3

Kihei left the *Ronin* to himself, but after a while, he turned up again on the shore. Masked and casually attired, he stealthily crept up to the hut, like in the scene of the *Daian Temple Embankment*, from '*Katakiuchi tsuzure no nishiki, a vendetta by a samurai in rags.*'

Kihei could not help yearning for the flute. However, from the *Ronin's* way of speaking, he probably wouldn't simply hand it over to him without protest. Thus, Kihei made up his mind to launch a surprise attack and take the flute by force. Of course, he hesitated over and over again before making a firm decision. But he wanted the flute at any cost. The other man was a *Ronin*, but he was also a homeless beggar. If Kihei could kill him without being seen, there wouldn't be any difficult interrogations. Thinking this way, Kihei finally passed himself off as a devil. He returned home in preparation and waited until later that night to come back for the attack.

Kihei didn't know whether it was true or not, but judging by the story, Yajiuemon was quite strong, although, he didn't seem to possess any arms. Even so, Kihei thought it was better not to be careless. Kihei had been trained in general swordplay, however, he was young and did not have any experiences of a real sword fight. Guessing that he'd need a lot of preparation, even for a surprise attack, he cut down a length of bamboo from a bamboo grove along the way and shaping it into a spear, he made his way down to the place. Silently, he scoped the situation of the hut by squeezing through the pampas grass, trying carefully to not make a sound. There was no sound of the flute and no activity coming from the hut. A straw mat covered the entrance.

Then he heard a groan coming from inside. The groan became louder and louder.

Yajiuemon seemed to be suffering incessantly. Kihei thought that it sounded more like the suffering from a kind of nightmare, rather than the pain of an illness, so he hesitated

a while. Kihei felt somehow eerie after the story that Yajiuemon had been suffering ten years because of the flute.

As Kihei observed with baited breath, inside the hut, the suffering and struggling became more violent with Yajiuemon finally bursting out of the hut, tearing the straw mat over the entrance. It seemed that his nightmare was over. Yajiuemon drew a long sigh and looked around himself.

Kihei didn't have time to conceal himself. The moon that night was unfortunately bright and his figure, holding the bamboo spear, lit up clearly in front of the *Ronin*.

At this point, Kihei panicked. Upon being seen he could not hesitate any longer. Kihei tightened his grip on the spear and thrust it at Yajiuemon. Yajiuemon quickly dodged the advance, grabbed the head of the spear and pulled it strongly. Accordingly, Kihei staggered and fell down onto his knees in the grass.

Kihei panicked even more because his opponent was far stronger than he had expected. Kihei let go of his end of the spear and was about to put his hand on his sword when Yajiuemon said immediately:

"Please, wait... You strongly desire my flute?"

It hit the mark exactly and Kihei was unable to say anything. He held his hand back from drawing his sword and was hesitating when Yajiuemon spoke softly.

"If you are so eager to have this flute, then I will give it to you."

Yajiuemon went inside the hut, took out the flute and handed it to Kihei who was kneeling silently there.

"Do not forget the story that I told you a while ago. Pay careful attention as much as possible not to meet an unfortunate demise."

"Thank you," Kihei said stumblingly.

"Better go back while nobody sees you," Yajiuemon warned.

With no other way but to follow his order, Kihei received the flute and standing up like a puppet, parted without saying a word after politely making a slight bow.

On the way back to his residence, Kihei felt kind of ashamed and remorseful. He regretted his shameful act that night, while at the same time he felt happiness and satisfaction from getting such a rare excellent flute. As Yajiuemon had given him the flute without protest, a guilty feeling, equivalent to that of a mugger, tormented his heart. However, Kihei also thought that he was lucky not to have made the mistake of killing the man.

Kihei made up his mind to visit the *Ronin* at dawn, apologize for his impudence of the previous night and do something in gratitude for receiving the flute. He hurried back to his residence, but stayed wide-awake that night, not being able to sleep easily.

Kihei could hardly wait until dawn. He went to the same place as last night very early that morning with three *kobans*, oval gold coins, in his pocket. A fall morning mist still hung about the shore and the sounds of wild geese could be heard somewhere.

As Kihei pushed through the pampas grass and got closer to the hut, he was taken aback by surprise. There in front of the hut lay Iwami Yajiuemon dead. He had pierced his own throat with both his hands holding onto the bamboo spear that Kihei had tossed aside.

In the spring of the following year, Kihei met his wife and got married. They were a compatible couple, had two boys, and lived without any mishaps. However in the fall, seven years after the previous incident, Kihei was forced to commit *Hara-kiri* due to a blunder of his workplace.

Kihei was making his final preparations at his home residence, when he asked the overseer of the event if he could play one last song on his flute, to which he was permitted.

The flute was the one given to him by Iwami Yajiuemon and Kihei played it serenely. When the song was about to end, suddenly with a peculiar crack, the flute split into two. Utterly mystified, Kihei examined the flute, upon where he noticed some words scratched into the inside of the flute.

Will terminate in 990 years. Hamanushi

Since Kihei was an expert researcher in the line of flutes, he had heard of the name *Hamanushi*. Numaji Hamanushi of Owari was respected for being the first person to introduce flutes in his province. This year was the fourth year of the *Tempo* era, and by counting backwards from this year, nine hundred and ninety years ago was the first year of the *Kasho* era, when the Emperor Ninmyo ruled. That was four years after the twelfth year of the *Jowa* era, when Hanamushi played the flute in the imperial court. Hamanushi was a musician of flutes, but in the beginning he also made and played them. As Hamanushi's name was engraved in this flute, this was probably his handiwork. It would not be so exceptional if the characters were simply on the outside of the flute, but the wonder was why he had inscribed them into such a slender pipe.

Even more mysterious was the phrase, *Will terminate in 990 years*, the nine hundred and ninetieth year seeming to correspond to this year. Had Hamanushi created this flute having decided its duration of life? Thinking back now, it seemed that Iwami Yajiuemon's fateful tale wasn't a lie. The strangely fated flute had been passed down from owner to owner, bringing much misfortune, when finally at the death of its last owner, the flute too ended its life of nine hundred and ninety years.

Kihei was amazed by the extraordinary mystery. At the same time, he embraced the fact that he could not avoid sharing the same fate as the flute. After Kihei revealed all the past secrets of the flute to the overseer, he rightly committed suicide.

The overseer spread this story of the flute. Everyone who heard felt that there was something peculiar about it. Someone close to Kihei in the clan spoke to the bereaved family and decided to join the split flute back together and bury it in the place where it was said that Iwami Yajiuemon had committed suicide. A stone engraved with the characters, '*Fuezuka*, the flute's tomb,' was placed there to mark the spot. The tomb was still on the shore even after the *Meiji* era, but now it's been said that it has disappeared because of two floods.

Fuezuka -- The Whistling Mound.
by Okamoto Kidô

1

I am from the north, and in my home country, the story I am about to tell you is widely known. But first let me tell you another story, by way of introduction-- this one an episode from the memoir of a famed Edo politician named Yasumori Negishi. His book is called *From the Ear's Pocket*.

From the Ear's Pocket relates the following story. In Mino, during the purging of the clan of Kanamori Heibe Shôtsuke by the Shogunate, a minor minister to Lord Kanamori was ordered to commit ritual suicide. As the servant of his lord, it was the minister's duty to formally confess to crimes committed by his lord to the Shogun's representative, as though he had committed them himself. He wouldn't necessarily have been reluctant to do this--quite the contrary; to him it may have seemed the very fulfillment of a warrior's life purpose.

As it happened, however, the servant was not without concealed guilt of his own. As a youth traveling through the countryside, he had once been a guest in the home of an old mountaineer. In passing conversation, the mountaineer mentioned that he owned a fine sword, and offered a glimpse of it to Lord Kanamori's future servant. It so happened that it was a truly rare and fine weapon, and the young servant wanted it desperately, even offering an extravagant price in exchange for the gift-- but it was a family heirloom, and so the mountaineer declined to part with it. Obviously the servant was not appeased, and the following morning, as he and the mountaineer were walking through a little-crossed pine forest, he turned on him, cut him down, took the sword-- and ran.

The servant had put this incident well behind him now, and in his good fortune he had lived out the fullness of his days, unsuspected by anyone to the last. But now at the lingering memory of it he felt his old guilt swallow him, and with gallant acceptance he spilled his life out before him. In his last breath he told those around him that truthfully, it was really a crime of his own that had made this ending inevitable.

This story bears a resemblance to the one I am about to relate, but I hope you will be so kind as to consider that mine may be still more complex, and more bizarre. We in my home country have always had a passion for classical masked plays. And because of this we are blessed with a great many dramatic and comedic masters. And it is quite likely thanks to them that, even among our professional soldiers, there are many who simply know the more familiar chants as a matter of course, and a few who know the more famous dances. Flute players are everywhere. Drummers are everywhere. And among these there was a man by the name of Yagara Yoshihei.

And while such a name seems as though it could only belong to an old man, Yoshihei was at the time of these events still nineteen: a young Samurai, but already assigned to his lord's corps of bodyguards. His father had also been named Yoshihei, and passed away in the summer of his son's 16th year, leaving the newly-breeched heir to

promptly pick up his father's name and his station as though a generation had not just turned over. Now, four years later, the junior Yoshihei had kept up his duties impeccably and had inspired no particularly bad rumors about himself, so his mother and relatives were free from worry, and privately they were testing the waters in search of an appropriate wife for him as his twentieth birthday approached.

Being a child from the country I have just described, Yoshihei was naturally exposed to the flute at an early age. While anywhere else he might at least have suffered gentle mockery for it, in our country it was gifted ones like him that people treated as exemplary samurai, far above the artless brutes. So there was no one scolding him over his tireless practicing.

Folklore claims that children born early in the year develop the best-formed teeth, and so make particularly fine flute players. Yoshihei was born in the second calendar month. Perhaps for that reason he was fairly proficient, and so it was that from childhood that his playing was praised by strangers and boasted of by his parents. Even now, as an adult, he still permitted himself this one musical indulgence.

It was an autumn night in the first year of the newly declared era of Tempō. Yoshihei caught some wildness of the moonlight and stepped out of his house. His flute, that secret treasure, was in his hand. He plodded through the evening dew and out onto the river plain beyond the fortress walls, and saw the ears of the reeds and the pampas grass sagging whitely in the moonlight. Yoshihei set off downriver playing a melody on the flute, and could almost swear he heard the sound of another flute on the road ahead of him.

He was sure that it wasn't his own playing he heard simply echoing off the water. Listening closely for a moment, he could hear the second instrument clearly, coming through confidently from across the plain. The player was far from poor, but he grasped that what was more remarkable was the flute, and because it was so remarkable, he wanted to find its owner.

So, then, deer are not all that a flute's call might mislead; Yoshihei was similarly drawn off his intended path, and once he drew nearer to the music's source, he found that the music was coming up from the stalks of grass growing prolifically downriver. He wondered if it might not be another player just like him, drawn out by the moonlight and playing for his own amusement. So, enthralled, Yoshihei crept up to the edge of the thick grass. What he found was a little hut covered with a beaten reed mat. It was low to the ground like a coffin with a round roof, and Yoshihei realized that he had stumbled upon the hovel of a vagrant beggar.

It shocked him that the music he heard was coming from such a place. Yoshihei stopped in his tracks, his suspicion visible.

"I swear, if it's a forest animal or spirit toying with me..."

The provocation of the moment may have made him fear that some fox or otter was conspiring against him, but even so, Yoshihei was still a samurai, with the family sword on his hip-- made by none other than Nagasone Kotetsu in Edo. He braced himself to dispatch in a single stroke whatever might come, if indeed there should be a shape changing monster at play. He marched forward, parting the high grasses

before him. He came to the entry of the little hovel and pushed it open. Inside he found a man sitting alone, playing a flute.

"You there!"

The man stopped playing when he heard the sound of Yoshihei's voice. Then, seeming to ready himself lest self defense prove necessary, he looked up at the still-standing Yoshihei.

Lit up by the moonlight, the man's appearance left no doubt about his poverty, but his age couldn't have been more than twenty-seven or eight, very different from the general mass of homeless and the beggars who built their nests in the area. Yoshihei saw this difference at once, and his tone changed instinctively.

"Was it you I heard playing?"

"Yes," the man holding the flute murmured in response.

"Your playing was so exquisite, I followed it until I found my way here." Yoshihei worked to summon a smile.

Before long the other man noticed the flute in Yoshihei's own hand, and seemed to relax slightly. His tone became friendlier.

"I must plead embarrassment. My playing is nothing to speak of."

"No, that's not true. From what I heard just now I'd say you've had quite a lot of practice. Forgive my rudeness, but may I see the flute you were playing?"

"It's only a toy for entertaining myself, not anything worthy of your attention."

But there was little apparent refusal as he took a few of the leaves of grass growing by his side and gently wiped the flute clean, handing it solemnly to Yoshihei.

His demeanor was nothing like that of a mere beggar. Yoshihei imagined that he might be a disgraced samurai from some warrior house, forced out by a desperate circumstance... and so he treated him with patience, and good manners.

"With your permission..."

He took the flute in his hands and held it up to the light. His first appraisal thus made, he blew into it once to test it—its tuning was remarkable, indeed it must be one of few such masterworks in the whole world, and now Yoshihei was absolutely sure that its owner, too, was not what he appeared.

Yoshihei's own flute was a fine instrument too, of course, but there was no comparison here. He wanted to know how this man had come to possess such a thing; he wanted the entire history. Emboldened by curiosity, he bent a few strands of grass and sat down on them beside the man as he handed the flute back to him.

"When did you come here? And where were you before that?" he pressed.

"In my situation, it can be hard to put a definite *where* to things. But I traveled up from Southern Japan through Kyoto and Osaka, using the Ise Highway and the Omi Highway but wandering through a great many places."

"You come from a samurai family?" Yoshihei asked abruptly.

The man fell silent. His refusal to give even a negative answer was confirmation enough for Yoshihei, and so he drove on with still more questions.

"You have such a remarkable possession and yet you live like this. There must be some kind of remarkable story behind that. Won't you tell me how you got here?"

The man remained, unsurprisingly, silent, but at Yoshihei's insistent urging, he finally grimaced and spoke.

"All of this is a curse this flute has brought on me."

The man's real name was Iwami Yajiemon, and he had been a samurai on the tiny southern island of Shikoku. Like Yoshihei he had loved to play the flute ever since childhood.

It changed one night in the spring, when Yajiemon was nineteen. He was returning from paying respects at his family temple when he discovered a pilgrim who had fallen over in a seldom-crossed field. Unable to bear the thought of leaving him where he was, Yajiemon came closer and saw that he was a man around forty years of age, suffering from some kind of illness. Yajiemon brought water from a nearby well and helped the man drink it, and fed him a bit of medicine he was carrying in his waist pocket, and generally did any and all things he could do to help him. But despite this the man seemed only to suffer more and more, and finally gave his last breath there in the field.

But he was deeply touched by Yajiemon's display of kindness, and by the thought that a young lord of a warrior family he had neither met nor heard of before should go so far to help him in his hour of need. He was without adequate recourse to repair the debt he felt.

It was such inadequate thanks as to be more insult than reward, he admitted, but at least as a symbol of gratitude deferred, he said, *take this*, and from his own pocket he handed a flute in a small bag up to Yajiemon.

"It's a thing without peer in this world. But be on your guard, my lord, that you avoid meeting the same end I have."

This riddle proved to be his last words. Yajiemon had asked for his country of birth and the name of his family, but the man only shook his head in silence. Sensing that it was his duty now, Yajiemon saw to the funeral rites for the body, interring it in his own family shrine.

The flute this unnamed beggar from Shikoku had left as Yajiemon's keepsake was an exquisite instrument beyond any comparison. How the man had come to own it, Yajiemon was unable to imagine, but finally he admitted that he was pleased with the unexpected reward he had reaped from the chance encounter, and he cared for it as a personal treasure all his own. Half a year a passed, and again Yajiemon went to pay his respects at the family shrine, setting out across the very same field where he had found the beggar from Shikoku. As he made his way, he was stopped by a young samurai, dressed for travel and seemingly standing in wait for him.

The young samurai drew closer and called out, "do I address Sir Ishimi Yajiemon?" When Yajiemon confirmed it, the man came still closer, and said, "according to certain rumors which I have heard, you offered help to a pilgrim who had fallen sick on this road and in return received from him a flute in a small bag. That man happens to have been an enemy of mine, and I have traveled far and wide to claim both his head and the flute that he carried. It seems that the man himself has already been taken by sickness and that I have little power in that regard. I still intend, however, to take possession of the flute. For that reason, I have been waiting for you here for the past few hours."

One would hardly expect Yajiemon to hand over the flute simply because he had been startled in this way. He faced the young samurai and declared that he must

first be satisfied that he knew who he addressed, where he came from, and how he had come to hate the pilgrim so intensely. Without that he would not address this demand. But the other man refused to explain in detail, and instead closed in on Yajiemon, demanding wildly that he hand over the flute immediately.

This change in the samurai increased the doubts in Yajiemon's mind. Might he not be trying to deceive him and steal the precious flute away? Under no circumstance would he hand over the flute, he said, so long as the other samurai refused to offer his name and explain the nature of his quarrel with the pilgrim. Yajiemon planted his feet in determination, and the other samurai's expression immediately darkened. "I believe that you can already guess my reasons," said the samurai, his hand already moving toward the hilt of his sword. Yajiemon sensed that the time for questions was over, and composed himself. They exchanged a few final words, then both swords were drawn and clashed; when it was over the nameless samurai lay at Yajiemon's feet oozing blood.

"Fool. That flute will sit like a curse upon you."

No sooner did he speak than he was dead. For a while Yajiemon was in a dreamlike shock at the realization that he had taken a man's life without really understanding the situation. He consoled himself by reporting the incident to the authorities, who, because he described the circumstances exactly as I have given them here, settled the case rightly as an accidental death and imposed no penalty.

As for the questions of who the man who bestowed the flute upon him had been, and who the samurai who followed him had been, these too remained, naturally, unanswered.

For Yajiemon the case of the death itself was closed, but now an additional difficulty arose. The incident turned into a rumor that traveled the entire length of the province, even reaching the ear of its lord, who sent down a request that he be shown this extraordinary flute of which so many voices spoke. A simple viewing would have been nothing in and of itself, but His Excellency, Yajiemon knew, loved flutes and eagerly paid any price for fine instruments. The danger existed that if he presented the flute without proper care it would be snatched up at the first signal from the lord. And no matter his personal circumstances Yajiemon, with his family name in the balance, could not directly oppose the will of His Excellency. Yajiemon saw this clearly, yet however many times he attempted to reconsider the problem, the thought of giving up his flute was unbearable.

He could see no alternative. Young Yajiemon took up the flute and vanished. His attachment to the instrument was so great that he chose it over the bonds of his family duty and his class.

Unlike earlier times, allegiances between the various provincial lords had by this day and age grown quite rigid, leaving little likelihood that Yajiemon could hope to be reemployed as a samurai under a new master. His only option was flight and hiding.

He crossed to Kyushu, wandered up southern Honshu, drifted into Kyoto and Osaka, and as he searched for a new life for himself he fell sick, fell victim to abuse, and faced every possible misfortune many times, until finally the man who had once called himself Ishimi Yajiemon, samurai, found himself fallen as far as he could fall - in among a crowd of beggars.

He let go of many things in this period, but never once the flute. And now, having wandered up to the north counties, he had been found out, without intending it, by this Yagara Yoshihei who had only needed to hear the flute to know that it was special.

Having spoken this far, Yajiemon allowed himself a sigh.

“Just as the pilgrim said, it does seem that this flute bears some kind of curse. I know nothing about its first owners, but I know that the pilgrim died in a ditch before my eyes. I know that the samurai who traveled to take it from me died at my feet. And I know what I have become. And it is all because of this flute. I am terrified of the future it is leading me toward. I’ve thought of selling it, or breaking it in half and leaving it. Over and over again I’ve realized that it comes down to one or the other. But selling it off in despair is always too heartbreaking, and breaking it to pieces and throwing it away is worse still. I know it is the cause of all my suffering, and yet I’ve never parted from it.”

Yoshihei, too, could not listen without a sigh. Not that he had never heard such a breathtaking story-- but those had always surrounded famous swords. He had never imagined that such adventures could accumulate around a flute!

But young Yoshihei quickly rejected the idea. Perhaps really this beggar of a masterless samurai, fearing Yoshihei’s probable desire for the flute, had deliberately invented a mystifying story to discourage him.

And therefore, thought Yoshihei, all these incidents were really lies.

“However much you want to keep it, I honestly don’t understand this insistence of yours on holding onto something that you yourself admit is the cause of all your misfortunes.”

“Nor do I,” pleaded Yajiemon. “I have tried to get rid of it but cannot. Maybe that is part of the curse too. And for the past ten years I have been suffering for it, constantly.”

“Constantly?”

“You cannot speak of this to anyone else. Though if you do they are unlikely to believe you in any case.”

Yajiemon, with this, fell silent. Yoshihei too fell silent. All either heard were the insect voices around them. The moonlight lay white like a mist upon everything.

“It has grown late,” Yajiemon finally spoke toward the sky.

“Yes, it’s late,” Yoshihei repeated. He realized that his time was up, rose, and parted.

3

Within two hours of leaving the former samurai’s home, Yoshihei reappeared on the river plain. He had covered his face and was lightly armed. Like a puppet performing the ambush scene in “Vendetta by a Samurai in Rags,” he crept up upon the homely little hovel with light, careful steps.

He had reached the point of desperation in his desire for the flute. But he could tell from Yajiemon’s tone of voice that the fallen samurai would surely not part with his treasure willingly. And this left Yoshihei with no choice, he decided, but to strike at him in the darkness and take it from him. To harden his will enough to arrive at this certainty had taken many convolutions of self-doubt, but still he could not

escape his desire for the flute. Disgraced samurai or not, his opponent was a homeless beggar. Even if it did end with his death, it still would probably not lead to any particular awkwardness. Thinking these thoughts, he eventually summoned the needed demons in himself, and he returned to his home momentarily to prepare. Once the night had deepened enough, he descended again downriver.

Whether it was true or not, Yajiemon's story suggested him to be something of a skilled swordsman. He didn't seem to own any weapons, but still Yoshihei felt that Yajiemon was not to be underestimated. Yoshihei had done a certain amount of his own training at fencing, but the fact remained that he was still young and had no real combat experience. Even the cowardly raid he had planned, worried Yoshihei, would demand considerable advance preparations of him. So along his way he stopped to cut a stalk of bamboo, which he fashioned into a pike, and with this in hand he ventured down toward the hut. He parted the grass gently before him. As he scanned the surroundings of the hut, there was no flute music to be heard. A mat lay over the door of the hut, and from inside came only deathly silence.

But now Yoshihei heard a low and growling voice. It grew louder and louder; Yajiemon seemed to be in some kind of pain, but it didn't have the sound of illness—more that of a bad dream, which gave Yoshihei pause. Yoshihei was reminded that Yajiemon had claimed that for almost a decade he had suffered endlessly because of the flute. Yoshihei suddenly felt faintly ill.

As Yoshihei looked on, his breath still, Yajiemon yanked away the mat covering the entry to the hut, as though he meant to rip it off completely, and rolled his body out into the open. Seemingly waking from his terrifying dream, he breathed in deeply and surveyed his surroundings.

Yoshihei never had a chance to hide himself. The moonlight was lying with inconvenient brightness upon everything, and his shape, with upright bamboo pike in hand, stood out shining in the dark right before the broken samurai's eyes.

Yoshihei panicked at this new turn of events. Now was his moment; his reprieve was over. He began to turn the spear in his hands with the hope of landing a single solid thrust, but Yajiemon righted himself quickly and grasped Yoshihei's weapon by the end. He twisted it, destroying Yoshihei's balance and dropping him onto one knee.

His opponent's unexpected physical strength only added to Yoshihei's panic. He dropped the spear and reached for his sword, only to be stopped by Yajiemon's voice.

"Wait a moment! Are you after the flute, is that it?"

Yoshihei was struck dumb at the sound of his own desire given voice. He pulled back his free hand and allowed himself to hesitate. Yajiemon spoke quietly.

"Because if you want it so badly, I shall surrender it."

Yajiemon went into his hut and reemerged with the flute in hand. Kneeling in silence, he placed it in Yoshihei's hands.

"But do not forget what I have told you. Be on guard against its curse."

"Thank... you..." Yoshihei faltered.

"Return to your home quickly, before you are seen," Yajiemon warned.

After all that had just happened he could think of nothing else to do except follow Yajiemon's command. Yoshihei clasped the flute and got up with almost mechanical politeness, bowed silently, and departed.

On his way home he was hit with a mix of shame and remorse. Satisfied and delighted though he was with having obtained the unique and peerless instrument, another part of him regretted his shameful actions that evening. With the simple act of relinquishing the flute peacefully, Yajiemon had introduced into Yoshihei's heart the long-delayed guilt that he should have felt the very moment he began to contemplate the act of murder. There was a small happiness, at least, in having repented and spared his would-be victim.

When the morning came, he told himself, he must visit the masterless samurai again and apologize for his offense, but he must also offer some kind of gift in return for the flute. He hurried home, but that night his eyes felt strangely tight and he struggled with sleeplessness.

Unable to wait the night out, Yoshihei hurried back to the place he had just left. With him he took three bars of gold. The autumn morning fog seemed to be lingering there, trapped, and Yoshihei could hear a goose calling in the distance. When he parted the surrounding grasses and approached the hut, Yoshihei was shocked at the changed scene. Yajiemon lay dead outside his hovel. His hands held the bamboo staff that Yoshihei had brought, the sharpened end piercing his neck. In the spring of the year that followed, Yoshihei married, and he and his wife were happy and blessed with two sons. They carried on their lives untroubled by unusual events, but in the seventh year after the incident with Yajiemon, an error by Yoshihei created an unavoidable necessity for him to take his own life. He made his final preparations in the family home, but was permitted by the sentencing attendant to play a single song on the flute as his last act.

The flute he chose was none other than the one he had received from Ishimi Yajiemon. Yoshihei, his heart at peace, was drawing near the closing phrases of a fine performance when the flute let out an unearthly noise and cracked in half. Astonished, Yoshihei looked at the instrument and found the following words carved into the chamber of the flute.

Nine Hundred Ninety. And then may it end. Hamanushi.

Yoshihei, like any good student of music, knew the name. Muraji Hamanushi of Owari had been the name of the man who popularized the flute among the Japanese, and he was admired as a founding father of the art in Japan. It was now the ninth year of Tempō, and counting backwards that made 990 years since the inaugural year of Emperor Ninmyō's Kashō Era, or four years after Hamanushi had performed the flute at court in the twelfth year of Jōwa. Hamanushi was a player of the flute, but in that early period players were also often the carvers of their own instruments. Since this flute was engraved with Hamanushi's name, it might have been made by his own hands—but never mind that—how on earth had he carved those letters into the narrow chamber of the flute?

Yet another mystery was the coincidence that this precise moment should happen to be the intended 990th year. Had Hamanushi made this flute himself and measured

out that lifespan for it? In that case, perhaps Ishimi Yajiemon's tale of complex fates was not a lie after all. This flute of ghastly attachments had laid its curse upon each successive owner and now, at the moment of its last owner's death, the flute too had finally concluded its 990 years of life.

Though his mind reeled at the mystery, he also recognized the inescapable logic of his and the flute's common end. Once he had related everything he knew to the sentencing attendant of the flute's history up to that very moment, he ended his own life in peace.

This story traveled on, beginning with the attendant, and shocked all those who heard it.

Afterward, it seems that a local appeared who had known Yoshihei as a young man, and after consulting with his surviving family repaired the flute and buried it at what he thought to be the spot of Ishimi Yajiemon's suicide. There he left a marker bearing the words *fue-zuka*, or *whistling mound*. I have heard that it survived until sometime in the Meiji period, only to be lost during a season of repeated floods. It is no longer to be found anywhere today.

Flute mound
by Okamoto Kidou

-1-

I am from the north country, and in my province this ghost story is passed down. Ah, before I tell this story, I'd like to introduce a passage from the essay collection "Mimibukuro" written by the famous official of the Edo era, the Negishi Hizen-no-kami. This story is written in "Mimibukuro". At the time the second assistant to the minister of war Kanemori's family lost their title, the lord's minister --- was commanded to commit seppuku, ritual suicide. This time it had come to the the minister, as was his role, to commit seppuku for the fault of his lord, so in no way was he guilty of anything. On the contrary, as a samurai this was a fulfillment of his greatest desire. However, to tell the truth, he had a crime that he was hiding. When he was young, while traveling he was staying at an inn. After some sort of conversation, his roommate, an itinerant monk, showed him his sword. This was a truly excellent sword, inscribed with the name of a famous swordsmith, so the young samurai came to want it desperately, and at great price earnestly offered to buy it, but he was turned down as it was a family heirloom. Even so, he could not get it out of his head, and the next morning when passing by a remote pine grove with the monk, he suddenly cut the man down, stole the sword, and escaped. This was long ago, and thankfully the time had past to that time with no one to remember this. However, to think of it now it was a deep sin, so the minister said that such a fate was only natural for him and calmly committed seppuku. The story I will tell resembles this a little, but beyond that, I would like you to see this as a much more strange and complex story. In my province Noh drama and Kyogen comedy have been popular since long ago. Accordingly, there are many masters of Noh and Kyogen. Of course because of this, naturally there are samurai that sing Noh songs and some that dance, some that play the flute, and some that play the tsuzumi drum. Among these there was a man named Yagara Kihei. His name sounds somewhat like an old man's, but at the time he was a 19 year old young samurai whose duty was to patrol on horseback. His father was also called Kihei and had died in the summer of his son's 16th year, so this only son, who had only just come of age, took up his father's name and succeeded him as head of the family. In the 4 years since then, this second, young Kihei uneventfully fulfilled his duties and didn't gain any particular bad reputation, so his mother and relatives were relieved and worked behind the scenes to find him a suitable bride to marry when he turned 20. Just as is the custom I mentioned earlier, Kihei as well studied the flute from his childhood. In a different province perhaps he would have been accused of being effeminate, but in this province a person with such talents was, on the contrary, seen as much more of a samurai than a person without any, so no one condemned his passion for the flute. From long ago it was believed that those born in the Marudoshi year had straight teeth well suited to playing the flute, and perhaps because Kihei was born in the second month of a Marudoshi year, his flute playing was quite good. From his childhood people praised him and his parents also boasted of his skill, so this one pastime he did not discard.

It was an autumn night in the first year of Tenpo. Carried away by the moon, Kihei left his estate. He carried his favorite flute in his hand. Stepping into the evening dew, he went down to the riverside, where under the bright moon the heads of the susuki grass and reeds were whitely scattered. The voices of insects could also be heard from somewhere. Kihei, playing his flute, went far down to the lower part of the riverbank when ahead of him he could hear the sound of a flute. He thought that it was certainly not the sound of his own flute sounding off the water but that there was some other player somewhere, and listening carefully for a while he could hear clearly the sound of the flute from far away on the nighttime riverside. Kihei realized that though the player was also not bad, the flute itself seemed to be excellent, and he then wanted to know the owner of this flute. It is not just fall deer that stop at the sound of a flute. Kihei also had his spirit stolen away down its own path, and pulled toward the sound of the flute he found that it was flowing out from between thickly growing susuki grass downstream. Thinking it lonely that another, like himself, was struck by the moon and went out to enjoy himself by playing while being wetted by the evening dew, Kihei snuck up on light feet beside a clump of susuki grass and found there a low hut covered with torn mats. It was a so called "kamaboko" hut (for its resemblance to kamaboko fish loaf, low and rounded), and Kihei realized that the person living there was a homeless beggar. Feeling that it was extremely unusual that such music would come from such a place, Kihei stopped in suspicion. "It couldn't be that a fox or tanuki spirit is tricking me?" Though wondering whether a fox or otter spirit was playing a trick on him, Kihei was also a samurai. At his waist was a Nagasone blade that had been passed down for generations. Thinking that if it was a spirit taking human form that with one stroke he would cut it down, he gathered his courage, parted the susuki, and went ahead. He lifted the mat covering the hut's entrance and there sat a lone man playing the flute. "Hey, hey," Kihei called out. When addressed, the man stopped playing. Taking a careful stance, he looked up at Kihei standing there. The shape of the man shining in the moonlight was unmistakably that of a beggar of about 27 or 28 years, but with one look Kihei saw that he was quite different in description from the usual beggars and homeless tramps that who set up house here, and naturally Kihei reframed his words. "You were playing the flute here?" "Yes," the flutist answered in a low voice. "I heard such a clear tone that in admiration I ended up here," said Kihei with a smile. The man quickly noticed that Kihei also carried a flute in his hand and he loosened a bit, and hearing these words he opened up. "It was such a poor performance, I am embarrassed." "No, not at all! I could tell from what I heard before that it was well practiced. Perhaps it's a bit forward, but couldn't you show me the flute?" "It's just something I have to play with. It's not at all the type of thing someone like you would be interested in," he said, but obviously not intending to refuse he carefully wiped the flute with blades of the susuki grass growing there and respectfully held it out to Kihei. His manner was most certainly not that of a mere beggar. Kihei speculated that this was

probably a wandering samurai, a ronin, that through some circumstance had fallen in the world, and at last addressed him politely.

"Nevertheless, allow me a glance."

He took the flute and examined it in the moonlight. When he was through, he played it to test its tone and found that it was extraordinary. With such a world class instrument, Kihei finally realized that this was no normal man. Though his own flute was of course quite good, in no way could it compare to this one. Kihei wanted to know the story behind why he was carrying such a thing. A sort of curiosity also pushed him, and returning the flute he pushed aside the grass and sat down beside the man.

"How long have you been here?"

"I came about half a month ago."

"Where were you before that?" Kihei continued.

"Since I am in these circumstances, there was no particular rule. I went from the Chugoku region to Kyoto-Osaka, and traveling the Ise road and Omi road, I have wandered on foot here and there."

"You're from a samurai family, aren't you?" Kihei asked suddenly.

The man was silent. In the circumstances, with no negative reply, it seemed as though a confirmation and so Kihei leaned even closer and asked again.

"Surely there must be some particular circumstances for you to be wandering around with such an excellent flute. Don't hold back - couldn't you tell me?"

The man, not surprisingly, remained silent, but when urged again and again by Kihei he reluctantly spoke.

"I am held under a curse by this flute."

-2-

The man was a samurai from Shikoku by the name of Iwami Yajiemon. He, like Kihei, had played the flute as a pastime from the time he was a young boy.

It was around sunset on a spring day when Yajiemon was 19. He was returning home from paying his respects at the temple of his family when he saw a pilgrim to the 88 temples of Shikoku falling over in a remote rice field. Unable to overlook it, he went over and found that it was a man of about 40 suffering from the pain of some illness. Yajiemon pumped some fresh water and gave it to him, took medicine from his own pack and mixed it with the water and gave him that, and looked after him in many ways but the man only declined and finally breathed his last.

The man offered his extreme thanks for the kindness Yajiemon, a total stranger and a samurai, showed in caring for him. He could not pay back such a great debt. Saying that though he thought it unworthy, he wanted to offer some sign of his thanks, the man took a flute from the bag at his back and offered it to Yajiemon.

"This is the only one of its kind in the entire world. Only keep a pure heart so that you don't meet an end like mine."

Leaving behind these puzzling words, the man died. Yajiemon asked the man's home province and name but he only shook his head and did not reply. Wondering what sort of fatal destiny this was, Yajiemon saw to the remains and buried them at his family temple.

The flute this unknown Shikoku pilgrim left behind in memory was truly a rare and excellent instrument. Wondering why the man had carried such a thing, Yajiemon felt it was very suspicious, but in any case he was glad to have gained such an unexpected treasure and valued it as his favorite. About half a year after that, Yajiemon was once again visiting the family temple. When he came upon the rice field in which he had found the Shikoku pilgrim, standing seemingly in wait was a young samurai in traveling gear. "Are you Iwami Yajiemon?" the young samurai came close and asked. When answered, "Yes," he came closer still and said, "I heard in a rumor that you took care of a sick pilgrim to the 88 temples of Shikoku at this place, and from him received the flute from his bag. That pilgrim was my enemy. I came, traveling very far, to take his head and the flute he carried. Though I cannot help that my enemy is dead at least I would like the flute, so I have been waiting for you here."

Told this from out of nowhere, of course Yajiemon would not simply hand it over. He faced the young samurai and answered calmly that, under these circumstances before a complete stranger, he would not be able to speak until he had heard why the young samurai took the Shikoku pilgrim as his enemy. However, the samurai would not explain more thoroughly and forcefully demanded that Yajiemon turn over the flute. When it came to this, Yajiemon increasingly had his doubts and wondered if perhaps this man wasn't trying to con him out of the precious flute. He strongly refused, insisting that as long as he did not know where this samurai was from or the basis of his grudge he would never hand over the flute to him. The face of the young samurai then colored.

"I am prepared for this as well," he said, and put his hand on the hilt of his sword. Realizing that it was useless to reply, Yajiemon also stood on guard. Then, after a few more crossed words, the two swords were drawn and met. The unknown samurai's blood was spilled and before Yajiemon's eyes he collapsed.

"That flute will curse you, bastard!" - with these last words he died.

Having killed his opponent but not knowing quite why this came about, Yajiemon felt as though in a dream. Regardless, if he reported the incident the circumstances are just as above, so he was blameless and it was settled with his opponent fallen dead. All the same he still did not know the identity of either the Shikoku pilgrim who handed the flute down to him, or the aforementioned young samurai.

The issue of cutting down his opponent was in the firstly thus settled, but here one difficulty was awoken. That is to say, this incident made him a reputation throughout the province and even his lord heard of it, and so the order came down for him to show this flute once to the lord. If it was simply to show his lord the flute it would be of no concern, but the lord's mistress was fond of flutes and Yajiemon well knew that she would buy even great luxuries without asking their price. If he carelessly presented the flute, he feared that under the excuse that it was the lord's desire it would be taken by the mistress.

Nevertheless, as a liege there was no way he could refuse any order from his lord.

Yajiemon puzzled over this but no matter how he turned it over he thought it too much to let go of the flute. When it came down to this, there was nothing else he could do. The young man took off with the flute in hand. For the sake of his obsession with this small flute, he threw away the history and inheritance of his ancestors.

Unlike in earlier times, most of the feudal lords then tightly kept their confidences and so would very rarely accept a newcomer. Yajiemon could do nothing but take the flute and become a ronin. He went over to Kyushu, wandered in the Chugoku area, and drifted over to the Kyoto-Osaka region. While scratching out a living, whether from falling ill or being robbed, from one thing to another his bad luck continued on until the once proud samurai Iwami Yajiemon ended up among beggars. In this time, he parted with things both great and small, but the flute alone he would not let go. In this way he came to wander in this northern province now, and the sound of his playing under the moon tonight was by chance overheard by Yagara Kihei.

When Yajiemon came to this point, he sighed deeply. "Just as the words left behind by the Shikoku pilgrim, it seems as though this flute has some kind of curse. I don't know who the former owner was but what I do know is that the pilgrim that carried this died on the roadside. The traveling samurai that came to take this was cut down by me and died. Even I have been reduced to this position for the sake of this flute. When I think of this I am afraid for my end, and many times I have prepared to either sell this flute or break it and throw it away. However, to simply sell it is too much to regret, and to break it and throw it away is at this point a waste, so though I know it is my misfortune I have never let it go and hold onto it still."

Kihei as well could not help but sigh upon hearing this. Though it was not as though he had not heard such eerie stories of deadly fate attached to swords, he did not think such mysteries extended to flutes. However, the young man soon denied all this. Kihei thought that perhaps this beggar of a ronin was afraid he would desire the flute and so deliberately told a mysterious seeming fable, and surely such an incident had not occurred. "No matter how precious an item, I can't imagine not getting rid of it now that it brings misfortune," he said tauntingly.

"Nor do I understand it," replied Yajiemon. "Though I tried to get rid of it I could not. Perhaps that is what they call 'misfortune' or a 'curse'? For the last 10 years I have been in endless agony."

"Endless agony..."

"That is something not worth speaking of to others. Even if I spoke of it, no doubt it would not be seen as truthful."

At this Yajiemon fell silent. Kihei was also still. The only thing that could be heard was the sound of insects. The light of the moon on the riverside was white like upon frost.

"It is already late," Yajiemon finally said, gazing at the sky.

"It is already late," Kihei parroted. He came to himself and stood up.

-3-

Kihei, who parted with the ronin and went home, after a few hours once again showed up at the riverside. He wore a mask and masqueraded in simple clothes. Looking like he was out of the scene at the riverbank by Daianji temple in "Vendetta by a Samurai in Rags," he snuck up on the "kamaboko" hut on light feet.

Kihei wanted the flute so bad he could not stand it. However, from what the ronin said, naturally he did not seem as though he would simply hand it over, so Kihei decided there

was no other way but to conduct a sneak attack and rob him of it. Of course before he settled on this course he hesitated many times, but no matter how he looked at it he had to have that flute. Though his opponent was a ronin, he was a homeless beggar. If he was cut down in secret, it would be settled without any particularly difficult questions. Thinking this, he finally turned himself into a monster and returned once more to his residence and made ready. He waited for the night to deepen, and once again returned to attack the hut.

He did not know if it was truth or lies, but according to the earlier story Yajiemon was a man of considerable strength. It did not really seem as though he had any sort of weapon, but nevertheless Kihei thought that carelessness would not do. He himself had also had the usual training with the sword, but no matter how he looked at it he was inexperienced. Naturally, he had never been in anything like a serious fight. Even for a dirty sneak attack, he thought considerable preparation was necessary, and so from the middle of a clump of bamboo he cut one stalk and fashioned a bamboo spear, and this he held at his side as he surveyed the scene. Taking care not to make the leaves rustle, he parted the susuki grass. He first went to check the area of the hut and found that the sound of the flute had ceased. The mats at the front of the hut were pulled off and the inside was utterly still.

Or so it first seemed, but inside he could hear a low groan. This gradually built and it seemed Yajiemon was suffering intensely. It struck Kihei as not the pain of illness, but rather the sound of a person being assaulted by some sort of nightmare, and he hesitated somewhat. For the sake of the flute, he had been in endless agony for the last 10 years - the earlier story was brought back to Kihei's mind and an eerie foreboding overcame him.

Kihei controlled his breath and looked in. Inside the voice like one struggling in pain grew yet more powerful, and Yajiemon came stumbling out, pushing aside the mats at the entrance as though to tear them apart. Then it seemed that he awoke from the hideous dream, and he took a deep, relieved breath and looked around at his surroundings.

Kihei did not have the time to hide himself. The moon that night unfortunately was shining brightly, so the form of the young man standing about with the bamboo spear at his side shone clearly out before the ronin's eyes. When it came to this, Kihei floundered. He was found out and could delay no longer. He brought up the spear in his hand and gave one thrust, but Yajiemon quickly dodged, grabbed the end of the spear, and pulled strongly, sending Kihei staggering to his knees in the grass. Finding his opponent stronger than he expected, Kihei grew yet more panicked. As he threw away the spear and moved his hand toward his katana, Yajiemon quickly called out to him.

"No, wait... You are obsessed by the flute, I take it?"

His aim pinpointed, Kihei was without words. His hand half raised to his sword, he hesitated for a moment, and Yajiemon quietly said, "If you are so obsessed, I'll give it to you."

Yajiemon went into the hut, brought out the flute, and put it in the silently kneeling Kihei's hand.

"Do not forget our earlier conversation. Keep a pure heart as much as possible if you want to avoid misfortune."

"Thank you," Kihei stuttered out.

"Hurry up and go home before someone sees you," Yajiemon said in warning.

At this point there was nothing to do but follow his opponent's orders. Kihei accepted the flute, rose mechanically, bowed and left.

While returning to his estate, Kihei was hit by a certain shame and remorse. While feeling satisfied and delighted to have gained the excellent flute, matchless in the world, on the other hand he regretted his shameful actions that night. With Yajiemon having simply handed over the flute to him, he was faced with a strengthening remorse in his heart for having committed a crime equal to those of a violent robber. Even so, he was at least glad that by his foolishness he had not killed the man. He decided that when day broke he must once again visit the ronin to apologize for his actions and with that offer something in return for the flute. He quickened his pace and returned to his estate but that night his eyes would not close and he could not sleep.

After impatiently awaiting the dawn, Kihei left very early to visit the scene of last night's events. In his pocket he carried three gold pieces. The morning mist still hung over the riverbank and from somewhere he could hear the crying of geese. When he parted the susuki grass and neared the hut, he was hit with a sudden shock. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead in front of the hut. He held the bamboo spear Kihei had throw off last night in both hands and had pierced his own throat.

The spring of the following year Kihei married. His marriage was harmonious and produced two boys. In this way he lived peacefully until in the autumn of the 7th year from the incident, he committed a mistake in his duties and had no choice but to commit seppuku. He had completed his last preparations at his household and for his final act requested to the official witness to be allowed to play one song on the flute, which the official allowed.

The flute was the very one he received from Iwami Yajiemon. Kihei calmly played and at the very time he ended the song, the flute made a strange noise and suddenly split in two. Wondering over this odd occurrence, he looked over the pieces and found these words etched into the inside of the flute:

990 YEARS AND END - HAMANUSHI

Kihei, from being a student of the art, knew the name Hamanushi. Owari-no-muraji Hamanushi was looked up to in the art as the patriarch who first spread the flute early on. This year was the 9th year of Tenpo, so counting back 990 years it came back to the first year of the Kasha era in the reign of the emperor Ninmyo, in other words about the 4th year since Hamanushi started playing in the imperial court in Showa 12. Hamanushi was an artist that from the beginning had made his own flutes and played them himself. Beyond this flute being inscribed with his name, it was likely made by his hands. However, the question remained as to why he carved just these characters, particularly on the inside of the thin tube and not on the surface of the flute. Another mystery was that just as inscribed - "990 YEARS AND END" - the 990th year was exactly this year. Had Hamanushi made this flute with his own hands and had he himself set these 990 years for it? To think of it now, Iwami Yajiemon's tale of the deadly curse also seemed to ring true.

This flute, carrying this strange and deadly fate, had brought misfortune from one owner to the next, and when the final owner went to meet his end the flute also met the end of its 990 year destiny.

Kihei, while astonished by this mysterious event, also realized that with the flute he as well faced an unavoidable, deadly fate. He faced the official witness and, after confessing all the secrets of the past tied to the flute, calmly committed seppuku.

When hearing this conveyed from the official, everyone was struck with an eerie feeling. Some in the province that had been close to Kihei in his life consulted with the surviving family and, joining the flutes two split pieces, buried them at the spot where Iwami Yajiemon had committed suicide. There he placed a marker inscribed simply, "Flute Mound". The mound remained on the riverside until even after the Meiji period ended in 1912, but I hear that now, after two floods, no trace remains.

FLUTE MOUND

by OKAMOTO KIDO

1

**blank line

I am a man of the north country, and in my clan are handed down strange tales such as this. But no: before I speak of it, I would like to offer a story from the *Mimibukuro*, the 'Collection of Tales Heard', from the pen of Negishi Shizumori, the renowned official of the Edo Period.

Among the stories he wrote in his *Mimibukuro* is this one. When the family name of Kanamori Hyobushoyu, in the land of Mino, was expunged by the Shogun's government, one of its elder retainers was ordered to commit suicide. This elder turned to face the official there to observe the proceedings, and said that as on this occasion he would by cutting open his bowels take upon his own head the sins of his lord's house, he felt not a trace of regret. This was, rather, what as a samurai he had always wished for the opportunity to do. 'To speak the truth, however, there is one sin your humble servant has always concealed. When traveling in my youth once I stopped at an inn, and a mountain hermit in the course of a conversation on some matter drew his sword to show it to me. As it was indeed a fine sword, far superior to most, I then and there conceived the desire for it and for the offer of a considerable

sum begged that it be ceded me, but was refused with the explanation that the item had been in his family for generations. Still I could not abandon my desire for it, so the following morning I set out with the hermit and, just as we entered an untraveled stretch of pine woods, suddenly cut him down, robbed him of the sword, and fled. This was long ago, and I have had the good fortune to pass the long years up to this moment with no one learning of it, but even now I remember it as a grievous sin, and for this sin alone it is only fitting that your humble servant die in this manner.' With these words he cut open his bowels in splendid fashion. In the tale I will now relate there is much that is similar, but I would wish it remembered that my story is far more complex, and macabre.

In the place I am from, the arts of Noh, its songs and its farces, have long been in vogue. There are thus many masters of Noh song and farce. It is almost certainly in this connection that there are among its samurai, too, those who can perform its songs, of course, but also even its dances. There are as well those who blow upon the flute. There are as well those who strike the hand-drum. One of those was a man named Yagara Kihee. While the name somehow suits an elderly man, he was at that time still a young samurai of nineteen serving in His Lordship's field guard. As his father, also named Kihee, had fallen ill and died in the summer of his heir's sixteenth year, this only son, having only just celebrated his coming-of-age ceremony, had succeeded to his name and, without impediment, to his position. Because over the next four years, in the old style of counting, the young second of the name Kihee had as well carried out his duties without incident, and was not generally held in poor esteem, his mother and his kin were reassured, and had quietly set their minds to such matters as a suitable bride for the following year, when he would turn twenty.

It being the sort of place I have described, Kihee had also, since his hair was cut in bangs across his forehead, learned to blow on the flute. While in another domain this might have rather been taken as effeminate, in this domain, more than one without arts, it was instead the man with airs and graces of this kind who was held to be most like a true samurai, and there was no one who reproached him for playing the flute.

Folk wisdom has long held that because one born early in the year will have well-formed teeth and thus be suited to blowing on the flute, so perhaps it is because this Kihee was born in February and had passed almost twelve months before reaching his first New Year and being counted as two years old that he was very skilled at the flute, and since from his childhood he had been praised, and his parents had taken pride in it, this was the one indulgence he had even now not abandoned.

It was an autumn night in 1830, the first year of the Tenpo era. Buoyant in the light of a fine moon, Kihee left his residence. In his hand he held his favorite flute. Stepping through the night-time dew, he came out of the castle to the river bank, where the bright moonlight tousled the ears of the pampas grass and reeds with white. All around could be heard the sounds of insects. As Kihee, blowing his flute, descended far downstream along the river bank, he heard the sound of another flute in the direction he was going.

Thinking this was not his flute echoing off the water, that without doubt there was another person playing somewhere, he listened intently for a while, and heard the sound of this flute coming clearly through the night along the river bank. The person blowing was not unskilled, but Kihee realized that the flute seemed to be a very fine one indeed, and he conceived the desire to know its owner.

It was not purely from instinct, like a moth to flame, that he went toward the sound of the flute. Kihee's soul was also lost to his avocation, and as he was drawn toward the sound of this flute, it came seeping to him from downstream through the intervals between the pampas grass. Was there someone like him who had come out tonight, buoyant in the moonlight, wet with the night-time dew, to entertain himself with playing? That would be a fine thing, Kihee thought, and when, treading silently, he had crept through the clumps of pampas grass, there was a small hut with sides of torn straw matting. It was literally a beggar's hut, and living there, Kihee realized, was a vagabond with no proper home.

Feeling it very strange that such timbre should emanate from a place like this, Kihee stopped, warily.

'Surely this couldn't be a fox or a badger out to deceive me...'

Though he was suspicious that a fox or an otter might be using his avocation to play an evil trick on him, Kihee was still a samurai. On his hip he wore a Nagasone Kotetsu sword handed down over generations. When, in firm resolve to cut down with one slash and walk away if there were any kind of other-worldly transformation, he threaded his way through a clump of pampas grass and raised the mat over the entrance of the hut, there was a lone man sitting, playing the flute.

'Here, now! Here, now!'

Thus addressed, the man stopped playing the flute. Then, adopting a cautious posture, he looked up at Kihee standing there.

Lit by the moon, he was in his bearing unmistakably the very picture of a beggar, but Kihee saw at a glance there was something in the character of the man, 27 or 28 years in age, that was quite different from the typical sort of homeless vagabond, so he decided to speak more politely.

'Were you the person playing the flute here?'

'Yes,' the man answered in a low voice.

'Hearing such a fine, clear tone, I have come here completely captivated by it,' said Kihee with a smile.

The man quickly saw that Kihee's hand was holding a flute as well, and his demeanor seemed to soften slightly. His words also sounded less cautious.

'I am embarrassed at such a poor melody.'

'No, not at all. I have been listening for some time, and you seem one who has practiced a great deal. If I may be so bold, could you perhaps show me that flute?'

'It is merely something I blow into to amuse myself. It is far from being a thing fit to set before one such as yourself.'

Thus he spoke, but with no particular sense of reluctance, and with a pampas-grass leaf growing near him carefully wiped his flute and formally proffered it to Kihee.

His manner was in no way that of a mere beggar. Kihee surmised that he was most likely a samurai of no position who for some reason had fallen in the world, and addressed him with greater politeness.

‘I am honored, then, to examine it.’

He accepted the flute, and peered at it in the light of the moon. Then, asking if he might, he blew into it to try it, and as this was indeed a most rare flute whose notes were far from the common run, Kihee saw more and more that this was no ordinary man. His own flute was, of course, quite a superior one, but in no way did it compare with this. Kihee began to want to know its provenance, how the man had come to possess it. Acting partly out of a kind of curiosity, as he returned the flute he spread some pampas grass and sat down beside his companion.

‘How long has it been since you came here?’

‘I came about two weeks ago.’

‘Where were you until then?’ Kihee asked.

‘Being in such circumstances, I have not really been in any particular spot. I have wandered on foot from place to place, from Chugoku to Kyoto and Osaka, along the road through Ise, and the road through Oumi.’

‘You are a samurai, are you not?’ Kihee asked suddenly.

The man was silent. In this situation, as his not giving some kind of answer denying this could be seen as confirmation, Kihee pressed further with his questions.

‘There must be some reason why, possessing so fine a flute as this, you are wandering in this way. If there is nothing to prevent the telling, may I hear why?’

The man remained silent, but under persistent urging from Kihee, he reluctantly began to speak.

‘Your humble servant is cursed by this flute.’

**blank line

**blank line

2

**blank line

The man was Iwami Yajizaemon, a samurai of Shikoku. In the same way as Kihee, it had been from childhood his inclination to blow upon the flute.

It was at dusk on a spring evening when Yajizaemon was nineteen. He was returning home from paying homage at his family temple when he discovered a Shikoku pilgrim fallen in a lightly traveled area of rice paddies. Unable to ignore this, he stopped and drew near, to find a man of nearly forty, suffering the ravages and pains of illness. Yajizaemon drew water from a nearby spring, brought it and gave it to the man to drink, gave him medicine he had in his walking-out box, and tended him in various ways, but the man’s sufferings grew steadily worse, and in the end the breath was taken from him.

He was exceedingly grateful for Yajizaemon’s consideration, saying ‘a samurai, a complete stranger, has shown me such kindness. I have no words

to express the gratitude I feel for this degree of favor. In which regard, though it is the epitome of poor manners, I would like to give you this as a token of my thanks,' and from the sash at his waist he took out a pouch with a flute inside, and offered it to Yajizaemon.

'This is a thing unlike none other on earth. However, keep it always in mind that you must not come to an end like mine.'

Leaving this puzzling remark, he died. Yajizaemon had asked him things like his birthplace and his name, but he had shaken his head and did not answer. Assuming this was the working of karma, Yajizaemon attended to the body and laid it to rest at his family temple.

The flute left by the nameless Shikoku pilgrim was indeed an item of rare quality. Yajizaemon considered it extremely dubious how the man had come to have such a thing, but in any event he was delighted to have by lucky accident obtained an extraordinary treasure; he cherished it as his own, and then it was six months later. Yajizaemon had again today paid homage at his family temple, and as he entered among the rice paddies where he had found the Shikoku pilgrim, a lone young samurai, in traveler's garb, stood as if waiting for him.

The young samurai drew near and addressed him. 'Would Your Honor be Squire Iwami Yajizaemon?'

To the answer of 'that is so,' he came even closer, and said 'I have heard tell that some days past in this place Your Honor tended to a sick man, a Shikoku pilgrim, and that in remembrance of him you received a flute in a pouch, but that Shikoku pilgrim is one upon whom I am sworn to take revenge. I have come all the way here to take his head and the flute he has, although if my enemy himself has already died a natural death, there is nothing to be done, but at the very least I would like to request that flute, and have been waiting for you here for quite some time.'

Addressed this way so suddenly, Yajizaemon for his part was not about to meekly hand it over. Facing the young samurai, he answered, 'I can make you no reply, sir, until I have been informed who and what you may be, and for what reason you bear hatred unto vengeance toward a Shikoku pilgrim such as he,' but the other man gave no exact explanation, pressing him harshly in all manner of ways to surrender the flute.

Now it had come to this, suspicion began to grow in Yajizaemon, and he wondered if the man was not perhaps manufacturing this story to cheat him out of the precious flute, so he turned him down in no uncertain terms; when he said 'as long as I know neither your name nor your reasons for vengeance, and know them for certain, I will never surrender it to you,' his young samurai opponent's face changed color.

'In that case I am resolved,' he said, and clapped his hand to the hilt of his sword. Judging there was no more time for talk, Yajizaemon also tensed. Then, after two or three harsh exchanges of words, two swords were clanged together and the young samurai, covered in blood, fell before Yajizaemon's eyes.

'That flute will curse you!'

With these words he died. Having killed his opponent without knowing why, Yajizaemon stood for some time as if in a trance, but then he quickly

reported the facts as they had occurred, and since the circumstances were as above, in the end Yajizaemon was held blameless, and his opponent had died for nothing. Who the Shikoku pilgrim was that had given him the flute, or who the subsequent young samurai was, he of course never knew.

The matter of his having killed an opponent was more or less settled, but from it arose a difficulty. This was that the incident caused a sensation throughout the domain, and the story reaching the ears of the Lord of that domain as well, the order came down that he would like to have a look at this flute. For His Lordship simply to see the flute would not present a problem, but Yajizaemon knew very well that the Lord's lady wife was fond of the instrument, and bought up good ones with no regard to price. If he thoughtlessly offered up the flute, there was the danger that it would be taken away by Milady, on the pretext that this was the Lord's wish. As a retainer, however, he could not for a moment refuse an order from his lord. Yajizaemon agonized over this, but no matter how he looked at it, he could not bring himself to let the flute out of his hands.

Now it had come to this, there was nothing else to do. Hugging the flute close to him, the young man fled his quarters. For the sake of his attachment to one single flute, he had abandoned the samurai family position passed down from his ancestors.

Unlike ancient times, in those days the finances of all the great lords were strained, and it was very rare that one would take on a new retainer. There was nothing else for Yajizaemon, holding his flute close, but to become a masterless samurai. He crossed over to Kyushu, wandered through Chugoku, then drifted to Kyoto and Osaka, and while he was searching for a means of support, was plagued by disease, fell among thieves, and on and on through all manner of ill fortune until finally the upstanding samurai named Iwami Yajizaemon sank into the depths of a crowd of beggars.

During that time he had let go both his dagger and long sword, but this flute alone he would not part with. Thus he had wandered to this northern land, and the notes as he entertained himself playing to the moon had happened to strike the ear of Yagara Kihee.

Having told his story this far, Yajizaemon heaved a sigh.

'As that Shikoku pilgrim said before he died, there would seem to be some kind of a curse on this flute. I do not know who its owner was in ages past, but of those I do know, the Shikoku pilgrim who had it died at the side of the road. The traveling samurai who came to take it was struck down by me and died. I, too, because of this flute, have come to this. When I think that, I fear for what will become of me, and many is the time I have steeled myself to just selling it off, or to breaking it and throwing it away, one of the two, but I cannot bear to simply sell it, even less can I bear to break it and throw it away, and so I keep it, knowing that it brings disaster upon me.'

Kihee had been unable to listen without sighing as well. It is not as if he had never over the years heard eerie stories of the workings of karma that involved swords, but he had never thought such strange doings might involve a flute.

However, young man that he was, he quickly discounted this. He concluded that this vagabond samurai was probably worried he would ask

for the flute, had deliberately concocted this bizarre story to tell him, and in fact these incidents had never happened.

‘However precious a thing it is, I cannot understand why you would not let it go, knowing that it brings misfortune upon you,’ he said in tones of rebuke.

‘That I do not understand myself,’ said Yajizaemon. ‘I try to throw it away, and I cannot. Perhaps that is the misfortune, and the curse. For ten years counting I have been tormented without cease by it.’

‘Tormented without cease...’

‘This you must not tell anyone else. But even if you do speak of it, you will not be thought to be relating truth.’

Abruptly Yajizaemon fell silent. Kihee was also silent. The only thing to be heard were the cries of insects. The light of the moon shone on the river bank white as frost.

‘It has grown late,’ said Yajizaemon after a time, looking up at the sky.

‘It has grown late.’ Kihee repeated. Coming to himself, he rose to his feet.

**blank line

**blank line

3

**blank line

Having left the masterless samurai and returned home, Kihee waited a while before he again appeared on the river bank. He wore a mask, and was lightly dressed. Looking like a character out of the Daian Temple embankment scene of the play *The Tapestry of Revenge*, he crept silently toward the beggar’s hut.

Kihee wanted a flute like this so badly he could not bear it. But from the way the masterless samurai had spoken, it did not at any rate appear that he would meekly give it up, so instead Kihee had resolved that there was nothing else to do but ambush him and steal it. He had of course paused many times in the firming of this resolve, but ponder as he would, he wanted that flute. Masterless samurai though his opponent might be, he was still a homeless vagabond. If he were to be cut down without anyone knowing, there would be no particularly severe investigation. At this thought he had become more and more a demon, and withdrawing for a time to his residence to prepare himself, he had waited for the night to wear on and once again come here to make his attack.

He did not know if it was true, but from the earlier tale, this Yajizaemon would seem to be fairly skilled. The man did not seem to have anything in the nature of a weapon, but even still Kihee felt he should not be without care. He himself was appropriately trained in swordsmanship, but for all that he was young. He had of course no experience of battle to the death with real swords. Thinking that a fair degree of preparation would be necessary for even a cowardly ambush, he cut a piece of bamboo from a grove along the way and fashioned it into a spear that he held as he approached. Gently parting the pampas grass to prevent it from rustling, he listened for goings-on inside the hut, where the sound of the flute had ceased. The mat over the door of the hut was down, and in it there was no sound of movement.

As he thought this, there came a low moaning from inside. It grew louder and louder; Yajizaemon seemed to be suffering horribly. As it would appear that this was not illness, but rather that he was being plagued by some form of nightmare, Kihee hesitated for a moment. Remembering what he had been told, that for the sake of this flute the man had been tormented without cease for ten years counting, Kihee somehow felt a vague sense of disquiet.

As he listened with bated breath, the voice inside became gradually more intense, an agonized writhing, the mat over the entrance flew aside as if torn away, and Yajizaemon came rolling out of the hut. Then, apparently awakened from this terrifying dream, he heaved a sigh of relief, and looked around.

Kihee had no time to hide himself. As the moon tonight was, alas, clear and bright, it lit him up big as life as he stood there frozen, clutching his bamboo spear, right before the eyes of the masterless samurai.

It having come to this, Kihee panicked. Discovery was the end; there was no time to lose. When, adjusting his grip on the spear he carried he simply thrust it forward, Yajizaemon swiftly dodged and, as he seized the tip of the spear and pulled strongly on it, Kihee stumbled and fell to his knees on the grass.

Because this was a more worthy opponent than he had thought, Kihee grew more and more flustered. He threw the spear aside and was about to clap his hand to his sword when Yajizaemon quickly spoke to him.

‘No, a moment... Your Honor is obsessed with my flute?’

His mind thus read, Kihee had no words. When, beaten, he hesitated for a moment after taking his hand from his sword, Yajizaemon spoke quietly.

‘If you feel that strongly, I will give it to you.’

Yajizaemon went into the hut, brought out the flute, and gave it to the silently kneeling Kihee.

‘Do not forget what I told you earlier. Be very careful that disaster does not befall you.’

‘I thank you,’ said Kihee with a stammer.

‘Go home now, while no one is watching,’ Yajizaemon said, as if to warn him.

Given the circumstances, there was nothing else to do but obey the other’s instructions. Kihee politely accepted the flute and, moving almost like an automaton, bowed wordlessly and left.

On the way back to his residence, Kihee was assailed by mingled feelings of shame and guilt. While he felt joy and satisfaction at having obtained an instrument the like of which did not exist, on the other hand he agonized over his shameful conduct of this night. Whereas the other had without demur simply handed over this flute, his grievous sin, tantamount to armed robbery, weighted his mind with stronger and stronger feelings of remorse. Still, at least, he considered himself happy at the fact that he had not compounded things by killing his opponent.

Resolving that when it grew light that he must once again call upon the masterless samurai, apologize for his shameful conduct of this evening and make some recompense for the flute, he quickened his step and returned to

his residence, but that night his eyes remained open, and he could not relax and fall asleep.

At the long-awaited dawn, Kihee hurried to the scene of the previous night's events. In his robe he carried three gold *ryo*. The autumn mist still drifted over the river bank, and from somewhere could be heard the call of wild geese.

When he parted the pampas grass and approached the hut, Kihee had a very sudden shock. Iwami Yajizaemon lay dead in front of the hut. He had taken the bamboo spear Kihee had discarded in both hands, and stabbed it through his very own throat.

In the spring of the following year, Kihee welcomed a bride, the couple got on well together, and were blessed with two boys. They then lived after that without incident, but in the autumn of the seventh year following the incident described here, due to a lapse in the conduct of his duties it came to pass that he would have to commit ritual suicide. At the residence in which he lived he made his final preparations, turned to the supervising official with a request in his last moments to play a melody on the flute, and the official gave his assent.

His flute was the one relinquished to him by Iwami Yajizaemon. Kihee blew calmly, peacefully, and just as he was about to end the song the flute, with an unsettling sound, snapped suddenly in two. Thinking this was strange, he looked at it, and found the following characters inscribed inside it.

'Nine hundred ninety years. Here it ends. Hamanushi'

Kihee, a student of Confucianism, certainly knew the name 'Hamanushi'. Muraji Hamanushi of Owari, who first popularized the flute in our emperor's court, is venerated as the founder of Confucian studies in Japan. As this was 1838, the ninth year of the Tenpo era, counting backwards nine hundred and ninety years from this one corresponds to the first year of the Kajo era, when the emperor was Nimmyo, the fourth year after Hamanushi began to perform on the flute for the court in the twelfth year of Showa. Hamanushi was a flautist, and in the beginning he both made his own instruments and played on them. Since Hamanushi's name was inscribed on the flute, one could very likely assume that it was made at his hand, but while it would not be difficult on the outside of the flute, it is a question how all these characters were carved into the inside of such a slender tube.

An even greater mystery is the 'Nine hundred ninety years. Here it ends', with the nine hundred ninetieth year corresponding exactly to this one. Was one to conclude that Hamanushi himself had made the flute, and himself decided its lifetime? Thinking about it now, even Iwami Yajizaemon's tale of karma did not ring false. This flute, with its dark karma, had brought calamity on one owner after another, and now, as it destroyed its final possessor, would seem also to have numbered the last of its nine hundred ninety years.

Kihee, while this mystery astounded him, realized that his ineluctable karma united his fate with that of the flute. Facing the supervising official, he revealed all the secrets of the history relating to this flute, and cut open his bowels in splendid fashion.

This being passed on from the mouth of the official, it struck all who heard it with a strange feeling. One who had been friendly with Kihee in his lifetime discussed this with his surviving family, the two parts of the broken flute were rejoined, buried in the spot where Iwami Yajizaemon was thought to have killed himself, and a stone was set up with the two characters 'flute mound' inscribed upon it. The mound remained on the river bank for at least thirty years, until after the beginning of the Meiji era, but owing to two floods, I am told that now not a trace of it remains.

**blank space

**blank space

end

The Flute Mound
by Okamoto Kidô

**blank line

I

I am from the northern provinces, and in my domain this kind of ghost story is often told. But before I tell you the tale, I want to introduce one passage from the book of essays **Mimibukuro** written by the famous Edo period magistrate Negishi Yasumori. In **Mimibukuro** there is to be found this story. At the time that the house of Lord Kanamori of Mino was being punitively crushed by the Tokugawa feudal government, one of its clan elders was ordered to commit suicide. The elder faced the official government observer and said that because his suicide would allow him to take full responsibility for the wrongs of his clan, he had nothing at all to regret. On the contrary, to die thus was but to attain every samurai's most deeply held desire. To tell the truth, however, there was a crime that he was hiding. "While young," he said, "I went on a journey and stopped at a wayside inn, where a mountain ascetic who was also staying there happened in the course of some conversation to draw out his great sword to show me. It was a magnificent piece the like of which is not often seen in the world, and I keenly wanted it for my own, so I pleaded with him to sell it to me for a considerable sum, but he refused, saying that it had been in his family for generations. I could not give up my desire nevertheless, so the next morning I set out together with the ascetic, and when we came to a grove of pines where few people were about, I turned on him suddenly, cutting him down, and fled, taking his great sword with me. That happened now long ago, and I have been fortunate in that the days and months have passed until this day without anyone finding out, but as I reflect back on it now, I see the gravity of my sin, and for even that crime alone, to die in this manner is only natural." So saying, he then proceeded to disembowel himself in the normal way. What I am about to relate to you seems to have much in common with this tale, but I would have you see it as both more complex and more bizarre.

In my province, Nô chanting and their attendant kyôgen farces have always been popular, and many are the master teachers, therefore, of both chanting and the farce. And probably because of their relation to these, there are also, as you might expect, ones who play the flute as well as aficionados of the hand drum. One among those was a man named Yagara Kihei. From his name you might think that he was older, but he was still then a young samurai, only nineteen at the time and a member of his lord's mounted guard. His father had also been called Kihei and in the summer of the son's sixteenth year had died of an illness, so this only son, who had barely come of age, had taken his father's name and smoothly assumed the headship of the family. For the next four years, the young second generation Kihei carried out his responsibilities well enough that his reputation suffered not at all, which relieved both his mother and their relations, and all secretly hoped that the next year when Kihei turned twenty, he would take an appropriate bride.

The customs of the region being as I have described them, Kihei too from a young age had learned the flute. Had it been another domain, activity of this sort might well have subjected him to the charge of weakness, but here one with a taste for such things was thought better of than those unlearned in the arts and considered if anything *more* worthy as a samurai; therefore, there was no one who criticized him for constantly playing his flute.

Folklore has it that the teeth of one born early in the year come in straight, making him apt for playing the flute, and I do not know if it was because Kihei was born in February or not, but

he was quite good at the flute and from childhood was both praised by others and the source of pride for his parents. Now as an adult he remained loath to give up this diversion.

It was an autumn evening in the fall of 1830. Stirred by the moon's beauty, Kihei left his residence, his prized flute in hand. Stepping through evening dew, he went out of the castle grounds down along the bank of the river to find a disordered mass of pampas grass and reeds, white beneath the bright moon, with insects chirping somewhere among them. Playing his flute as he went, Kihei had moved far downstream along the bank when he reached a place where he heard coming to him from somewhere up ahead the sound of another flute.

It was not his own flute echoing back off the water. No, this most certainly was another person playing, so he stopped for a moment and strained to listen. The sound of the flute came clearly to him from far away along the nighttime river bank. The person blowing on the flute was not unskilled, but the flute itself, Kihei realized, seemed particularly exceptional and he desired to meet its owner.

It is not only autumn deer who flock to the sound of a flute. Kihei's soul being consumed as it was by this his beloved discipline, he was drawn in the direction of the flute, whose notes drifted to him through the tangled clumps of pampas grass downstream. This might well be one who, like himself, was stirred by that night's moon to walk among the drenching dews playing his flute -- "And paying it almost too beautifully," he thought -- so he stole noiselessly closer through clumps of pampas grass to find there a low ramshackle hut covered in torn rush mats. It was a mean hovel, and Kihei knew that the one who lived there was no doubt a homeless beggar.

That such a sound might pour from this place was exceedingly strange, and Kihei stopped wonderingly in his tracks.

"Surely this is not some fox or badger out to bewitch me!"

Though Kihei had his doubts, thinking this might be a fox or river otter out to take advantage of his passion to play him a dirty trick, he was after all a samurai. From his belt hung the blade forged for his family generations before by the venerable swordsmith Nagasone Kotetsu. Were he to meet some goblin, he had but to cut it down with a stroke of his sword, he thought plucking up his courage, so he parted a tangled clump of pampas and stepped forward, lifting up the rush mat covering the entrance to the hovel. Before him sat a solitary man playing a flute.

"What is this?"

So addressed, the man quit playing his flute, and shifting his position so as to be ready for anything, he looked up at Kihei, who stood before him.

Lit by the light of the moon, the man's appearance was undoubtedly that of a beggar, but the merest glance told Kihei that this man of twenty-seven or eight was not your ordinary homeless mendicant hunkering down in a make-shift nest, and his address immediately became more polite.

"Were you the person who was playing the flute?"

"Yes," answered the flutist in a low voice.

"The tones I heard were so very clear," said Kihei smiling, "that I couldn't help coming here to see for myself."

Seeing immediately that his visitor carried in his own hand a flute as well, the man's demeanor seemed to relax somewhat, and his form of address softened as well.

"I play so very poorly that I'm quite embarrassed."

“You shouldn’t be. It was not at all poor. In fact, from what I heard, I could tell that you are one quite practiced in the instrument. Would it be too much to ask you to show me this flute?”

“Truly this is something that I play simply for my own pleasure and is not worthy of the glance of one such as you,” he answered, but without any air of reluctance, he carefully wiped the flute dry using blades of pampas grass that grew there and deferentially placed the instrument before Kihei.

This manner was most certainly not that of a mere beggar. Kihei surmised that the man was perhaps a *rônin*, a masterless samurai, who had for some reason fallen on hard times, and Kihei’s own manner only became more polite.

“With your permission,” he said, picking up the flute and peering through it in the light of the moon. As he had been granted permission, he tried blowing a note and found that indeed it was of no ordinary quality. It was truly an exceptional instrument the like of which was not often found in the world, which only confirmed for Kihei all the more that this man was more than he seemed. His own flute was of course of considerable quality, but it was nothing to compare with this. Kihei wanted to know how the man had come into possession of it as well as its history. Spurred in part by a kind of curiosity, he gave back the flute and, bending down some pampas grass there, sat down beside the man.

“When did you come here?”

“I made my way to this place about two weeks ago.”

“And where were you before that?” Kihei further asked.

“Given my circumstances, I am not the kind to have any fixed abode. I’ve wandered here and there, walking from the Chûgoku region to Kyoto and Osaka, up the Ise Road and down the Ômi Highway.”

The man hesitated. Knowing that the lack of any sort of negative response would be seen as indicating tacit approval, Kihei inched a bit closer and asked, “There must be a reason that you possess such an extraordinary flute while yet drifting about like this. By your leave, I would have you tell me this story.”

The man remained silent, but prodded again and again by Kihei, he eventually, though reluctantly, opened his mouth.

“I have been cursed by this flute.”

**blank line

II

The man was a samurai from the island of Shikoku by the name of Iwami Yajiemon. Like Kihei, he had since boyhood loved playing the flute.

It was on an evening in spring in Yajiemon’s nineteenth year. He was on his way home after worshipping at the Bodai Temple when, in a deserted paddy field, he discovered lying there a Shikoku pilgrim, one who was making the circuit of Shikoku’s eighty-eight temples. Unable simply to pass him by, he approached and found a man of forty or so writhing in pain from sickness. Finding some clean water nearby which he brought the man to drink, Yajiemon took medicine from his own medicine kit and fed it to him. Despite Yajiemon’s best efforts, though, the man’s suffering only increased, and in the end, he breathed his last.

The man had greatly appreciated Yajiemon’s kindness, wondering that this total stranger of a samurai would go to such lengths for him. As a sign of his appreciation, he had said he wanted to give Yajiemon something, insufficient though it may be, and had taken from his waist a bag containing the flute to press upon him.

“This piece has no peer in the world, but you must take great care so as not to meet an end like mine.”

Leaving behind but this mysterious statement, the man died. Yajiemon had asked him the province he had hailed from and his name, but the man had only shaken his head without answering. He must have had some reason for this, Yajiemon thought, so he looked after his remains and had them interred at his own Bodai Temple.

The flute left as a memento of the anonymous pilgrim of Shikoku was indeed an absolutely incomparable instrument. Yajiemon could in no way account for its having passed into the man's hands, but however it had come about, he was overjoyed to acquire this unlooked-for treasure, which he cherished, and so the situation remained for perhaps half a year. One day when Yajiemon had again gone to worship at Bodai Temple, he came to the field where he had earlier stumbled upon the Shikoku pilgrim and found waiting for him there a young samurai dressed as for a journey.

“Would you, sir, be Iwami Yajiemon, by any chance?” asked the young samurai drawing close.

When Yajiemon answered that he was, the man drew even closer. “Rumor has it,” he said, “that you ministered at this place to a sick Shikoku pilgrim, and that you received from him as memento a flute in a bag. Well, that Shikoku pilgrim was my sworn enemy. It was to take his head as well as charge of all he possessed that I have come on this long journey, but since my enemy is already dead of an illness, I realize that there is nothing I can do as regards him, but I have waited here for you for some time, hoping at the very least to take charge of the flute.”

At such a bolt from the blue, Yajiemon was not simply going to hand over the flute. He turned to the young samurai and said that he had no idea who he might be and where he might hail from, nor had he any knowledge of the particulars that had led to the man's swearing a vendetta against the Shikoku pilgrim, and that without such information, there was no answer that he could really make. The young man, however, provided no details in response, and desperately insisted that Yajiemon turn over the flute.

This response only made Yajiemon more suspicious and left him wondering if the young man weren't trying to swindle him out of the valuable flute. Without knowing anything certain about the young man's origins or the details of the vendetta, he would not, he told him in no uncertain terms, hand the flute over to him. At this, the young samurai's expression darkened.

Then there was nothing more to say, the man said determinedly and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. Seeing that it could not be avoided, Yajiemon set himself. After just two or three increasingly angry exchanges, swords were drawn, and soon the young samurai about whom nothing was known lay bloodied before Yajiemon.

“For this, I curse you!” uttered the man as he died.

Having killed another for some unfathomable reason, Yajiemon felt as if he were in some kind of dream. He reported the events just as they had happened, and in the end no censure was leveled at him, the matter being settled with the only loss being to the man who was killed. And of course he knew nothing concerning the identities of either the Shikoku pilgrim who had given him the flute or later the young samurai.

As to the cutting down of the young samurai, the matter was settled thus, but a further difficulty then occurred. Within his own domain, the story was passed about and eventually reached the ear of his feudal lord, who decreed then that he be shown this flute. Were it simply a matter of his lord's examining the flute, there could be little problem, but Yajiemon well knew that his lord's consort, a flute aficionado, was buying any and all flutes of quality no matter the

price. Were he so careless as to show this flute, he feared that it might be taken from him by his lord's consort under the pretext that it was his lord's desire. Nevertheless, how could he, a mere retainer, refuse to honor his lord's decree? Perplexed though he was, the one thing that he knew for certain was that he did not want to give up the flute.

Given the situation, he felt he had no choice. He gathered up the flute and fled his residence. In his obsession with a mere flute, he was willing to throw away the feudal rank and stipend that had passed down to him through generations.

Unlike the old days, the financial situation of the various daimyo lords allowed little leeway, and there was almost no likelihood of his being taken on by a new lord. Yajiemon had little choice but to take his flute and become a *rônin*. He wandered off to Kyushu, then about western Honshu, eventually finding his way to the Kyoto-Osaka area. As he made his way in the world, he encountered sickness and suffered being robbed, and in the end, Iwami Yajiemon, who had begun as a cut above his fellow samurai, fell into the ranks of beggars.

Along the way he rid himself of possessions both large and small, but never once did he consider letting go of the flute. And now he had found his way into this northern province and was playing his flute under the moon of this evening, when unexpectedly, Yagara Kihei had come within hearing of it.

At this point in his story, Yajiemon drew a long sigh.

"It is as the Shikoku pilgrim said in his the last words -- this flute carries with it some kind of curse. I do not know of its earlier masters, but of just what I do know, the Shikoku pilgrim had it in his possession when he died upon the road; the wayfaring samurai who sought to take it from him died at my hand; and for this flute I too have fallen to the extent that you find me now. When I think of the pass this has brought me to, I have resolved time and again either to sell it off or break it in two and be rid of it, but selling it seemed too great a waste and neither could I bear to destroy it. So, though I knew full well that it would probably mean my ruin, I have held onto it and never let go."

Kihei too could not listen to this tale without sighing himself. Though he had long heard similar tales of woe concerning swords, never had he thought such strange things might happen concerning a flute.

But being young, Kihei immediately said to himself no, this could not be. Most likely this *rônin* beggar, fearing that Kihei himself desired the flute, had fabricated this entire tale. After all, could such a thing be true?

"I don't care how strong your feelings of regret might be," he said with some asperity, "I cannot understand how you couldn't give it up when you knew it meant your ruin!"

"I too cannot make it out," Yajiemon answered. "I try to rid myself of it but cannot. That is my ruin, is it not -- my curse? It is now going on ten years that I have suffered this endless torment."

"Endless torment..."

"This is something I have spoken to no one else about. It is, I fear, something that no one would believe real."

At that, Yajiemon fell silent. Kihei too said nothing. All that could be heard were the cries of the crickets. The light of the moon alighting on the river bank shone white as if covered in dew.

"The hour is late," said Yajiemon, looking up at the sky.

"The hour is late," parroted Kihei. Coming to himself, he rose to his feet.

**blank line

III

Kihei parted from the *rônin*, but within half an hour he reappeared on the river bank, wearing a mask and assuming a disguise. In what had all the trappings of the climactic revenge-taking scene from a Kabuki drama, he stole noiselessly up to the ramshackle hovel.

Kihei desired the flute more than anything, but given what he had said, the *rônin* would not easily give it up. Kihei decided that he must attack the man under cover of darkness and take it from him by force. Of course, before coming to this resolution he hesitated a number of times, but in the end, he simply had to have that flute. *Rônin* though the other man may be, he was still a homeless beggar. Were Kihei to cut the man down unbeknownst to anyone else, there would likely be little in the way of an investigation. And with this thought, he now had himself finally become a rogue. Returning briefly to his residence, he had made his preparations. Waiting then until the night had deepened to its darkest moment, he had returned here to carry out his attack.

Whether true or not he had no idea, but from what he had heard earlier, this Yajiemon possessed a considerable amount of prowess. Though the man had not appeared to have any sort of weapon on hand, still he should remain on his guard, Kihei thought to himself. He himself had been trained in the martial arts, but his youth was a problem. He had, of course, never fought a “real” battle, to the death. And even this cowardly sort of surprise attack would require, he thought, a great deal of careful preparation; therefore, he cut out a single length of bamboo and fashioned it into a spear, which he tucked under his arm to make his way ahead. Being careful not rustle the leaves, he quietly parted the pampas grass and approached close to the hovel. The flute now silent, the reed mat was lowered over the entrance, and inside nothing stirred.

But then, from within could be heard a low groan, which gradually grew louder. It seemed that Yajiemon suffered greatly, though not from illness; rather, it was as if he were having some sort of nightmare, and Kihei momentarily paused. For the flute, the man had told him earlier, he had suffered through ten years of endless torment, and a dark foreboding now overtook Kihei.

As Kihei looked silently on, the groaning from within grew louder and more violent until suddenly knocking the reed mat out of the way, Yajiemon came rolling out of the hovel. It seemed his awful nightmare had roused him, for now he breathed in sharply and looked all about.

Kihei had no time to hide. And with the moon of this night shining so bright and clear, the figure of Kihei with the bamboo spear stuffed under his arm stood out distinctly before the *rônin*’s eyes.

Kihei was thrown into a panic. Now that he had been discovered, there was no turning back the inevitable. Taking hold of his spear, he lunged forward in a single thrust, but Yajiemon was too quick and dodged out of the way. Grabbing the spear by its end, Yajiemon pulled hard, which staggered Kihei and brought him to a knee on the grass.

His opponent proving to be much stronger than he had supposed, Kihei grew increasingly desperate. Casting away the spear, he reached for his sword, at which point Yajiemon quickly called out,

“No, wait! Is it the flute that has you so obsessed?”

Feeling pierced by the stars, Kihei said not a word. When he drew back his hand from his sword in hesitation, Yajiemon quietly went on.

“If indeed you are so very obsessed, then I shall yield to your desire.”

Yajiemon entered the hovel, retrieved the flute, and emerging, knelt down and handed it to Kihei.

“Remember what I told you earlier. Take very good care that this does not become your ruin.”

"I thank you," stammered Kihei.

"Please leave while there is still no one about," said Yajiemon as if in warning.

At this point, Kihei had little choice but to do as he was ordered. Kihei took the flute and, like a puppet on a string, stood up. Saying nothing, he gave a polite bow and then walked away.

As he returned to his residence, Kihei was overcome by a feeling of shame mixed with regret. Though elated and satisfied that he had acquired what would seem a truly exceptional flute, his shameful actions this night were to be regretted. All the more so because his opponent had simply handed the flute over to him he felt pangs of conscience at his heavy sin, which was the equal of killing and robbing the man. Still, that he had not made the mistake of actually murdering him was at least something about which to be thankful.

Come morning, he decided, he must again seek out the *rônin* and apologize for tonight's rudeness while at the same time making some sort of recompense, and he hurried back to his residence, but there was no sleep for him that night as he was wide awake and could not relax.

Unable to wait until daybreak, Kihei hurried off at an early hour to the spot of the previous night. In his pocket he carried three large gold coins. Along the river bank the morning mists still drifted, and somewhere in their depths could be heard the cries of geese.

Parting the pampas grass, Kihei approached the hovel, only there to receive a sudden shock. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead before the shack. In his hands was the bamboo spear discarded by Kihei the night before, which he had shoved through his own throat.

In spring of the following year, Kihei took a wife, and the intimate affection between them eventually yielded two sons. They were living thus peacefully, but in the autumn of the seventh year after the events described earlier, Kihei was ordered to commit suicide for a mistake he had made in his official duties. He prepared to carry out the order at his residence and there in his final moment asked the official charged with the duty of witnessing the event to be allowed to play one final tune on his flute, a request that the official granted.

The flute was that which Iwami Yajiemon had relinquished to him. With tranquil heart, Kihei blew on the flute, producing tones of crystal clarity, and just at the instant that he finished the tune, the flute gave off a strange note suddenly to crack and split in two. Finding this strange indeed, Kihei examined the flute and found incised inside,

**blank line

990 years to its end

Hamanushi

**blank line

To Kihei, a well-versed student of matters related to the flute, the name Hamanushi was familiar. Muraji Hamanushi of Owari was revered as the first great master of the flute in Japan and one who had broadened interest in it. Since it was now the ninth year of the Tempō Era (1838), counting backwards 990 years would correspond to the first year of Kajō in the reign of Emperor Ninmyō, the fourth year, in other words, of Hamanushi's tenure playing the flute for the imperial court. Though Hamanushi was a flutist, in the beginning he played flutes that he himself made. Since Hamanushi's name was incised in it, the flute was likely produced by his hand, but the mystery of it was how the characters for his name had been etched on the inside of the narrow barrel rather than the outside, which had that been the case would have been unexceptional.

And even more mysterious was that the nine hundred ninetyeth year of the "990 years to its end" was exactly the present year. Had Hamanushi made the flute and himself determined its lifespan? In light of what he now knew, he thought Iwami Yajiemon's story of the events surrounding the flute not likely to have been fabricated. This flute with its mysterious bonds had

brought on the downfall of each of its masters, one after the other, and at the demise of its last master, was itself, it would seem, to close out its nine hundred ninetieth year of life.

The profound mystery of it all took Kihei by surprise, and at the same time, he realized how inescapably entwined his own fate was with that of this flute. He turned to the official government witness and related the whole of the body of secrets surrounding this flute, after which he carried out his suicide in the normal manner.

That story was passed on to many by the government witness, and all who heard it were struck by its singular strangeness. After consulting with his family, fellow vassals who had been close to Kihei while he lived fitted the two pieces of the shattered flute together and buried it at the spot where it was thought that Iwami Yajiemon had killed himself, above which they placed a stone incised with the two words "Flute Mound." That mound could still be found even at the beginning of the twentieth century, but in the two great floods that have happened since, the mound and marker have vanished without a trace.

Fuezuka: Burial mound for a flute

OKAMOTO Kidō

1

While I may be from the provinces north of here, throughout the feudal lands of this domain they tell a bizarre tale of unfathomable mystery. But before I tell you that tale I would like to offer you a passage from the *Mimibukuro* (literally ‘the earcap’), the title of the collected miscellaneous writings of a famous Edo commissioner, Negishi Hizen-no-kami. The following written narrative is found in that collection.

When the House of Kanamori Hyōbu-shōsuke, an imperially appointed military adviser from the castle town of Mino (in southern Gifu Prefecture), had its ties severed from the Tokugawa shogunate, a certain senior retainer was ordered to commit *seppuku*, the ritual form of disembowelment. This particular senior retainer turned to the inspecting coronial official and said: ‘As I now commit suicide myself to take responsibility for the crimes of my master’s house, the House is therefore completely innocent. Rather, as a samurai, I esteem this act my greatest deed. But I must confess, this humble servant of my master is guilty of a hidden crime. When I was travelling in my younger days I once stopped at an inn. An itinerant Buddhist warrior monk was also staying there. In relating some story or other he unsheathed his long sword to show me its craftsmanship. I then so eagerly wanted that sword, for it was one of the best blades to ever see the light of day and was inscribed with the name of its swordsmith. I pleaded with the monk to sell it to me and offered a considerable sum for it. He refused saying it was a family heirloom that had been passed down through successive generations. Even finding this out didn’t allow me to give up on the idea, so the following morning I went with the itinerant monk. As we approached a field dotted with pines where few people passed I took him completely by surprise and killed him with my sword before pilfering his long sword and running off. This all happened a long time ago and luckily for me no one has ever found out to this day.’ The senior retainer departed this world with these last words: ‘Looking back on what I did once again I realise that this was an ungodly act and this act alone means it is natural for me to be ending my life in this way,’ and then it is said that he committed suicide in the accustomed way. What I am about to tell you closely resembles this story but I would like you to bear in mind that it is yet more complex and yet more bizarre than that which you have just heard.

In the province from where I hail, Noh singing and comic Noh theatre sketches have been de rigueur for a very long time. There are consequently many teachers and masters of these arts. As you might expect from these ties to the arts, among samurai one could find those who not only knew Noh singing but some who also could perform *shimai*, unaccompanied Noh dancing performed in formal attire. Some samurai could play the flute. Some could beat on *tsuzumi* hand drums. One such man was Yagara Kihē. Somehow his name makes him sound like an old

geezer but at the time of this story he was a young 19-year-old cavalryman of the mounted samurai. His father was also called Kihē. In the summer of his sixteenth year his father was taken from him due to illness, and so this lone male child who had just celebrated his coming of age took his father's given name and without delay succeeded his father. For four calendar years this second, younger, Kihē carried out his duties without incident, resulting in no notoriety at all. This made his mother and relatives less anxious and they secretly kept in mind the matter of him taking a respectable wife and other steps in life as he was turning 20 the following year.

The local province having the sorts of manner and custom that applauded ability in the arts, Kihē also learned to play the flute when he still had the forelock that showed he had not yet come of age. If it had been a different feudal domain things would have been different or perhaps the people here were less critical of 'arty' samurai. Throughout Kihē's feudal domain, however, people thought it more becoming of a samurai if he were accomplished in the arts rather than if he were a master of none at all. For this reason no one found fault with him for eagerly practicing his flute.

There was a long-held popular belief that those who had fully reached one year of age were suited to playing the flute because of the way in which their teeth were lined up. Perhaps because Kihē had been born in February and was now one, he was rather skilled at playing the flute. From his childhood days onwards strangers would praise him, and his parents would take pride in his ability and this led him to keep the pastime even now.

On an autumn night in the first years of the Tenpō era (1830-1844, under the reign of Ayahito who ruled as Emperor Ninkō), Kihē left his residence delirious with the thrilling fullness of the moon. He carried his treasured flute with him. Treading on the evening dew he emerged onto the dry river bed outside the castle walls where the heads of the Japanese pampas grass and the reeds looked strangely white beneath the resplendent moon. From somewhere or other chirping insects could be heard. Kihē travelled far downstream along the dry river bed playing his flute as he went, and then heard the sound of a flute coming from where he was heading.

He thought that the sound was not that of his flute echoing off the water, but that it had to be coming from someone else who was playing an instrument. Kihē listened carefully for some time and discovered that the clear sound of that other instrument penetrated far along the nocturnal river bed. While its player was by no means unskilful, Kihē realized that the instrument being used was most probably a flute of great renown and he wished to meet its owner.

It is not only the proverbial deer in autumn who are attracted to the sound of a flute. Kihē also found himself rapt by the thing he loved, and in finding himself drawn to the source of the flute's noise, he noticed that very noise seeping through the gaps between the Japanese pampas grass that grew thickly in the lower reaches of the river. It seemed to Kihē that someone else had also become merry with the night's moon, gone out, and was enjoying playing their flute while the night dew

gathered on their face and clothes. Finding it irresistible Kihē stealthily crept up to a spot beside a thicket of reeds, and there he found a low-standing hut covered with an old straw mat in need of repair. Generically it was called a *kamaboko-goya*, a crude side-on D-shaped hut with bamboo framing and straw covering, so named because it resembled the oft-found shape of a common form of processed fish paste. Kihē already knew who dwelt within this hovel: a homeless beggar.

With such tonal quality emanating from within this place Kihē felt extremely surprised. He stopped himself and waited suspiciously.

‘Surely the vulpine wickedness of a fox or the impish Procyon deceits of a racoon dog can’t be tricking me.’

Kihē wondered whether a fox or an otter had taken advantage of his fondness for music and was playing some manner of devilment upon him. But Kihē also had the rational nature of a samurai warrior. At his waist Kihē wore a generations-long family-heirloom sword that had been forged by the 17th-century master swordmaker Nagasone Kotetsu.

Kihē plucked up his courage by thinking that if this person turned out to be some sort of spectre or hobgoblin he would cut them down with one stroke of his sword. As he went Kihē pushed his way through a thick copse of pampas grass. Lifting up the straw mat that covered the entrance Kihē discovered a man sitting down and playing the flute.

‘What’s all this then, eh?!’ Kihē demanded.

Upon being addressed the man stopped playing his flute. With a defensive posture that showed he was staying very much alert the man raised his eyes to look up at Kihē who now stood before him.

Outwardly the man looked unmistakably like a beggar under the light of the moon. He appeared 27 or 28 in age, and at first glance Kihē somehow detected the character of the man to be seemingly different from the usual vagabonds or beggars who build their nests in these parts. Because of this, and of his own accord, Kihē became more formal in his choice of words.

‘Have you, sir, been playing your flute here?’

‘Aye,’ the flute-playing man replied sotto voce.

‘The sound had such a clear tone that I humbly followed it here,’ Kihē said with a smile.

The quick-witted man soon saw that Kihē also had a flute in his hands and this fact seemed to put the man’s mind at ease. The man’s words suggested as much.

‘I am mortified by just how awkward my tune really is.’

‘Ohhrr, but it isn’t. From what I heard just now I can also see that you have notched up rather a lot of hours in practice. May I be so bold as to ask to see the flute?’

‘It’s something that we play to amuse ourselves. It’s not something that would even register on the collective horizons of you honourable gentlemen.’ While the man’s words might disabuse the notion, there was no sign of refusal. The man wiped the flute carefully on the Japanese pampas grass growing by him and respectfully held out the instrument before Kihē.

Somehow the man’s manner suggested he wasn’t just another beggar. Kihē guessed that he had probably been a lordless samurai from a military family who had fallen on hard times for some reason or other. And so Kihē finally addressed him in a civil manner.

‘If so, then please let me see it.’

Kihē accepted the flute from the man and held it up to the moonlight and looked at it. Then, having once tentatively refused the offer, Kihē experimentally tried playing the flute. He saw that its tune was extraordinary, that it was a most rare and fabled flute, and so Kihē saw that this man must really be something out of the ordinary. Kihē’s own flute was of course nothing to be sniffed at but he could see that his couldn’t compare with the example before him. Kihē now wanted to know the history of how this man came to possess a flute of this calibre. Aided by curiosity of a sort, Kihē broke off and lay down some pampas grass as he handed back the flute and there sat down beside his interlocutor.

‘How long have you been coming here?’

‘From about half a month ago.’

‘Where were you before then?’ Kihē furthered his questioning.

‘With the circumstances I find myself in there was no fixed abode for me. I wandered here and there, from China to Kyōto and Ōsaka, along the road to the great shrine at Ise, and along lakeside roads through Ōmi province.’

‘So, as we appear to be on a level footing, you are a samurai, aren’t you?’ Kihē abruptly asked.

The man stayed silent. Under these circumstances not giving some kind of answer denying the assertion would be seen as tautamount to acknowledging it, so Kihē drew himself closer to the man and continued his questioning.

‘Plainly there must be some reason as to how you have been wandering around in this way while in possession of such a fabled flute. If you have no objection to telling me why, I’d like to hear it.’

The man remained silent for a while but Kihē urged an answer from him again and again. Unwillingly the man began to speak: ‘Good samurai, my humble soul is cursed by this flute!’

2

The man’s name was Iwami Yajiemon, a samurai from the Shikoku area. Like Kihē this man Yajiemon had chosen to play the flute from boyhood.

An incident had occurred during the evening twilight one autumn when Yajiemon was nineteen. Returning from a visit to his *bodaiji*, the temple where his family traditionally paid their respects, Yajiemon came across a rice field where few people passed by and there found a collapsed pilgrim who was journeying through the circuit of 88 temples on the island of Shikoku. Unable to let it go by, Yajiemon stepped over to the field and saw that the pilgrim was a man of around 40 years of age who was suffering from an agonising illness. Yajiemon drew some water from a nearby spring and gave it to the man. Yajiemon took his own supply of medicine from the elaborately crafted pillbox around his waist that was common for most samurai to have and gave medicine to the man. Though Yajiemon tried to care for the pilgrim in many different ways, the man only seemed to suffer all the more until, at last, the man drew his last breath and expired then and there.

The pilgrim had been extremely grateful to Yajiemon for his kindness, for Yajiemon represented a completely unknown majestic lordlike samurai to him who had deigned to give him very considerate care. The man said that he had no way of expressing his gratitude for this most grateful kindness, and that consequently it would be deemed an egregious discourtesy, but that he would like to give Yajiemon something as a token of his gratitude. The man drew a flute wrapped in a pouch from around his waist and presented it to Yajiemon.

‘This piece is unparalleled in the known world. But be fully careful not to choose an ending like the one I have.’

Leaving Yajiemon with this enigmatic comment the man passed away. Yajiemon had asked the man where he had been born and what his full name was but the man had shaken his head and given no answer. Putting these events down to some form of predestination Yajiemon disposed of the man’s remains by burying him in his *bodaiji*, Yajiemon’s own family temple.

The flute that the unidentified Shikoku pilgrim had bequeathed Yajiemon was a rare example of a celebrated flute. Yajiemon was full of questions as to why the man had had such a flute. But whatever those reasons might be, Yajiemon was pleased to have gained an unexpected treasure from this chance encounter and he prized his newly-acquired possession. While Yajiemon was treasuring this new possession an event occurred on a day roughly six months later. On this day as well Yajiemon had paid a visit to his *bodaiji* family temple and as he approached the enclosure of the rice field where he had six months earlier come across the Shikoku

pilgrim he discovered a young samurai who was dressed for travel and who appeared to be expecting him.

The young samurai approached and spoke: 'Are you, sir, his lordship, Iwami Yajiemon?'

After Yajiemon replied that this was so, the younger samurai came closer still.

'From rumours that I have heard it seems that sir, some time ago you cared for an ailing Shikoku pilgrim in this place and as a keepsake, sir, you did accept a pouched flute from him, but sir, he is my enemy and foe. Good sir, I have come a great distance in my quest to find this man, and to remove his head and the flute that he carries. I cannot help the fact that my foe, the very man I came to kill, has already died from an illness, but at the very least I hope to have--if it's the only thing I can have--that flute, and so, if I might venture to say, I have been here expecting you for some time.'

But who would expect Yajiemon to hand over the flute passively when he has just been told this so abruptly and unexpectedly. Yajiemon turned to the young samurai and said: 'From where doth you hail, and of what ilk is your personage young man? And what is more, I must know, before all other courtesies can be seen to, what sort of circumstances conspired for you to think so evil of that Shikoku pilgrim in question that you see him as your enemy?'

But the younger samurai would not explain the matter any further. He only pressed Yajiemon again and again to hand over the flute under all circumstances.

At this point Yajiemon finally became skeptical. He started to wonder whether this young samurai wasn't trying to obtain his precious flute under false pretences by making all this up. Yajiemon flatly refused this proposal stating that he couldn't venture to give over the flute without first reliably knowing the younger samurai's identity and the reasons for his desired vengeance. At this the younger samurai changed his countenance.

He said that now things have come to this pass he was ready for what would come, and placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword. Yajiemon could see no use in arguing with this man and so Yajiemon also braced himself for a fight. After another two or three vehement verbal exchanges the two samurai drew and crossed swords, and the young unknown samurai soon became covered in blood and fell before Yajiemon's very eyes.

'That flute will bring you nothing but a curse, you blackguard!'

Finishing with these words the young samurai passed away. Yajiemon had just killed his antagonist without comprehending why and this put him into a dream-like state for a short while before he could regain his composure. Yajiemon hastened to report the circumstances of what had happened. Under the circumstances given above Yajiemon was blameless; the matter was officially

settled with it viewed that Yajiemon's adversary had been killed, with that being the adversary's unfortunate loss. Yajiemon of course did not know the identity of the Shikoku pilgrim who had handed over the flute, nor the identity of the later young samurai.

While the matter of Yajiemon having slain his adversary had been fairly well officially settled, a difficulty now arose. That is to say that this whole affair had now become the talk of the entire feudal domain. So much so that the lord of the domain came to hear of the affair with a decree being issued by the lord commanding Yajiemon to show the flute once for the benefit of that lord. While there would have been no real consequences if this had merely meant submitting the flute to the lord's inspection, Yajiemon well knew that the lord's *O-heya-sama*, his influential male-child-bearing mistress, was a lover of flutes and had been purchasing choice-quality flutes no matter what figure was being asked for them. Yajiemon feared forfeiting the flute to this *O-heya-sama*, on the pretext of it being the feudal lord's desire, if he unguardedly produced the flute before them. And yet, Yajiemon could not, in his capacity as a retainer, refuse for a minute something that was his feudal lord's desire. Yajiemon was confounded by this state of affairs but he still felt absolutely unwilling to part with the flute.

At this point in time there was no alternative that Yajiemon could see. With the flute upon him the young Yajiemon left the premises and ran off. His attachment to a single flute was making Yajiemon throw away the hereditary stipend that was the legacy of his ancestors.

In those days, unlike earlier times, many daimyo (feudal lords) had strict requirements with regard to secrecy and so the engaging of a new paid retainer only ever occurred on very rare occasions. This meant that Yajiemon had no real option but to carry the flute with him and become a *rōnin*, a wandering lordless samurai. He crossed over to the island of Kyūshū, roamed through China, drifted about Kyōto and Ōsaka. He sought to make a living but between falling ill and being robbed he was beset by misfortune after misfortune and in the end the very able samurai Iwami Yajiemon was reduced to falling in with an assortment of beggars.

During this time Yajiemon parted with the pair of large and small samurai swords that his former class normally wore, but the only thing he didn't try to give up was the flute. And now Yajiemon had wandered into these northern provinces, and his musical tone played with enjoyment to the evening's moon was caught, in sheer chance, by Yagara Kihē.

Yajiemon narrated his tale up to this point and then heaved a sigh.

'As in the words uttered by the Shikoku pilgrim earlier, there is reason to believe that some kind of curse has been placed on the flute. I don't know the identity of the long-past original owner, but just with what I know, the Shikoku pilgrim who carried this flute died by the wayside. The journeying samurai who came to take the flute died from blows inflicted by my sword. And I too have been reduced to

such circumstances as these. When I consider these facts I so dread my future fate. I have wondered whether it is better to part with the flute by selling it, or to snap it in half and throw it away, and many times I have resigned myself to the fact that I must choose one or the other. But then again to part with it without offering any resistance would be such a waste, and to break it in half and discard it would be still more of a pity. While I know it means ruin for myself I cannot separate myself from it, I must always have it ready to hand.'

Kihē too was so moved he let out a sigh after listening to this story of woe. Kihē had heard talk of strangely interconnected tales of karmic fate dating way back that related to swords but he never for the life of him thought there would be such a tale relating to a flute.

But Kihē's youth made him reject outright, and abruptly, the possibility of this being true. Kihē questioned inside himself whether such an incident could actually have happened. He thought perhaps this beggared rōnin feared that Kihē would desire the flute himself and so the rōnin had deliberately told him a wonderful piece of pure fabrication.

As if taunting the fallen rōnin, Kihē stated: 'I cannot understand, no matter how precious the thing is, that you won't part with it if you know it will bring you nothing but harm and ruin!'

'That,' Yajiemon replied, 'is something I don't understand either. One tries, but one cannot discard it. Is that why it is both one's ruin and a curse at the same time? For 10 calendar years I have been ceaselessly tormented by this problem.'

'Ceaselessly tormented by'

'That is something that you shouldn't tell other people. And even if one ventured to speak of such a thing it couldn't possibly be taken as the truth.'

With that Yajiemon fell silent, and Kihē also held his tongue. The only thing they could hear were singing insects. The illuminating white light of the moon made the dry river bed a hoar-frost landscape.

Before long Yajiemon said, 'The night grows late,' and looked skyward as he spoke.

'The night's grown late,' Kihē parroted in a very mechanical fashion. Then he realised the meaning of the words and stood up.

3

Parting from the rōnin Kihē returned but a short time later and once more appeared at the dry river bed. He was lightly disguised in a mask. Approaching the D-shaped hovel on tiptoe Kihē's moves were reminiscent of the Daian Temple embankment scene from the vendetta drama *Tsuzure no nishiki*, often known as the Vendetta by a samurai in rags, in which the son of an outcast avenges the sword-testing slaying of his father with the aid of a witness who saw the callous murder.

Kihē couldn't resist wanting that particular flute. But it sounded like there wasn't any possibility of the masterless samurai compliantly handing it over, and so Kihē decided that he had better launch a sneak attack under cover of darkness and take it by force. Of course Kihē hesitated a number of times before he could fully resolve to do this, but in the end he really wanted to have that flute. Kihē convinced himself that even granting that this man is a masterless samurai, he is still a homeless beggar. If he secretly dispatched him with his sword so that no one found out there would be no seriously difficult inquiry with which he would become involved. As a result of this line of thinking Kihē became more and more something of a fiend. He returned to his residence to get dressed for the task, then waited for night to fall before making his raid back at this spot.

He didn't know whether it was the truth or not but according to what he had heard earlier this Yajiemon chap was very proficient at sword-fighting. Even though it seemed that Yajiemon wouldn't have anything faintly resembling a weapon Kihē considered it prudent to be on his guard. Although Kihē had gone through and completed the usual course in swordsmanship, when all was said and done, he was still young and inexperienced. He still of course had no experience in fighting with real swords or engaging in any other potentially fatal form of combat. Kihē concluded that a sufficient amount of preparation was needed even for a dastardly surprise attack under cover of darkness. He cut down a single shaft of bamboo from a grove of them he found along the way and fashioned it into a low-tech substitute for a spear. With the bamboo spear under his arm Kihē approached for a reconnoiter, and to avoid making a rustling sound he gently pushed aside the Japanese pampas grass. Upon first looking into the hut to see what was happening Kihē discovered that the sound of flute playing had stopped. The straw mat was drawn down over the entrance and all was still in the hut.

Just as he was thinking that all was quiet, Kihē heard a low-pitched moaning emanating from inside the dwelling. The moaning slowly grew in volume making it seem that Yajiemon was in unrelenting agony. Kihē thought that this seemed more like the result of some nightmarish fit rather than the result of suffering due to illness and this thought made Kihē hesitate a little. For the sake of a flute this man had undergone relentless torment for nearly a decade. When Kihē bore this in mind with the knowledge of what he had heard earlier he became somehow or other nervous at what seemed to be a horrible thing.

Taking a breath Kihē peeped into the hut and heard the sounds of someone writhing in agony intensify more and more. Yajiemon appeared and as if tearing it down he thrust aside the straw mat covering the entrance and stumbled out from the his hut. And now that it seemed he had awoken from his dream of terror he drew a long breath and looked about him.

Kihē had no time to hide himself. More inconveniently for Kihē the orb of night was so clear and bright that evening that the contours of his frame standing there with a bamboo spear under his arm were vividly lit up before the barely woken rōnin.

At this point Kihē lost his cool. He had been found out but now, at the end, he could delay no more. Kihē got a firmer grip on the spear he held and made a single lunge with it. Yajiemon quickly dodged the blow, then grabbing the tip of the spear he heaved it back causing Kihē involuntarily to go down on the grass on one knee.

Meeting more formidable an adversary than he could have imagined Kihē panicked even more. Throwing away his spear Kihē tried to reach for his sword and in that moment Yajiemon spoke to him.

‘No, wait a moment Are you, honourable gentleman, intent on having my flute?’

With the stars shining down upon him Kihē could come up with nothing to say. He stayed his half-drawn hand and in the short period of his hesitation Yajiemon quietly spoke: ‘Seeing as you are so intent on it, I will venture to give it to you.’

Yajiemon entered his hut, retrieved the flute, and placed it in the hands of the now silent Kihē who knelt there.

‘Forget not what I told you earlier. Take utmost care lest you meet with ruin.’

‘Tha, tha, ... thanking you p, pp, politely, sir’ Kihē stuttered.

Warned Yajiemon: ‘Return now with haste ere anyone spies thee here.’

At this point Kihē had no option but to listen to his adversary’s wishes. Kihē raised the flute to his head as a sign of his gratitude. He got to his feet in a mostly mechanical fashion and silently gave a polite bow before leaving.

On his way back to his residence Kihē was struck by a type of shame and remorse. While also experiencing the joy and satisfaction of having obtained a most rare and fabled flute, on the flip side of that joy Kihē also felt sorry for his shameful behavior on this night. That his adversary had obediently handed over the flute made Kihē feel the strong pangs of remorse all the more for what was very much a wicked crime tantamount to violent robbery. He was glad at least that he had, despite it all, apologized and not taken the life of his opponent.

Kihē decided that once dawn broke he ought to once more visit the masterless samurai, apologize for his improper behavior that night and offer some kind of recompense for the flute. He hastened his way home but that night, for some reason or other, he was wakeful and couldn’t sleep peacefully.

After impatiently waiting for the dawn Kihē set out as soon as it was light for the spot where he had confronted the rōnin the night before. He carried three oval-shaped Japanese gold coins in his pocket. The autumnal morning fog still drifted along the dry river bed and somewhere or other one could hear the cries of wild geese.

When Kihē parted the pampas grass to approach the hut he was startled by an unexpected find. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead before his hut. Yajiemon had grabbed with both hands the bamboo spear that Kihē had thrown away the night before, and thrust it through his body and throat.

In spring of the next year Kihē married and he and his wife were happy together, with them gaining two boys from the union. Thus Kihē spent his days without incident until the seventh autumn after the preceding incident. In that autumn Kihē had been ordered to commit suicide by ritual disembowelment for a stuff-up in the duties to which he was supposed to attend.

Kihē was making the preparations for his impending death at his own home. He turned to the official appointed for confirmation of the suicide and asked if he might be able to play a single piece on his flute in this his last hour before his death. The official allowed him to do so.

The flute was the one that he had received from Iwami Yajiemon. Kihē calmly played the flute with virtuoso skill but as he approached the end of the piece the flute gave out an uncanny din and abruptly sundered in two. Thinking this to be unaccountably strange, Kihē examined the two pieces and saw the following characters inscribed on the inside of the flute.

‘Ends in the nine hundred and ninetieth year. *Signed Hamanushi.*’

On account of Kihē being one who had fully inquired into the art he knew the name Hamanushi. The man Muraji Hamanushi from the province of Owari had been the first to introduce the flute to the Japanese realm and was revered as the originator of the art. It was now the ninth year of the Tempō era (1838) and counting back nine hundred and ninety years one arrives at the first year of the Kashō era (848) in the reign of the emperor Nimmyō, which equates to 4 years from the twelfth year of the Jōwa era (845), the year in which Hamanushi performed on the flute at the imperial court. While Hamanushi was a flute player but he had earlier been both a maker and player of his own flutes. Given the fact that Hamanushi’s name was carved into the flute it would be reasonable to assume that he had fashioned it but Kihē was somewhat curious as to why he had taken the trouble to carve this many characters onto the inside of the narrow tube of the flute when this would have been no particular feat if it had been the outside.

What was stranger still was the fact that the 990th year in the message, ‘Ends in the nine hundred and ninetieth year’, appeared to equate exactly to this very year. Had Hamanushi fashioned this flute with his own hand and specified the term of its existence as well? At this late stage it now seemed that Iwami Yajiemon’s tale of karmic fate wasn’t a lie after all. The uncanny karmic destiny possessed by the flute brought ruin to each successive owner of the instrument, and upon the fall of the last owner the flute also appeared to have completed the 990-year term of its unnatural existence.

While being amazed at the wonderousness of this turn of events, Kihē also perceived that he had an unbreakable interconnected fate conjoined to the destiny of the flute itself. Kihē turned to the confirming official, divulged all the past secrets of the flute, and then committed ritual disembowelment in the usual prescribed manner.

This story was then passed on by word of mouth by the official, never failing to evince wonder in those that heard it. Various individuals throughout the feudal domain who had been close to Kihē during his lifetime then consulted with his surviving family and decided to rejoin the two pieces of the split flute and bury it in the spot where it was thought that Iwami Yajiemon had committed suicide. There they erected a stone marker upon it with two characters read *fuezuka* engraved into the stone and meaning ‘burial mound for a flute’.

I have heard that this burial mound survived on that dry river bed until after the end of the Meiji era in 1868, but two floods have now removed all trace of it from our collective vision.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS, PLACES

88 temples on the island of Shikoku, circuit of the: *see* Shikoku, pilgrimage circuit to the 88 temples of.

bodaiji: the particular Buddhist temple that is frequented or patronised by a family

Ōmi province: modernday Shiga prefecture. The name Ōmi (roughly meaning ‘close to the inlet or bay’) refers to the province being the home to the largest lake in Japan, Lake Biwa.

Shikoku, pilgrimage circuit to the 88 temples of: pilgrimage to 88 temples in Shikoku that are thought to have remnants of the early Heian-period Buddhist priest, Kōbō Daishi (also known as Kūkai, 774-835 CE), who is seen as a wandering saint, and who also engaged in poetry, calligraphy, sculpture, and lexicography, and who founded the Shingon Sect of Buddhism. [Source: Japan: an illustrated encyclopedia, Kodansha, 1993; Daijirin]

Tomb of the Flute

Okamoto Kidō

1.

I am from the north, where the mysterious tale I am about to tell you has been told and re-told throughout my clan province. Before I begin, however, I should like to tell you of a story found in a collection by that most famous of Edo magistrates, Negishi Yasumori, entitled 'Ear Pouch'. The story goes something like this: the military government had ordered the destruction of the Mino home of Kanamori Yorikane, the daimyō of that same province, and his chief retainer had been ordered to commit ritual suicide. Turning to the government official sent to oversee his death, the retainer proclaimed that since he was about to die for his clan chief, he was to breathe his last breath with his conscious clear. Indeed, he said, I am about to fulfil the ultimate ambition of any true samurai. And yet, he continued, in truth I am hiding a terrible secret. Then he told his tale: as a young man on his travels, the retainer had spent a night in a certain lodgings. As he had talked with the warrior priest with whom he had shared a room that night, the priest had, quite suddenly, drawn out his broad sword. It was a stunning weapon, inscribed with the name of the swordsmith who had crafted it. The young retainer had wished immediately for the sword to be his. He begged the priest to sell it, offering him a handsome sum; but his roommate refused him, explaining that he could not possibly sell the sword, for it was a treasured family heirloom. And yet the young retainer still could think of nothing but the sword, so in the morning he left with the priest, and led him to a deserted pine grove. There he set abruptly upon the priest, killing him and fleeing with the sword. It had all

happened so long ago, the retainer explained, and he had been lucky that no-one had ever remembered the incident. But now, about to end his own life, he realized what a dreadful thing he had done, and, ending his tale, he calmly slit himself open, belly to bowel. It is only just that I must end my life like this, he had said, as his final words, if only for the terrible crime I committed that day. Now, the story that I am about to tell you is somewhat similar to this, but I hope that you will find it to be much more complex – and a great deal more frightening.

Where I am from, the musical and dramatic arts have always been popular. We are home to many masters of traditional song and theatre. I am sure it is these men who are responsible for the many samurai from our region who have also mastered Noh chanting, or who can even perform the New Year's lion dance. Some are accomplished flautists. Others still are skilled at the drums. Amongst these talented warriors there was once a man named Yagara Kihei. His fogeyish name did make him sound rather old, but at the time of our story he was, in fact, still a young samurai, just nineteen, and was working as a horse guard. His father, who had also been called Kihei, had died from illness when the young samurai was just sixteen. So Kihei the younger – who had only just celebrated his coming of age the year before – took on his father's name, and succeeded his father's position without delay. For the next four years, Kihei the younger fulfilled his duties without fault, and was certainly not thought of poorly. So his mother and his family were much relieved, and turned their thoughts to finding him a wife for when he turned twenty the following year.

Our province, as I have explained, is somewhat unique in its ways, and so it was that Kihei, too, had been learning the flute since childhood. Had he been born into a different clan then perhaps his practice would have been denounced as effeminate, but as far as we were concerned, it was much more fitting for a samurai to have some such accomplishment than to be quite without artistry. Indeed, not a single person reproached him for his almost constant practice of his instrument.

We have an old proverb that holds that people born in the early months of the year are suited to the flute – supposedly because of their beautifully aligned, well preserved teeth. Kihei was no exception - he had been born in February, and, true to the saying, was very gifted at the flute. Ever since he had been small his talent had been praised by others, a source of great pride for his parents, and he had kept up with his practice.

My tale takes place one autumn night in the first year of Tenpō. Tempted by the moon, Kihei wandered from his home. In his hand was his treasured flute. Stepping through the night dew, he headed towards the banks of the river that lay outside the castle walls. Scattered tips of pampas grass and reeds shone silver under the moon's clear light. From somewhere came the sound of chirping insects. His flute at his lips, Kihei made his way far down the riverbank. But then he heard the sound of another flute, coming from somewhere ahead of him.

It was not the sound of his own flute echoing on the water. No, without doubt there was someone else, somewhere out there, playing another flute. For a time, Kihei strained his ears; the sound of the second flute seemed to be coming from far down the night-time river bank. Now, whoever was playing

was certainly not bad, but Kihei had realized that whoever it was had no ordinary flute at his lips. He was overcome with the desire to meet the owner of this wonderful instrument.

The old adage is not true, for it is not just the autumn doe that is lured by the sound of a flute. Kihei also found his soul entranced, himself being drawn towards the magical sound of the flute. The notes were spilling out from the dense growth of reeds covering the river bank. Kihei wondered if this other flautist had also been tempted outside by the evening moon, if he too was relishing playing in the cool dampness of the night dew. Creeping up to the reeds, he came upon a small shack, covered in torn rush mats. It was a vagrant's hut, in other words, and Kihei knew that only a penniless pauper, a man with no roof over his head, would make his home in such a place.

Kihei thought it strange that such a beautiful sound should be coming from such a shabby place, and stopped, suddenly a little suspicious.

"Perhaps," he whispered to himself, "this is the trickery of some fox, or shape-shifting forest possum."

He was wary, fearing that a fox, or perhaps a river otter, was trying to hoax him by tempting him with what he liked best. But Kihei was a samurai. In his scabbard lay nestled a blade crafted by the master swordsmith Nagasone Kotetsu, his prized family heirloom. Even if it were some kind of trick he would see an end to it with just one slash of his sword. Thus reassured, Kihei swaggered forward through the reedy growth, and swung open the tattered reed mat covering the entrance to the hut. Inside was sat a man, alone, playing the flute.

"You there!"

At Kihei's words, the man took the flute away from his lips. His eyes turned up to gaze upon Kihei, stood tense, armed and ready in the middle of the hut.

He was without doubt a pauper – that much was soon revealed by the illuminating light of the moon. Yet he only looked around twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and Kihei understood with just one glance that there was something different about this man - that he was not your run-of-the-mill pauper. So naturally, he spoke again, this time more politely.

"Was it you, sir, who was playing the flute?"

"Yes." The flute player replied in a low voice.

"The sound rung out so clearly that I found myself drawn here, wanting to hear more." Kihei smiled as he spoke.

They both looked down, towards the flute lying in the pauper's hand. He seemed to have relaxed somewhat, and his words came easier now too.

"I'm terribly embarrassed, my poor efforts at a tune being overheard..."

"No, sir, not at all. From what I heard just now, it certainly sounded like you are a man with a great deal of experience with the flute. I know this may seem rude, but in truth I was hoping that you would show me the instrument."

"Oh, it's just a little thing that I play to amuse myself. I don't think it's really something that would interest a person of your standing," replied the pauper. Still, he did not seem to be denying the request, and after wiping the flute gently with a leaf torn from the reeds growing around him, he held it out, reverently, in front of Kihei.

His behaviour showed him to be, indeed, no ordinary pauper. Perhaps, Kihei guessed, he was a masterless samurai, or a man who, for some reason or other, had fallen from the circumstances into which he had been born.

“In that case, I would be honoured to examine the instrument.”

Kihei took hold the flute, and held it up to the light of the moon. Then, having made his apologies for doing so, he brought the flute to his lips. It truly had a remarkable tone – this was a flute of rare quality indeed. And so Kihei was again sure that the man before him was no ordinary fellow. Kihei’s own flute was too of great quality, but it was nothing compared to what he held in his hands at that moment. Kihei found himself curious as to why such a man might have such a flute – he wanted to know just what had come to pass. Spurred on by his curiosity, Kihei, whilst returning the flute, pushed through the rushes and sat himself down beside the pauper.

“How long have you been here?”

“I arrived these two weeks ago.”

“And where were you until then?” Kihei pressed him further.

“Well, sir, you can see very well for yourself the circumstances I find myself in, so I do not call any one place home. I’ve wandered through Chugoku, around Kansai, along the Ise road, the road to Awaji – I’ve roamed around all over the countries.”

“And am I right that you are a samurai?” Kihei asked suddenly.

The man fell silent. But Kihei took the man’s failure to reject his question as a tacit acknowledgment that his instinct had indeed been right. He shifted closer towards the man, and continued his questioning.

“There must be a reason for you wandering around like this, all the while with such a marvellous flute. If you do not mind, I should like you to tell me your story.”

The man remained silent, but after Kihei's repeated entreats, he reluctantly began to speak.

"The truth of the matter is this. I am cursed by this flute."

2.

The pauper was, in fact, Iwami Yajiemon, a samurai from the island of Shikoku. Just like Kihei, he too had enjoyed playing the flute ever since boyhood.

It had happened one evening, when Yajiemon was nineteen. On his way home from visiting the local Bodaiji temple, Yajiemon had noticed a man collapsed in one of the area's few rice paddies. From the man's clothes Yajiemon had guessed that he was a pilgrim, making his way around Shikoku's many temples. He could not ignore the man, and approached him.

The prostrate man was close to forty, and appeared to be stricken with the pain of some sort of illness. Yajiemon brought him fresh water from nearby and had him drink it; he pulled out a pouch, removed some medication from it and had the man take it. Yajiemon did everything he could for the man, but it was no use; he got steadily worse, and eventually expired in the very same spot where Yajiemon had come upon him.

The man had been extremely grateful to Yajiemon for his kindness, amazed that a samurai of Yajiemon's standing would take such trouble for a total stranger. I have, he had said, no way for repaying you for your kindness, but please accept this, with my humblest apologies. He had then taken a flute, nestled inside a bag, out of his waistband, and handed it to Yajiemon.

"There is nothing else like this in the world. But, sir, I entreat you. Please take care that your life does not end as mine is about to."

With these mysterious words, the man had breathed his last. Yajiemon had asked him his birthplace, his name, but the man had simply shaken his head, leaving the questions unanswered. Still, Yajiemon felt sure that the whole episode must have been brought about by fate; so he did what was necessary with the man's remains, and had them interred at the Bodaiji temple.

The flute which the unknown Shikoku pilgrim had left him was, indeed, quite unlike any other instrument that Yajiemon had ever seen or heard. Yajiemon was somewhat suspicious as to why such a man might have owned such a flute, but, whatever the reason, he was nonetheless delighted at the unexpected windfall from the unforeseen event. He treasured the flute dearly. Then, around six months later, Yajiemon was on his way - that day too - to the Bodaiji temple. As he headed towards the rice paddy where he had found the Shikoku pilgrim, he saw, standing in the same place, a young samurai dressed in travelling clothes. The samurai seemed to have been waiting for him.

"Are you, sir, Iwami Yajiemon?"

When Yajiemon replied that yes, indeed, he was the very same, the young samurai moved closer towards him.

"From what I have heard," said the samurai, "some time ago you aided a sick pilgrim from Shikoku, right here, and he bequeathed to you a flute in a cloth bag. That Shikoku pilgrim was my sworn enemy, and I have come here, from afar, to claim his neck and his flute. Nothing can be done about the fact that he is dead already – but at the very least, I must have his flute. At the very least. After all, I have been waiting here for some time."

There was certainly no way that Yajiemon was going to just give the flute up, having been spoken to so unexpectedly. Turning to the young samurai, Yajiemon replied that, without being told exactly who he might be, and with no explanation as to the reasons for him holding the dead pilgrim his enemy, he simply would not be able to respond to the samurai's demands. Yet still the samurai persisted in demanding that the flute be handed over, no matter what, despite not providing any further explanation.

All this led Yajiemon to become rather suspicious. He began to think that the young samurai before himself might well be saying such things in an attempt to steal Yajiemon's precious flute away. So, again, he retorted that, until he had been enlightened as to the samurai's name and origin and the reasons for his enmity towards the pilgrim, he simply would not hand the instrument over. At this, the blood drained from the young samurai's face.

I had prepared myself for this, said the samurai, and lay his hand on the hilt of his sword. Sensing the situation could not be salvaged, Yajiemon too readied himself for combat. Two or three threats having been exchanged, the two swords were drawn; they clashed. All too soon, the young, nameless samurai was drenched in his own blood. Fatally wounded, he fell to the ground in front of Yajiemon.

"That flute – that flute will curse you."

With those final words, the samurai died. Yajiemon had been forced to kill a man without fully knowing why; for a moment, he felt as if he were dreaming. Still - first things first - the killing had to be reported. On investigation by the authorities, the whole incident was determined to have been a civil affair and Yajiemon was to receive no punishment for his involvement. As for the

samurai, well, death had ended the matter for him. Of course, Yajiemon still had no idea who either the Shikoku pilgrim, who had given him the flute, or the belligerent young samurai had been.

So, the samurai slain, the whole issue should have been over, but, in fact, the incident had created a rather difficult problem. News of the tussle had spread throughout the province, reaching even the ears of the feudal lord. He had decided that he wanted to be shown this infamous flute. If all the lord wanted to do was look, there was no problem. But Yajiemon well knew that his lord's favourite concubine was a great fan of flutes, and was in the habit of obtaining fine examples of the instrument – with no regard to the price. Were he to present them with the flute, Yajiemon feared that it would be taken from him and given to the concubine – all, he would doubtless be told, at the will of his lord. And if that were the case, it would be impossible for Yajiemon to refuse – he was, after all, one of his lord's retainers! He was thrown into turmoil – but the thought of giving up the flute was simply too much for him to bear.

So it was that there was only one path left for him to take. The young man fled his home, cradling the precious flute. And with that, he abandoned the post that his family had held for generations, all for his obsession with a single, hollow pipe.

At that time, all of the feudal lords were under considerable financial strain, and obtaining a new post as a retainer for another lord was almost impossible. Yajiemon had no other choice than to take his flute and roam, as a masterless, penniless samurai. He crossed the waters to the island of Kyushu, wandered aimlessly through Chugoku, found himself passing through the old capitals, searching for a means to make a living. During his travels, however, he was

struck by illness, robbed, afflicted by a veritable string of bad luck. And so the strikingly talented young samurai known as Iwami Yajiemon had fallen to the depths of a common pauper.

During his travels he had relinquished all of his possessions, big and small, but never once had he thought to part with the flute. And now, his wanderings had brought him here, to the northern provinces, where the strains of his flute as he played, elatedly, in the light of the moon had floated into the ears of Yagara Kihei.

Having told his story thus far, Yajiemon stopped and sighed.

“So it seems that those final words of the Shikoku pilgrim were right - this flute carries with it some kind of curse. Now I have no idea who the previous owners might have been, but the one man that I knew of - the pilgrim - died at the side of the road. And the samurai who tried to take it from me was cut down by my sword, and perished. And I – for the sake of this flute – have sunk to what you see now. So, naturally, I have feared for what might happen to me, and have thought of selling it, or breaking it in two and discarding the pieces; but just selling it off seems such a shame, and breaking it into pieces – well, that would be even worse. And so, even though I know that it will bring me misfortune, still I have it to this day – I am quite unable to part with it.”

Kihei, too, could not help but sigh as he heard the story. He had heard, it was true, tales of such mysterious connections between men and their swords before, but he had never imagined that there might be such a strange account about a flute.

But Kihei, still so young, soon dismissed the story. Surely this pauper, this masterless beggar, was afraid that Kihei would desire the flute, and had

deliberately invented the spooky yarn to frighten him off. There was simply no way that such things could actually have happened.

“However much you might not want to part with it, I can’t understand why you wouldn’t – for you know that it will only bring you harm,” Kihei said, accusingly.

“Even I cannot understand it,” replied Yajiemon. “But when I try to discard it, I find that I cannot. Perhaps that is the very misfortune, the curse. It has been a decade now that this instrument has tormented me, without a moment’s respite.”

“Unremitting torment...?”

“I cannot breathe a word of it, not to another soul. If I were to tell you then - I am certain of it - you would not take my words to be true.”

And, with that, Yajiemon fell silent again. Nor did Kihei speak. All that could be heard was the sound of crying insects. The light of the moon, falling upon the river bank, was bright white, as if a frost had descended upon them.

“Night has fallen,” said Yajiemon at last, looking up at the stars.

“Night had fallen.” Kihei repeated his exact words. Then he realized the time, and stood up.

3.

Kihei had parted from the penniless samurai and started to make his way home. After a short time, however, Kihei had returned, once again, to the same river bank. This time he was masked and dressed inconspicuously. He crept towards the rush mat hat, as if recreating the famous Daianji scene from that famous old Kabuki play “Vendetta by a Samurai in Rags”.

Kihei was desperate to have the flute – he could think of nothing else. He was determined to attack the pauper, and steal the flute from him – he could see

no other option. Of course, Kihei had wrestled, many times, with his conscience before making his decision, but however much he tried to put it out of his mind he could not shake the same, single thought: he must have the flute! His opponent may well once have been a samurai, but now he was little more than a homeless, starving pauper. All Kihei had to do was get rid of him quietly; surely no thorough investigation would follow. Steeled by this, Kihei had allowed wickedness to overcome him, and had made his way back home to ready himself. He had waited for the night to deepen, and then crept his way back to the banks of the river.

Kihei still could not know if the pauper's story had been the truth or just lies, but in his tale he had been no shabby swordsman. He did not seem to be carrying anything resembling a weapon, but Kihei saw that as no reason to be careless. Kihei was skilled enough in the art of the sword, but he was still young. So naturally he had yet to experience true combat. Even now, as he planned a cowardly sneak attack, he knew he needed to be well prepared. Along the way, he had broken off a stalk from a bamboo bush, fashioned from it a crude spear, and used it to hack through the reeds on the way to the hut. Then, moving carefully so as not to rustle the leaves of the reeds, he parted the growth with his spear and peered through at the hut. There was no sound of the flute. A mat hung down over the hut entrance, and the inside seemed completely still.

Or so he had thought. Suddenly Kihei heard a low groaning, coming from inside the hut. It grew louder and louder - Yajiemon seemed to be suffering greatly. But they were not the groans of a man blighted by a painful illness. No, it sounded rather like he was being tormented by a terrible nightmare. Kihei

hesitated for a moment. He remembered Yajiemon's story, that for an entire decade the man had suffered unremitting torment, all for the flute. Kihei felt a sudden tingle down his spine.

He held his breath, watching. The howls from inside the hut grew more violent, as if the man were writhing in torment. Yajiemon burst out of the hut, shoving the rush mat aside, tumbling out onto the river bank. His monstrous nightmare appeared to have ended. He took a deep breath and looked around him.

Kihei had no time to hide himself. The moon on that night was, unfortunately, clear and bright, and the outline of his form, bamboo spear clutched in his hand, was thrown into clear relief, right in front of the masterless samurai.

Kihei panicked. Thus discovered, he could not delay. He corrected his grip on his bamboo spear, and ran forward, thrusting it ahead of him. Yajiemon quickly dodged away, grabbed the spear by its spike and pulled hard. Kihei - not knowing what was happening - toppled over, stumbling onto his knees in the grass.

His opponent had been much more skilful than expected, and Kihei's panic rose. He discarded the spear and slid his hand around to the hilt of his sword, ready to draw. Yet as he did so, Yajiemon spoke.

"It's you again, I see...so, you are determined to have my flute?"

Under the light of the stars, Kihei had not a single word in reply. He relaxed the hand resting on his sword, hesitating.

"If you desire it this much, then it shall be yours." Yajiemon spoke again, softly.

Yajiemon entered the hut, retrieved the flute and brought it out. He placed it into Kihei's hands where he knelt, still silent, on the ground.

“But don’t forget the story I told you. Make sure, sir, that you meet with no calamity.”

“Thank you,” said Kihei. His voice was faltering.

“Now go home, before anyone sees you,” said Yajiemon, as if warning him.

Kihei felt he had no choice than to obey his would-have-been opponent. Flute in hand, he scrabbled to his feet, like a rickety wind-up doll, bowed politely, and made his exit.

On the way back to his quarters, Kihei was struck by with a terrible sense of shame and of regret. The joy and satisfaction he felt at having gained possession of an instrument like no other in this world were marred, for he was haunted too by his shameful behaviour of the evening. The pauper, whom he would willingly have fought and killed, had instead handed him the flute quite willingly. Kihei was at last struck with a sense of deep repentance, as much as that by which he would have been afflicted had he in fact carried out the murderous robbery he had been planning. All he could muster was an empty, unfulfilling happiness at not having accidentally killed the man.

Kihei decided that, come morning, he would again visit the masterless samurai. He would apologise for this evening’s behaviour, and give the man something, at the very least, in return for the flute. He rushed back to his quarters, but he could not keep his eyes shut to sleep, instead spending the night tossing and turning restlessly.

Kihei could hardly wait for dawn to break. He left early and rushed back to the same spot as the night before. In his pocket were three gold coins. Autumn’s thick morning mist still hung over the banks of the river, and Kihei was sure he

could hear the cries of wild geese, setting off on their long migration to the warmth.

Brushing aside the thick reeds to approach the hut, Kihei was unexpectedly startled. There was Iwami Yajiemon lying – quite dead - in front of the hut.

The bamboo spear that Kihei had abandoned the previous night lay in his hands – Yajiemon had thrust the sharpened tip clean through his own throat.

In the spring of the next year, Kihei welcomed a bride. The couple lived happily together and had two sons. They lived, together and contentedly, quite uneventfully for the next seven years, until a blunder at work resulted in Kihei having to commit ritual suicide. As he made preparations for the end, at his quarters, he turned to the official accompanying him, and requested that he be allowed to play one final tune on his flute. The official granted his request.

The flute was, of course, the instrument he had received from Iwami Yajiemon. Kihei played calmly. Just as his tune was coming to an end, the flute made a strange sound, and snapped in two, quite suddenly. Kihei was perplexed. He examined the instrument, and saw the following inscription, carved inside the barrel of the flute:

990 years later, so I end my life. Hamanushi.

Kihei, as a student of his discipline, well knew the name Hamanushi. Owari no Muraji Hamanushi had been the first person to introduce the flute to Japan, and was revered as the founder of the discipline. It was now the ninth year of the Tenpō era. Counting backwards, 990 years ago would have been the first year of the Kashō era, the reign of Emperor Ninmyō. Or, Kihei calculated, the fourth year since Hamanushi had begun to play the flute at the Imperial Court.

Hamanushi had been a flautist first and foremost, but in his early years he had also crafted his flutes with his own hands. And since his name was etched into the instrument, Kihei could assume that this flute had been fashioned by Hamanushi himself. But why had the words been etched into the narrow barrel of the flute, and not on its outside? Kihei could but only wonder.

Stranger still was the fact that the 990 years later seemed to work out to this very year. Hamanushi must have crafted the flute himself, and at the same time decided on how long it was to be played for. Perhaps, thought Kihei, this means that Yajiemon's tale of the strange fate of the flute and all who possessed it had been more than just fantasy after all. This flute, and its strange destiny, had brought ill fortune to owner after owner after owner. And now, just as its final master was about to die at his own hands, so too had the flute ended its 990 years of life.

Kihei was shocked at the strangeness of these events. Yet at the same time he realized how his fate had become tied to that of the flute. His was a destiny he could not have avoided. Kihei turned to the official who accompanied him, and confessed to him the entire story of the mysterious flute. Then, coolly, he slit himself open.

And so it was that the official who had been there that day repeated the tale that had been told to him to all who would listen, and all who did listen were chilled by it. A man from the same province who had been close to Kihei before his death, having sought the permission of the grieving family, sought out the two halves of the flute, and fixed them together again. He then buried the flute at the place where Kihei was thought to have committed suicide, and raised a stone marker, engraved with the words "Tomb of the Flute". The

tomb itself, it is said, could still be found on that same river bank after the Meiji era ended, but since then it has sadly been swept away as the river flooded its banks twice in a row. Now nothing remains of it, not even a trace.

Translator's notes:

- (1) The footnotes are intended as an editorial guide. They may provide additional information for readers, but I have endeavored to make the story readable without the need to include them.
- (2) I have used, without italicizing, certain Japanese words such as seppuku, ronin, inro etc where these are listed in major dictionaries such as Oxford American and Merriam Webster's.

Fuezuka

"The Flute's Final Resting Place"

by Okamoto Kidô

**blank line

1

This uncanny tale is from the domain in the northern provinces from whence I hail. But first let me relate an anecdote from the distinguished magistrate Negishi Hizen-no-kami, taken from his *Earmuffs* collection.

The passage in question is about a certain chief retainer to Lord Kanamori of Mino, the vice-minister for military affairs. When the clan was disbanded and the domain confiscated on the orders of the shogunate, this retainer was sentenced to death. Just before committing seppuku, he assured the officiating bureaucrat that since his punishment was to atone for the crimes of his master his own conscience remained clear. Indeed, by dying for his master he would realize the long-cherished ambition of every samurai. However, he himself had committed a crime that he had kept secret. Once when traveling in his youth, he had stayed at an inn where he was shown a sword by an itinerant priest with whom he had been exchanging tales. It was an excellent sword, finely crafted by a master swordsmith, and the samurai dearly coveted it. He implored the priest to let him purchase it at a worthy price, but the priest refused on the grounds that it was a family heirloom. The samurai, however, was unable to leave matters there. The next day he accompanied the priest on his way and, just as they were approaching a pinewood off the beaten track, he suddenly attacked him and made off with the sword. That had been long

ago, and he had been fortunate to pass the intervening years without detection, but the guilt nevertheless remained with him. His present act of seppuku would therefore atone for that crime alone. Having said this, he plunged his sword deep into his belly.

This account should give you some hint as to the nature of my story, although I assure you that it is altogether more complex and mysterious.

****blank line**

Where I come from the Noh theater¹ has been popular since olden times, and there are accordingly many masters of its various arts. Among the samurai too, of course, there were those skilled in chanting, or who could at least perform a Noh dance. Some could play the flute, while others could play the drums. One such was a man called Yagara Kihei. This name somehow brings to mind an elderly man, but at the time he was just nineteen and employed in the lord's horse guard. His father had also been called Kihei but had fallen ill and died in the summer of his only son's sixteenth year. Kihei the younger, who had just celebrated his coming of age, thus succeeded early to his father's name and position as head of the family. For almost four years he had performed his role without mishap and with his reputation intact. His mother and kinsfolk were much relieved and, given that he would turn twenty the following year, set their sights on finding him a suitable bride.

As it was customary for our people to study the performing arts, Kihei had learned to play the flute from a tender age. Elsewhere he might be censured as effeminate for this pastime, but in our domain such skills were considered more worthy of a samurai than being lacking in accomplishment, so nobody reproved him for wasting time on it. According to popular tradition, people born early in the year have evenly spaced teeth well suited to playing the flute, and perhaps Kihei owed his talent to having been born in the second month. Ever since he was a child he had been praised for his skill, and his parents had taken such pride in him that he had never given up this favorite diversion.

¹ The text specifies chants and performances, including the comic Kyôgen interludes, but perhaps this is more than the average foreign reader needs.

One night in autumn, soon after the start of the Tenpô era², Kihei was so enthralled by the splendid moon that he left his residence taking with him his treasured flute. Stepping in the night dew he went beyond the castle walls to the river, where the spikes of pampas grass and reeds rolled in white swaths beneath the bright moon. Insects chirred here and there.

Kihei had wandered some distance downstream, playing as he went, when the sound of another flute came from up ahead. This was not his own music echoing in the stream. Somebody else must be playing somewhere. As he strained his ears, clear notes reached him from far along the river. The flautist was not bad, but it was the flute itself that sounded like such a fine instrument that Kihei found himself wanting to meet its owner.

Just as rutting autumn deer are attracted to the flute's call, so too was Kihei drawn spellbound to the elegant sound seeping out of the dense grasses in the lower reaches of the river. Could it be that someone else had also been enticed by tonight's moon to play his flute amidst the damp night dew? How extraordinary! Kihei crept on tiptoe up to the long grass and there he saw a small shack with a barrel frame covered by threadbare straw matting. It could only be occupied by a homeless vagrant. That such dulcet tones should be coming from a place like this was so extremely unexpected that Kihei stood rooted to the spot in disbelief.

"Surely it couldn't be a fox or tanuki out to trick me?"³

Perhaps some devious being in the guise of an otter, or perhaps a fox, was taking advantage of his passion to wreak mischief? But he was a samurai, and at his hip he wore his family's precious sword crafted by Nagasone Kotetsu. If he should come across some supernatural creature he would cut it down with a single stroke. Summoning his courage, Kihei elbowed his way through the dense clumps of grass and lifted up the straw matting over the entrance to the shack. There he saw a lone man seated playing the flute.

"What have we here?"

The man stopped playing and looked warily up at Kihei standing over him.

² Tenpô era 1830–44

³ Often translated as "raccoon dog." Both foxes and tanuki are known as supernatural beings capable of changing their appearance to trick humans.

From his manner and appearance the man here bathed in moonlight was clearly a beggar, but he could be no more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight years of age. Perceiving at a glance that he was different from the usual type of tramp that would build their den around here, Kihei softened his words.

“Were you playing a flute just now?”

“Yes,” the flautist answered in a low voice.

“The sound I heard was so pure that I followed it all the way here,” said Kihei with a smile.

The man’s eyes flickered to the flute in Kihei’s hand, and he seemed to relax a little. He, too, appeared a little friendlier as he said, “I’m embarrassed you overheard such a clumsy melody.”

“No, not at all. As soon as I first heard it a while back, I could tell you were well practiced. Would you be so kind as to show me your flute?”

“It is a mere plaything, hardly worthy of your lordship,” the man asserted, although he did not seem particularly disposed to refuse. He plucked a piece of the pampas grass growing nearby and pushed it through the flute to clean it before respectfully holding it out for Kihei.

Such comportment was not at all that of a simple beggar. Surmising that the man was in all likelihood a ronin samurai who had fallen on hard times, Kihei responded more properly, “The honor is mine.”

He took the flute and held it up in the moonlight for a better look. After once politely refusing the man’s offer to play it, on being again pressed he tried a few notes. It was in all truth a rare, distinguished instrument with an uncommonly fine pitch. No ordinary man could own it. Kihei’s flute was, of course, a worthy instrument, but stood no comparison to this one. His curiosity piqued, Kihei found himself wanting to know how this man had come to have such an instrument in his possession. Handing the flute back, he picked some grass to make a seat for himself on the ground next to the man.

“How long have you been here?”

“I came a couple of weeks ago.”

“Where were you before that?” pressed Kihei.

“In my present circumstances, nowhere is certain. I departed from the southwest

and have wandered here and there, to Kyoto and Osaka, and then the roads to Ise and Ômi.”

“You must be a samurai?” Kihei asked suddenly.

The man said nothing. Sensing that he would not be able to deny it, Kihei moved closer and asked, “There are surely reasons why the owner of such a fine flute is living the life of a drifter?”

The man remained silent, but when Kihei pressed him a third time, he reluctantly said, “I have been cursed by this flute.”

****blank line**

2

The man was a samurai from Shikoku by the name of Iwami Yajiemon. He, like Kihei, had liked to play the flute ever since he was a boy.

One evening in the spring of his nineteenth year, Yajiemon had been on his way home after paying his respects at the Bodaiji temple when he came across a pilgrim⁴ collapsed on a quiet path through the rice paddies. He could not simply leave him lying there. As he drew close, he saw that the man was around forty years of age, and that he was suffering acutely from some illness. Yajiemon scooped up some water from a nearby spring and gave it to him to drink. He then took out some medicine from the intro he carried on him, and placed it in the man’s mouth. Although he tended to him as best he could, the pilgrim’s condition grew worse until eventually he was at death’s door.

The pilgrim expressed his gratitude for the samurai’s kindness in having gone to such lengths to nurse a stranger. He could not thank him enough and he hoped Yajiemon would not take it amiss if he gave him a token of his appreciation. Taking a flute from a bag at his waist, he offered it to Yajiemon saying, “No other flute can match this one. However, you should always be on your guard lest you meet the same fate as myself.”

And with these enigmatic words, the pilgrim passed away. Yajiemon had asked him his name and where he was from, but he had merely shaken his head without answering. Feeling the hand of fate, Yajiemon took the pilgrim’s body to his own

⁴ The tour of the eighty-eight temples on the island of Shikoku is a popular pilgrimage route even today.

Bodaiji temple and there laid him to rest.

His memento of the unknown pilgrim really was a flute of extraordinary quality.

Yajiemon had strong suspicions about how the pilgrim could have come to possess such an instrument, but in any case he rejoiced at having received this unexpected treasure from their chance encounter and treated it with the utmost care.

Some six months later he was on his way to worship at the Bodaiji temple, when on the same path through the rice paddies where he had found the pilgrim, he came across a young samurai in traveling attire standing there as if waiting for him.

“Are you Iwami Yajiemon?” the young samurai called out, coming towards him.

When he answered in the affirmative, the warrior came closer still, and said,

“Rumor has it that you recently tended to an ailing pilgrim in this very spot, and as a memento you accepted from him a flute that he kept in a bag. That pilgrim was my enemy. I have come from far away, asking here and there so that I may find him and take both his head and his flute. Since I hear that he is already dead, however, I have been waiting here for some time to inform you of my desire to at least take the flute.”

Being spoken to like that out of the blue, Yajiemon was hardly about to meekly hand over the flute. He answered that however worthy the young warrior’s cause, he would not be able to comply without hearing more about the reasons for his bitterness towards his enemy. Yet the young man declined to give any further explanation and furiously pressed Yajiemon to hand over the flute.

This merely aroused Yajiemon’s suspicions all the more. Believing that the warrior was making up his story in order to cheat him out of the precious flute, he rebuffed him sharply, insisting that as long as he did not know the warrior’s identity, or the reason for the feud, he would never hand over the flute.

The young samurai paled. “Since we have come to this, then I am ready,” he said, reaching for his sword. Seeing that there was no use arguing about it, Yajiemon too stood on his guard. The dispute rapidly escalated until the two crossed swords.

Suddenly blood gushed from the unknown young samurai and he fell at

Yajiemon’s feet, just managing to gasp out, “That flute will be your curse!” before he died.

Yajiemon had killed a man without even knowing the reason, and for a while he

felt as if in a dream. Nevertheless, he reported the circumstances to the authorities, who decided that Yajimon was not to blame and the matter had been settled with his adversary's death. Nobody knew the identity of either the pilgrim or the young warrior.

The matter should have been settled there but for a new complication. The incident was the talk of the domain and had even reached the ears of the lord, and the order came down that the lord wanted to see the flute in question. If it had been merely a matter of showing it to him then there would not be any particular problem, but as Yajimon well knew, the lord's mistress was fond of flutes and was in the habit of acquiring good quality instruments without so much as asking the price. If he carelessly handed this flute over, there was a danger of the mistress taking it as her own on the pretext of it being the lord's desire. Yet there was no question of he, a mere retainer, refusing an order from his lord. Yajimon was thus plunged into confusion, but whichever way he thought about it he was reluctant to part with his flute.

There was therefore only one thing he could do: he took the flute and absconded from his residence. All because of his attachment to this one flute, he renounced his hereditary stipend.

It so happened that at the time the feudal lords were all in straightened circumstances and seldom took on anybody new in their employ. Yajimon was forced to remain masterless, roaming the land with his flute in hand. He crossed over to Kyushu, then wandered through the western provinces of the main island and passed through Kyoto and Osaka. All this time he sought to make a decent living, yet fell prey to illness and robbers and other such misfortunes until eventually this once respectable samurai ended up falling in with a gang of beggars.

Over time he parted even with his swords, yet the one thing he refused to relinquish was the flute. And so his travels had brought him to these northern parts, where tonight he had been delighting in playing his flute beneath the moon when, unawares, he had been overheard by Yagara Kihei.

Having talked thus far, Yajimon sighed. "It's like that pilgrim said. This flute does seem to have a curse on it. I don't know who its original owner was—all I know is

that the pilgrim who had it died on the wayside. The warrior who came after it was slain by me. I can only think that a terrible fate awaits me, too, and many's the time that I have resolved to either sell the flute, or snap it in half and throw it away. But I can't bring myself to sell it, let alone break or discard it. Even knowing that it is cursed I cannot let it go.

Kihei could not hear this without a sigh, either. He had heard eerie tales about swords, but he had never imagined a flute could have such a mystery about it. Being young, however, he soon dismissed the very idea. This roving ronin had probably spun such a fantastic tale out of fear of others coveting the flute. There was no truth in it, he thought to himself.

"However regrettable, I can't understand why you won't let it go, knowing as you do that it is cursed," he said reproachfully.

"I can't either," responded Yajiemon. "Even if I try to throw it away, I can't. It must be a curse, or maybe it's divine punishment. For almost ten years now I have been in constant torment."

"Constant torment..."

"This is not something I generally talk about. I am afraid that even if I do, nobody will ever believe me.

So saying, Yajiemon fell silent. Kihei also said nothing. All that could be heard was the chirring of insects. The riverbank glistened white as frost in the moonlight.

"It's late," said Yajiemon at last, glancing up at the sky.

"It's late," echoed Kihei mechanically. Recovering himself, he stood up.

****blank line**

3

After taking his leave from the ronin, Kihei went home, but it was not long before he once again returned to the riverbank. This time he was dressed lightly with his face covered as he crept stealthily up to the shack, not unlike Utaemon in *Vendetta by a Samurai in Rags*⁵ as he goes to kill the outcast on the Daianji temple

⁵ *Katakiuchi tsuzure no nishiki*, by Miyoshi Shôroku, 1736, a play written for Bunraku and Kabuki in which a samurai, Utaemon, slays a *hinin*, Jirôzaemon, purely to prove the quality of his sword. Utaemon's companion, Buemon, is so appalled that he helps Jirôzaemon's son to take revenge upon Utaemon.

embankment.

Kihei was desperate to get his hands on the flute. However, given the way the ronin had spoken of it he was hardly likely to meekly hand it over, and so Kihei had made up his mind to ambush him and steal it. Of course, he had vacillated any number of times before coming to his decision, but the bottom line was that he wanted the flute. Ronin or not, his adversary was a homeless vagrant and as long as he killed him without being seen, the matter would be resolved without any especially awkward inquiry. He became quite demonic at this thought, and having briefly returned home to equip himself, he waited until late into the night before once again going to the riverbank to make his assault.

He had no idea whether Yajiemon's story was true or not, but from his account it would seem that he was considerably skilled with the sword. He did not appear to possess any weapons, but he would probably be on his guard. Kihei himself had studied the basics of fencing, but he was still young and had never experienced a serious contest. The attack he was to launch was cowardly, but it was nevertheless necessary to make the appropriate preparations and so he cut a piece of bamboo from a grove along the way and fashioned it into a spear. Tucking it under his arm he made his approach, softly parting the pampas grasses trying to not to rustle the leaves. When at last he caught sight of the shack there was no sound of the flute. A straw mat hung down over the entrance and silence reigned.

Just then Kihei heard a low groan from inside. It gradually became louder, as though Yajiemon was suffering terribly. It did not sound as though he was ill, but was rather in the throes of an awful dream. Kihei hesitated, unnerved by the thought that Yajiemon had apparently been suffering on account of the flute for almost ten years.

As Kihei looked on with bated breath, Yajiemon's agonized moans grew more and more violent until suddenly he ripped aside the straw matting and came tumbling out of the shack. Then, apparently woken from his nightmare, he drew a deep breath and looked around.

Kihei had no time to hide. The moon that night was alas so bright that he was vividly spotlighted standing, the bamboo spear under his arm, right before the ronin's very eyes.

Kihei was flustered by this turn of events. Now that he had been exposed, he could delay no longer. He adjusted his grip on the spear and lunged at Yajiemon, who quickly dodged out of the way then grabbed the spear and pulled hard. Losing his balance, Kihei dropped to his knees on the grass.

Finding his adversary tougher than he had expected, Kihei panicked. He abandoned the spear and made to draw his sword, but Yajiemon quickly called out, “No, wait! Are you so obsessed with the flute?”

The stars glittered overhead. Kihei hesitated with his hand on his sword, saying nothing. Yajiemon said quietly, “If you are so attached to it, I will give it to you.” He went into the hut and returned with the flute. Handing it to Kihei who was kneeling in silence, he said “Don’t forget the story I told you. Do whatever you can to avoid bringing calamity onto yourself.”

“Th-thankyou,” stammered Kihei.

“Go home quickly, and make sure nobody sees you,” Yajiemon admonished him. Things having come to this pass, Kihei had no choice but to obey. He accepted the flute gravely and, mechanically raising himself to his feet without a word, bowed deeply and departed.

On his way back home, Kihei was struck by a sense of shame and remorse. While he felt great joy and satisfaction at having got his hands on the magnificent flute, he lamented his disgraceful conduct this night. Just the fact that his opponent had meekly handed him the flute added to the keen guilt he felt for his crime, which amounted to nothing less than armed robbery. Nevertheless, he at least felt fortunate that his error had spared him from killing his adversary.

Having made up his mind that at daybreak he would again visit the ronin to apologize for his rudeness tonight, and also to give him some kind of recompense for the flute, he hastened his steps home. Somehow, though, he remained wide awake and was unable to get a good night’s sleep. He could not wait for daybreak, and hurried back to the earlier scene. In his pocket he carried three gold coins. The autumn morning mist hung over the riverbank and from somewhere came the cries of wild geese.

Parting the pampas grass as he approached the shack, Kihei came to an abrupt halt. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead before his hut. In his hands was the bamboo spear

discarded by Kihei, with which he had pierced his own throat.

The following spring, Kihei took a wife, and the happy couple produced two sons. They lived uneventfully until the seventh autumn after the incident with the flute, when Kihei was forced to commit seppuku following a blunder in his duties. He made the preparations for his death at his residence, but at his request the officiator gave him permission to play one last tune on his flute.

The flute was the one he had been given by Iwami Yajiemon. Kihei was calm as he played, but as soon as he came to the end of the tune an ominous sound came from the flute and it suddenly split in two. Astonished, he took a closer look and saw the following words engraved inside:

The 990th year will be my last. Hamanushi.

Kihei was something of an authority on flutes, and knew the name Hamanushi.

Owari no Muraji Hamanushi had been the first to introduce the flute in Japan and was revered as the founder of the art. They were now the ninth year of the Tenpô era.⁶ Counting back 990 years would take them to the reign of Emperor Ninmyô in the first year of Kashô⁷—just four years after Hamanushi's celebrated performance on the flute in the Imperial Court. As a flautist, Hamanushi originally made his own instruments. Since his name was carved into this flute, it was reasonable to assume he had made it. But then, given the flute's exceptionally slender body, how had those words been carved inside it?

Another mystery was the specified 990 years and how the final year had come to correspond precisely to this current year. Had Hamanushi himself made the flute and decided on that number of years himself? In hindsight, it would appear that Iwami Yajiemon's story had been true. This flute with its strange history had ruined its various owners, and it seemed that its own 990-year lifespan had come to an end just as its final owner was about to perish.

⁶ Tenpô era 1830–44

⁷ Kashô era 848–50. I omitted the reference to the performance taking place in the twelfth year of Jôwa (834–47) since so many dates would perhaps be too confusing to readers. Hamanushi was a priest at Atsuta Shrine, as well as a dancer and musician. He traveled to China to study these arts and is credited with having greatly contributed to the development of court music and dance in Japan. Born in 733, he is said to have lived to the ripe old age of 115.

As Kihei puzzled over this, he recalled that his own fate was tied up with that of the flute. Turning to the overseeing official, he confessed the flute's secret before plunging the dagger into his belly.

I myself heard this account from the official's own mouth, and it struck me as an exceptionally strange story. After consultation with Kihei's bereaved family, several people in the domain who had been close to him put the two pieces of the flute back together, and buried it in the spot where it was thought that Iwami Yajiemon had committed suicide. They marked the location with a stone engraved with the words "The flute's final resting place." This remained on the riverbank until after the start of Meiji,⁸ but I have heard widespread flooding has since wiped out all trace of it.

⁸ Meiji era (1868–1912)

Fuedzuka

Okamoto Kidou

1

Though I am one from the Northern provinces, ghost stories such as these are propagated by my clan. No, before speaking of that, I wish to introduce a stanza from the essay “Mimibukuro,” written by the great Edo magistrate Negishi, governor of Hizen. Written somewhere within “Mimibukuro” is a story like this: When the Second assistant to the Minister of War Kanamori of Mino’s house was destroyed by the shogunate, one of the chief retainers was ordered to commit ritual suicide. The retainer said to the inquisitor that since he would take on the sins of his master’s house and disembowel himself, he would have not a single regret. Rather, as a warrior, he knew deep down that he must. *However, if I may speak the truth, I have a hidden secret of my own. When I was young, I stayed at an inn I’d travelled to and, after some discussion, the itinerant priest I was rooming with pulled out a long sword and showed it to me. Since it was a world-renown sword, inscribed with the name of its swordsmith, I was burning to have it. For a fair price, I solicited him to hand it over. But he declined, saying it was a family heirloom that had been passed down for generations. Yet I couldn’t stop thinking of it, so the next morning I accompanied the itinerant priest and, once we reached an empty pine grove, I slayed him, stole his sword, and ran away. But that was long ago, and (luckily for me) I’ve lived out my days without anyone else being aware of it. Now when I look back, I can say that for such a sinful crime, it’s only natural for it to end like this.* Then he committed an ordinary suicide. The story I’m now about to tell closely resembles that one, though I’d like you to think it even more complex and bizarre.

In my province, Noh songs and farces have been in vogue since long ago. Naturally, there are many masters of said songs and tricks. Perhaps due to this relationship, even among warriors are those who can at least sing and dance an informal kind of Noh. Then there are those who play the flute or bang the drums, as well. In their midst was a man named Yagara Kihei. His name sounded somewhat like that of an elderly person, but at the time he was still a young samurai of nineteen years who worked alongside the horses. His father, who was also named Kihei, died a natural death the summer his son was sixteen. His only son, who had just attained manhood, took on his father’s name and inherited the family property without delay. Thereafter for roughly four years, the young Kihei the Second carried out his duties uneventfully. As there hadn’t been any particularly bad rumors about them, both his mother and kin had nothing to worry about, and since he would turn twenty next year, they secretly considered finding him a suitable bride, and so on.

As I mentioned earlier, ours is a province of song, and since he was young, Kihei too had been learning to play the flute. Had it been another clan, perhaps he would have had to endure harsh criticism or slander. But within our clan, a modest man like him (far more so than one without any accomplishments whatsoever) is thought of as rather samurai-like, so no one objected to his eager playing of the flute.

Since olden times, persons born in the first quarter of the year tend to have a straight set of teeth, so we have this myth that they are fit to become flute players. Perhaps because Kihei too was one born in February, he was relatively good at playing the flute, and even as a child others would praise him. Since his parents were so proud of him, this was the one pastime he didn't forego.

It was an autumn night during the first year of the Tempō era. Entranced by the moon, Kihei left his own estate. In his hand, he held his treasured flute. Treading through the evening dew, he came out onto the dry river bed outside the castle, and beneath the luminous moon the tips of the pampas grass and reeds were stained white. One could also hear an insect's cry from far off in the distance. Kihei descended into the depths of the river bed as he played his flute, and wherever he went the sound could be heard.

Either my flute is resounding off the water, or there must be someone else playing too, he thought. Listening carefully, he could clearly hear the sound of that flute far from the night river bed. The one playing it wasn't bad, but that flute seemed to be one of great standing, Kihei discerned, and suddenly he wanted to know who its owner was.

But it's not only autumn deer that approach the sound of a flute. Kihei too was charmed down his favorite path, drawn in the direction of the flute, which leaked through the luxurious pampas grass at the bottom of the river. Was there someone who, like him, was enchanted by tonight's moon and set out, playing and enjoying himself while soaking in the evening dew? However unrefined, Kihei stealthily crept up beside a grass thicket, and behold, there was a low shed covered in ripped up straw mats. It was the so-called fish-paste hut, and Kihei knew that residing in there was a homeless beggar.

He felt it so strange that a tone like this was leaking out from someplace like that that he stood still, as though in doubt.

"Don't tell me those pesky foxes and raccoon dogs are deceiving me!"

Though he wondered whether some mischievous foxes or river otters were playing dirty tricks on him by taking advantage of his fondnesses, Kihei was also a warrior. Sheathed at his hip was the Nagasone Kotetsu, a family heirloom that had been passed down for generations. Should there be some kind of phantom, he'd kill it with a single stroke and

cast it aside, so firm was his courage. He pushed through a single bush of thick grass and lifted the mat at the hut's entrance, only to find a man sitting there as he played the flute.

"Here, here."

Having been called out to, the man stopped playing. At that, he straightened out as though on alert, and looked up at Kihei, who was standing there. Lit by the moonlight, his manner was undoubtedly that of a beggar, though he looked to be about twenty seven or twenty eight. Kihei saw at once that his appearance was different from that of the normal kind of homeless beggar who made his home hereabouts, so naturally he changed to a formal tone.

"Are you playing the flute there, sir?"

"Yes," the man playing the flute answered in a low voice.

"I could hear the tone quite clearly. Fond of it, I ventured all the way over here," Kihei said with a smile.

The man saw that those hands were also holding a flute, and his heart seemed to open slightly. His words sounded frank as well.

"I'm ashamed that you should have heard my truly humble tune."

"No, not at all. I've been listening for a while, and it struck me as rather well-rehearsed. Excuse me, but may I see that flute?"

"It's something I trifle with as I please. It's not worthy of being seen by you, sir," he said, though he didn't give any indication of refusing him, as he politely wiped off his own flute with some blades of grass that were growing there, and respectfully presented it before Kihei.

Such manners were not those of an ordinary beggar. He's likely a masterless samurai who came under ruin for some reason or other, Kihei surmised. Finally, he replied respectfully.

"In that case, I'll see it."

He took the flute and held it up in the moonlight. And then, after asking if he could, he tried playing it to see. Since the temperament was no ordinary temperament, and it was an extremely rare, renowned pipe, more and more Kihei saw that he was no ordinary man. His own flute was, of course, quite respectable, but it was still no match for this. Kihei suddenly wanted to know why he had such a thing in his possession, how it came to be so. Due in part to his curiosity, he knelt on the grass and settled himself down beside the man as he returned the flute.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since about half a month ago, sir.”

“Where were you up until then?” Kihei prodded further.

“Given my circumstances, I was not at any one place for any given amount of time. From Chūgoku I went to the Kyōto-Ōsaka area, Iseji, Ōmiji, and then wandered around here and there by foot.”

“Your etiquette is that of warrior’s, is it not?” Kihei suddenly asked.

The man was silent. In this case, his not denying it was viewed as an affirmation, so Kihei drew even closer.

“There must be a reason you wander around continuously with such a renowned flute in your possession. If it’s no trouble, please tell me your story.”

Naturally, the man kept quiet, but as Kihei prompted him for an answer again and again, he finally gave in, reluctantly.

“I’m cursed by this flute, sir.”

2

The man was a warrior named Iwami Yajiemon from Shikoku. Like Kihei, he also enjoyed playing the flute from a young age.

It was a spring evening, when Yajiemon was nineteen years old. He was on his way home from a pilgrimage to a family temple when he discovered the body of a fallen Shikoku pilgrim in the middle of a deserted rice paddy. Unable to ignore such a thing, he went to take a look. He was a man close to forty, anguished and suffering from a disease. Yajiemon brought some spring water he pumped from nearby and had him drink it, took some spare medicine from his pill case and had him swallow it, and looked after him however he could. But the man suffered more and more, and at long last drew his final breath.

He was extremely grateful for Yajiemon’s kindness—that an unfamiliar warrior would sympathize with him to such a great extent.

“There are no words to express my thanks. It’s extremely rude of me, but I’m giving this to you as a token of my gratitude,” he said, and retrieved a flute from the pouch at his waist, offering it up to Yajiemon.

“It’s a one of its kind, sir. I sincerely hope, however, that you don’t end up as I did.”

And leaving him with this one puzzling phrase, he died. Yajiemon had asked him his full name and hometown, but the man had simply shaken his head and given no reply. He thought that this too was probably fate, so Yajiemon cleaned off the corpse and buried him at his family temple.

The flute, left behind as a memento by the unidentified pilgrim from Shikoku, was a truly rare and renowned pipe—the only one of its kind. Just why did he possess such a flute? Yajiemon hadn't the slightest clue. At any rate, he was delighted to have obtained such a surprising treasure from such a random incident, and he cherished it deeply. Then, half a year after the fact, Yajiemon went to visit his family temple once again. As he approached the middle of the paddy where he'd discovered the Shikoku pilgrim before, as if awaiting his arrival, there stood a young samurai, travelling alone.

"Would you, fine sir, happen to be Lord Iwami Yajiemon?" the young samurai called out, drawing near.

"That's correct," he replied, and the other advanced still more.

"According to the rumors, your honor cared for a sick pilgrim from Shikoku the other day, and in doing so received as a memento the flute which had been in his pouch. However, that Shikoku pilgrim is my enemy. To take both his head and the flute he possessed, I've come a long way, searching high and low for him. But as my foe himself has already passed on, there's nothing I can do anymore. At the very least hoping to request just the flute, I've been awaiting you here for a while now," he said.

Having been told something like this so out of the blue, there was no way even Yajiemon would hand it over so easily. He faced the young samurai.

"Who are you and where are you from, and for what reason do you resent that Shikoku pilgrim as your enemy? If I can't confirm those things, then I can't give you a reply," he answered, but the other party explained nothing, desperately pressing him to hand over the flute.

In doing so, Yajiemon became increasingly skeptical. If he's going to make stuff up, then perhaps he's trying to swindle me of my precious flute, he thought. He repelled him harshly, saying, "So long as I am unsure of your identity and the reason for your vengeance, then I will never hand it over to you," causing the young samurai's face to change color.

"I came prepared for something like this," he said, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. Seeing that there was no use in arguing with his recklessness, Yajiemon stood guard as well. And then, after exchanging a few words and getting good and worked up, they drew their

swords and faced off. The unidentified young samurai, now stained with blood, collapsed before Yajiemon's eyes.

"The flute will curse you."

Upon saying that, he died. Having killed his opponent without even fully knowing why, for a short while Yajiemon felt as though he were dreaming. At once he reported the situation, and because it happened just as described, it was concluded that Yajiemon was not at fault for the death of his opponent. Who was the Shikoku pilgrim who handed him the flute, and the young samurai who appeared afterwards? Naturally, he hadn't a clue.

It should have ended with the fact that he'd slain his opponent, but herein arose the first hardship. That is to say, this incident became the talk of the clan—so much so that even the feudal lord caught wind of it, who issued a decree to show him the flute. Had he simply wished to see it, it wouldn't have been an issue. But Yajiemon knew all too well that the lord's mistress was fond of flutes, and purchased good quality ones regardless of price. If he carelessly handed it over to him, there was a good chance it would be taken away to the concubine, under the pretext of it being the lord's wish. Having said that, as a retainer, there was no way he could possibly refuse the lord's will. Though Yajiemon was greatly discomfited by this, there were no two ways about it—parting with the flute was just too painful.

And so there was nothing to be done about it. Still young, he fled the estate, flute in hand. He threw away his entire hereditary stipend all for his attachment to the single-piped flute.

Unlike before that, many feudal lords of the era had a rather stringent level of confidentiality to maintain, and therefore it was quite rare of them to induct new recruits who might have jeopardized that. Yajiemon had no choice but to wander about as a masterless samurai, flute in hand. He crossed over into Kyūshū, loitered around Chūgoku, and swept across the Kyōto-Ōsaka area. While seeking out some kind of livelihood for himself, he contracted diseases, had bad encounters with theft and from one thing to another he repeatedly had bad luck. Finally, the superior samurai known as Iwami Yajiemon had sunken into the beggar class.

During that time, he parted with great and small. The only thing he wouldn't relinquish was the flute. And so, he'd wandered to the Northern provinces, and was fooling around playing to the moon that night. Unbeknownst to him, that melody was heard by Yagara Kihei.

Having spoken all this time, Yajiemon sighed.

“Just as the Shikoku pilgrim from before said, this flute appears to have some sort of curse. I don’t know what the previous owner was like, but as far as I know, the Shikoku pilgrim who had this in his possession died along the roadside. I killed the travelling samurai who came to take it away and became as I am now all for this flute. When I think of it like that, rather than put my life at risk, why don’t I sell it off, or break it apart and throw it away? I’d resigned myself to do one of the two countless times, but selling it so casually is too painful for me, and breaking and throwing it away, even more so. Knowing full well of the misfortune it’s causing me, I’ve held onto it, never letting it stray from my person.”

Kihei didn’t sigh, nor had he been listening. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t heard strange tales like this concerning swords since long ago, but he’d never imagined there were mysteries like this concerning flutes as well.

However, despite his youth, he refuted it immediately. Perhaps this masterless samurai beggar was worried he would desire the flute for himself, so he purposely invented such a curious story to tell. There’s no way something like this actually happened, he thought.

“However hard it may be for you, I don’t understand why you won’t get rid of it, knowing the misfortune it causes you,” he said scoldingly.

“I don’t understand it either,” Yajiemon said. “Even if I try to, I can’t throw it away. You could call it my burden or my curse. For roughly ten years now, I’ve been continually afflicted by it.”

“Continually afflicted...”

“It’s not something I can speak of with others. After all, even if it were a tall tale, nobody would believe me.”

On that note, Yajiemon went silent, as did Kihei. The only thing they could hear was the sound the insects made. The moonlight that lit the river bed was white, as though frost lined the ground.

“It’s getting late,” Yajiemon said before long, looking up at the sky.

“It’s getting’ late,” Kihei parroted. Noticing that, he stood up.

3

After a short time had passed, Kihei, who had parted ways with the masterless samurai and went home, once again made an appearance on the river bed. He was masked and lightly dressed. Much like in the play “Vendetta by a samurai in rags” at Daianji dike, he stealthily crept up to the fish-paste hut.

Kihei wanted that flute so badly he couldn't bear it. But from the way the masterless samurai spoke, he didn't seem at all likely to hand it over so easily, so he decided that there was nothing to do but launch a surprise attack at night and take it by force. Of course, until he finally resolved to do it, he had hesitated countless times. But no matter how hard he thought about it, he wanted that flute. Though he called himself a masterless samurai, he was still just a homeless beggar. If he killed him unseen, it would end without an exceptionally difficult cross-examination. Thinking this, he became all the more a devil. Once he returned to his estate and got dressed up, he waited for it to get late and came visiting this place once more.

He didn't know if it were true or not, but according to his story from earlier, that Yajiemon seemed to possess considerable skill. He didn't appear to have any sort of weapon with him, though one mustn't be unprepared, Kihei thought. He too had been learning a form of fencing, but after all is said and done, he was still unseasoned. He had, of course, no experience at a real match. Even if I'm attacking at night like a coward, planning for my opponent is crucial, he thought. And so he cut off a single stick of bamboo from a bamboo grove along the way, fashioned it into a spear and, scooping it up under his arm, went to take a peak. So as not to make the slightest sound, he gently pushed through the pampas grass. Just when he saw the shed, the sound of the flute had stopped. The woven mat was taken off the entrance to the hut, and the inside was still.

Or so he thought until he heard a low groan. Gradually it grew louder—it seemed as though Yajiemon was suffering greatly. He appeared to be having some sort of nightmare rather than suffering from some kind of sickness, though Kihei was a little hesitant. It reminded him of the story from before, about how he'd suffered nonstop for roughly ten years, all for that flute. Thus Kihei felt a kind of vague sense of apprehension.

He held his breath and went to take a look. From inside, his anguished, struggling voice grew intense, and as though tearing it off, Yajiemon thrust aside the woven mat from the entrance and came tumbling out of the hut. Then, seemingly already haven awoken from the terrifying dream, he breathed a sigh of relief and looked around.

Kihei hadn't the time to hide himself. Unfortunately, the moon on this night was bright, so his erect figure and the bamboo spear he was holding were clearly lit up before the masterless samurai's eyes.

At this, Kihei began to panic. He'd at last been discovered, and could no longer postpone the inevitable. He re-gripped the spear he was holding and lunged forward with a single thrust, when Yajiemon quickly dodged it, grabbed the shaft of the lance and pulled back roughly, causing Kihei to stagger involuntarily onto his knees over the grass.

As his opponent was far stronger than expected, Kihei became increasingly panicked. He threw away the spear and was about to reach for his sword, when Yajiemon called out to him immediately.

“No, wait... are you obsessed with my flute?”

He'd hit the mark, and Kihei had not a single word to say. He hesitated for a moment, holding back his partially-extended hand, when Yajiemon spoke quietly.

“If you desire it that much, I'll hand it over to you.”

Yajiemon went to the hut and retrieved the flute, then placed it in Kihei's hands as he knelt there in silence.

“Don't forget the story from before. So as not to harm yourself, please don't get too attached to it.”

“Thank you,” Kihei stuttered as he said it.

“Go home before someone sees you,” Yajiemon said carefully.

At this rate, all he could do was obey his opponent's orders. Kihei accepted the flute and reverently held it over his head. Then he raised himself in an almost mechanical way, bowed politely in silence and bid farewell.

On the way back to his estate, Kihei was struck with a sense of shame and regret. Though he felt joy and satisfaction at having obtained a famous pipe (thought to be the only one of its kind), on the other hand, he regretted tonight's shameful actions. Because he'd handed it over so meekly, more and more the crime, tantamount to robbery with assault, sent pangs of guilt to his heart. Since he hadn't killed him, he deserved at least an apology, he thought.

Once dawn broke, he'd have to visit the masterless samurai once more and apologize for tonight's impoliteness, in addition to offering up some kind of reward for the flute, he decided. He quickened his pace and returned to his estate, but for some reason that night he laid awake and couldn't sleep well.

Unable to wait for the dawn, Kihei quickly made his way to last night's location. In his pockets, he placed three gold coins. An autumn morning mist was still drifting along the river bed, and from somewhere off the cry of a goose could be heard.

He pushed through the grass and approached the shed, when Kihei was shocked out of his wits. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead before the hut. In both hands, he held the bamboo spear Kihei had thrown away, and with it, had pierced his throat.

The following spring, Kihei accepted a wife into his family, and their relationship as husband and wife was a harmonious one, yielding two healthy boys. And so, they lived together peacefully until one autumn seven years after the previous incident, when he failed at his duties and ended up having to commit ritual suicide. Though he made final preparations at his personal estate, he faced the government official who would oversee his death and requested that he be allowed to play one last song, which the official permitted.

The flute was the one he'd received from Iwami Yajiemon. Kihei played calmly, and just as he was about to finish up, the flute emitted a strange sound and suddenly split in two. Thinking it strange, he examined it and found that engraved inside the flute were words such as these.

Year 990 The End Beach Master

Because Kihei was a researcher in this field of study, he knew the beach master's name. Beach master Owari no Muraji was revered as both the one who first propagated flutes, and as the founder of this art. This year was the ninth year of the Tempō era, so if one counts backwards, then 990 years ago was the first year of Emperor Ninmyō's Kashō era. In other words, the date corresponds to the fourth year since the beach master played his flute at the Imperial Court, during the twelfth year of the Jōwa era. The beach master was among the first flute players to create and play his own flutes. Besides having his name engraved upon it, perhaps this flute was also made by him. But why were those the only words carved into such exceptional, thin pipes, he wondered.

Even stranger was that, it was entirely as if the 990th year corresponded to this year, the '990 years in which it would end.' Perhaps the beach master both produced the flute and determined its lifespan himself. Thinking back on it now, it appeared that Iwami Yajiemon's story wasn't a lie after all. This flute, with its bewitching fate, cursed its each and every one of its owners. Only when its last owner perished would the flute's 990 year lifespan also come to an end, it seemed.

Just as he was overcome by the bizarreness of it all, Kihei realized that it was a destiny from which he could not escape—that his fate was wrapped up with that of this flute's. He turned to the government official who was to oversee his death, and upon confiding all the secrets of this flute's past, he committed an ordinary suicide.

This was all transmitted word of mouth via the government official, and I was struck with a strange sensation upon hearing of it. Someone with whom Kihei was close while still alive consulted with his bereaved family. Upon doing so, he patched up the flute, which had split in two, buried it where Iwami Yajiemon was believed to have committed suicide, and erected a symbolic rock into which he engraved the two characters for 'flute' and 'tomb,'

or 'Fuedzuka.' That mound remained at the river bed even after the Meiji era, but due to two floods, it's said that there is no trace of it anymore.

I am from a northern land of Japan, and in my clan we tell eerie stories like this one. No, before that, I want to relate a passage from the famous Edo magistrate Negishi Hizennokami's memoir *Mimibukuro*. There is a story in *Mimibukuro* that goes like this:

Around the time when Kanamori, the junior war minister of Mino, was removed from the shogunate along with the rest of his house, some *daimyō's* chief retainer was ordered to commit *seppuku*. That retainer said to the officer overseeing the deed, "I am to accept the blame for my lord's crime and die in his stead, and therefore I have a clear conscience. As a soldier, it is an honor. But to tell you the truth, I have a crime of my own that I have kept hidden.

"While travelling in my younger days and upon stopping at a certain inn for the night, I found myself in a conversation with a fellow traveler. He was a *yamabushi*, a monk who wanders the mountains seeking enlightenment. At one point in our conversation he showed me his sword. This was a sword of exceeding quality, and I wanted desperately to have it for myself. I implored him to sell it to me, offering a sizeable price, but he refused, saying it had been in his family for generations. Nonetheless, I could not accept not having it. The next morning I left with the monk. As soon as we reached a deserted growth of pines, I swiftly cut him down, took his sword, and fled.

"That was a long time ago, and thankfully it has gone undiscovered to this day. When I think about it, that crime alone is enough reason for me to meet an end like this," and with that, the retainer slit his stomach and died.

The story I am about to tell is quite similar to this one, but I would like you to realize that it is an even more complex and mysterious tale.

In my country, *Noh* singing and *Kyōgen* comedic theatre have been popular since long ago, and understandably, we have many masters of both disciplines. As a result, there are warriors in our clan who sing *Noh* songs and even those who practice *Noh* dance. Still more play the flute, or the drums. There was once such a man named Yagara Kihei. The name sounds a bit old-fashioned, but at the time of this story he was still a young samurai of nineteen, and worked to guard his lord's horses. His father had been named Kihei as well, but had died of an illness in the summer of his son's sixteenth year. Kihei the senior's only son, who had just come of age, took his father's name and took his father's place at the head of the family. His mother and relatives were relieved to find that the young Kihei succeeded in carrying out his duties without incident or ill report during the nearly four years since his father's death. They harbored fond hopes that he would take a fitting wife upon turning twenty the following year.

Growing up in a country like that, Kihei had himself been learning to play the flute since he was little. In other clans this could have been seen as a sign of weakness. In this clan, however, people with some skill in the arts were actually seen as more samurai-like than the ones without any, so no-one took issue with his constant flute playing.

There has long been a myth that people born between the first and third month of the year have straight teeth and are therefore well suited for playing the flute. Kihei happened to have been born on the second month of the year, and perhaps because of this, he was quite a good flute player. He earned the praise of others and the pride of his parents, and continued to pursue his hobby.

It was an Autumn night in 1830, the first year of the Tenpo era. Lifted by the sight of a pleasant moon, Kihei stepped out into the open air. He carried his prized flute with him. He trod over the evening dew, out of the castle and to the riverbank, where pampas grass and reeds shone white under a bright moon. He played his flute as he walked, and once he had descended all the way down

to the riverbank, he heard the sound of another flute ahead of him. He thought it was another flute player, and not the sound of his own flute echoing off the water, and he listened carefully for a while. Sure enough, he heard a distant flute's mellow tune farther down the riverbed. The player was certainly not bad, but Kihei could tell that the flute itself was of a high quality. He wanted to know to whom it belonged.

There is a proverb that says that deer in autumn are drawn to the sound of a flute, and often into a trap. Apparently, autumn deer are not the only creatures attracted to a flute's sound. As Kihei was drawn closer and closer in the flute's direction, entranced by the sound of his favorite instrument, he found that the sound came from among the grasses downstream. As Kihei crept along the patch of tall grass, he wondered, *Is it another person, like me, drawn by the moon to come walk through the dew and play his flute?* In any case, he found the playing impressive. He continued to sneak closer, and he soon saw a squat hut covered with tattered straw mats. It was a *kamaboko* hut: a "fish cake" hut, so-called for its semicylindrical shape, and Kihei knew it would be inhabited by a homeless beggar.

He was surprised to hear such a sound emanating from the hut, and a sense of uneasiness brought him to a halt.

It couldn't be a fox or a damned tanuki trying to trick me...

He wondered if it could be a fox or even an otter playing on his love of flutes in an attempt to trick him. But he was, after all, a warrior. He had his family's Nagasone *kotetsu* sheathed at his side. He stirred up his courage by reminding himself that if it *were* some shape shifter, he could easily cut it down with one swipe of his sword. Pushing the tuft of grass aside, he lifted the mat covering the entrance of the hut to find a seated man playing the flute.

"Hey, you there."

The man stopped playing when Kihei called to him. He looked up at Kihei guardedly.

The moonlight revealed that the man was surely a beggar, and that he appeared to be of about 27 or 28. Yet Kihei sensed that he was somehow different from the usual tramps and beggars throughout the area, and Kihei adjusted his speech accordingly.

"Excuse me. Is that you playing the flute there?"

"Yes," the flute player replied in a low voice.

Kihei smiled, and said, "Its lovely sound led me to seek it here."

Seeing Kihei holding a flute of his own seemed to put the man at ease, and the man relaxed his speech.

"I am embarrassed to have led you on such a pointless search."

"No, not at all. You seem to have quite a deal of experience, judging by the music I just heard. Would you indulge me to have a look at your flute?"

The beggar replied, "This is just something I play for fun, and it is surely not fit to be seen by someone like you," but he did not show any particular aversion to the request. He gently wiped it on the grass nearby and politely extended it towards Kihei.

That was surely not the way a beggar would act. Kihei wondered if perhaps he was a *rōnin* from a warrior family, who had fallen out of favor for some reason or other. Kihei spoke ever more politely.

"Well then, if I may, I will have a look at it."

He took the flute, and held it in the moonlight to look at it. With the man's permission, he played a few notes. He found that this was indeed a splendid instrument, and its sound was like nothing he

had heard before. Kihei was convinced that this man was not the commoner he appeared to be. Naturally, Kihei's own flute was a quality instrument in its own right, but it held no comparison to this one. He wanted to know how the man had come to possess it. Spurred on by curiosity, he flattened a patch of grass to sit near the man.

"How long have you been in these parts?"

"I arrived about half a month ago."

"And where, might I ask, were you before that?" Kihei inquired.

"As you can see, I am not the type to be settled in one place for long. I've wandered here and there, from the Chūgoku region of western Japan, to Kyōto and Ōsaka, along the Ise road, and farther north along the Ōmi path.

Abruptly, Kihei said, "You are from a warrior family, yes?"

The man said nothing. Kihei took his silence to be a yes, and pressed on.

"There must be some reason why you possess such a splendid flute and yet wander the land like this. If I may, I would like to hear your story."

The man remained silent, but after Kihei asked for the third time, he reluctantly spoke.

"This flute is cursed."

2

The man was Iwami Yajiemon, a warrior from the island of Shikoku. Like Kihei, he too had enjoyed playing the flute from a young age.

Yajiemon told the story of a spring evening from when he was nineteen. He had gone to the temple near his ancestors' grave to pray for them. On the way back, he came across a pilgrim lying in the road amidst a patch of rice fields. Unable to ignore him, Yajiemon approached the pilgrim, and found him to be an ill man of about forty in the throes of agony. He fetched some water for the man to drink. He took some of the medicine he kept in a small case, soaked it in water and gave that to him as well. He did all he could to help him, but the man's condition only worsened, and he soon lay dead.

Before the man died, he expressed his profound gratitude for Yajiemon's kindness: "Noble warrior, there is no way I can thank you enough for what you have done for me. Please pardon me for that, but as a sign of my thanks, I would like to give you this." He pulled a flute pouch from his hip and handed it to Yajiemon. "There is no other like it in the world, but I must caution you to be careful, and not meet an end like mine." With that last cryptic line, the man died. Yajiemon asked him his name and place of birth, but he only shook his head. Sensing something about the situation was not quite right, Yajiemon took care of the body's last rites, and had the pilgrim interred at his own family's grave site.

The flute that the pilgrim left him truly was an instrument with no equal. Though he could not help but wonder how such an item had come into the man's possession, he was happy to have received this unexpected treasure, and he treasured it dearly.

Half a year later, Yajiemon was again returning home from the same temple. He was walking along the same rice fields when he spied a young samurai in travelling garb. Oddly, the samurai looked as though he were *waiting* for Yajiemon.

"I say, are you Iwami Yajiemon?" the young samurai asked as he walked closer.

When Yajiemon said yes, the samurai walked still closer. "They say that some time ago you tended to a dying pilgrim and received a flute from him. That pilgrim was an enemy of mine, and I have travelled far seeking to cut his throat and receive that flute. That he has died before I could kill him

can't be helped, but nonetheless, I intend to have that flute. I have awaited you here for that very reason."

Yajiemon could not oblige such a sudden request. He asked the samurai who he was, and from where, and what quarrel he had with the pilgrim. Without at least that much, he said, he could discuss the matter no further. The samurai refused to tell him any more and continued to press for the flute.

By now, Yajiemon had grown suspicious of the samurai's motivations, and wondered if perhaps this man had fabricated the story to trick him out of the precious flute. He said that as long as the young samurai's identity and the details of his argument with the pilgrim were not made clear, he absolutely would not hand it over. Hearing this, the samurai became visibly enraged.

"I will have that flute!" the samurai shouted, placing his hand on his sword. Yajiemon saw that there was no more sense in talking and prepared to fight. After a few harsh words, swords were drawn, and the unnamed samurai fell bloodied at Yajiemon's feet.

With his last breath, the samurai growled, "That flute shall curse you," and fell dead. Yajiemon felt a sense of unreality sweep over him. He had just killed another man without really knowing why. He knew he would not be blamed once he reported the incident and explained what had happened, but the only outcome of the encounter had been that he was forced to slay a fellow man. The identity of the pilgrim who had given him the flute and that of the samurai remained unknown to him.

The matter of his duel was settled without a problem, as he had expected, but an unexpected difficulty arose. News of the incident spread throughout the clan and soon enough his lord heard of it. The lord declared that he wanted see this flute that had caused all this. Yajiemon did not particularly mind showing it to his lord. However, he knew that his lord had a liking for flutes and had a custom of buying good ones he found, no matter the cost. So he feared that if he showed it to him, he would demand it for himself and take it away. Even if his lord simply requested for the flute, as his lord's subject he could not refuse. He struggled with this idea, but no matter how he thought about it, he simply could not part with the flute.

There was only one thing he could do. The young man set off with it, leaving his home behind him. For the sake of a single flute, he abandoned the ancestral home of his family.

Unlike earlier times, the *daimyōs* of those days headed close-knit clans, and rarely invited new members from outside. Yajiemon's only option was to take his flute and live as a *rōnin*. He crossed over to Kyushu, wandered the Chūgoku region and drifted through Kyōto and Ōsaka. As he sought the food and shelter he needed, he fell ill, was robbed, and found that bad luck dogged him wherever he went. Iwami Yajiemon the samurai finally fell among the ranks of beggars.

Over time, poverty forced him to let go of his worldly possessions, big and small, but he would not give up his flute for any reason. So it was that he came to wander in the north and encounter Yagara Kihei on this night, as he played his flute beneath the moon.

When Yajiemon reached that point in his story he stopped, and sighed.

"I am sure this flute has some sort of curse on it, like the pilgrim said. I do not know where it came from, but even in the short time I have known of it, I have the seen its previous owner die in pain by the side of the road, and have been forced to slay the travelling samurai who sought it. And I, merely to keep it in my possession, have sunk the depths of society. When I think about that, I fear for what is in store for me. I have thought again and again that I should either sell the flute away or break it in half. But I couldn't stand to sell it, and I could stand destroying it even less."

Kihei merely sighed. Stories of swords cursed like this had been told since ancient times, but he had never heard such a story about a flute.

But the young man quickly told himself the story was false. Perhaps the *rōnin* had made it up, fearing that Kihei too would want the flute. Perhaps the events he told had never happened at all.

“No matter how dear it is, I cannot understand why you continue to possess it, knowing the misfortune it will bring upon you,” Kihei challenged.

“Nor do I,” said Yajiemon. “Even if I try to rid myself of it, I cannot. Could that be part of the curse, part of the misfortune? I have been in constant pain for nearly ten years.”

“Constant pain...?”

“That is not something of which another person should know. Even if I told you, you would surely think it untrue.”

Yajiemon fell silent. Kihei was also silent. The only sound in the tent was the noise of the insects outside. The moon was a pale white, as though covered by frost.

Eventually, Yajiemon looked up at the sky and spoke.

“It’s late.”

“It’s late,” Kihei parroted, and stood up to leave.

3

Kihei bade goodnight to the *rōnin* and went home, but it was not long before he returned to the riverbed. This time, however, he wore a veil over his face, and crept towards the *kamaboko* hut, reminiscent of the *Daianjitei* scene in the play *Katakiuchi Tzure no Nishiki*.

Kihei desperately wanted that flute, but from listening to the *rōnin* speak, he did not think Yajiemon would give it up easily. He concluded that there was nothing to do but assassinate him in the dark and take it. He had agonized over the decision, but he wanted that flute. In any case, even if he was a *rōnin*, he was still a homeless beggar. If Kihei succeeded in killing the man without being found out, he would not be troubled with any complications. He retired to his home, prepared the necessary clothing, waited for the night to deepen, and set out again to make his attack.

He did not know how much truth Yajiemon’s story held. Still, if there was any truth to it, he was a man of some skill with a blade. He did not appear to have any sort of weapon, but Kihei knew he could not be too careful. He himself had done some sword training, but in the end, he was still young. He had naturally never been in a sword fight. He surmised that even a cowardly assassination like this would require some preparation. So, as he crept toward the hut, he cut down a bamboo pole and fashioned it into a spear, which carried under his arm. He used the spear to push the long grass aside and when he reached the hut there was no sound of a flute. The straw mat covered the entrance, and there was no sound from inside.

But a moment later, he heard a low groan from within. The voice grew louder and louder, and it was clear that Yajiemon was in a great deal of suffering. This sounded to him not like the sound of a sick man, but of someone enduring a nightmare, and it caused him to take pause. He recalled Yajiemon saying that he had suffered endlessly for nearly ten years, and felt a sense of unease.

Kihei held his breath. Yajiemon was now screaming in agony and suddenly burst out into the open air. It seemed he had awakened from his terrible dream. He exhaled heavily, and looked around.

Kihei had no time to hide. Unfortunately for him, the moon was still bright and clear that night, and he was in plain view of the *rōnin*, standing there with the bamboo spear under his arm. Kihei panicked. There was no time to delay. If he was seen, he would be in trouble. He grabbed the spear

and thrust it at Yajiemon. Yajiemon jumped out of the way, seized the spear, and yanked it, causing Kihei to stagger and fall to his knee.

Kihei further panicked when he found his opponent even stronger than he expected. He released the spear and as he grabbed for his sword, Yajiemon called out to him.

“Wait! Hold! ... Is it the flute that you seek?”

Kihei could not quickly respond. He faltered a moment in reaching for his sword, and Yajiemon said quietly, “If you desire it so badly, it is yours.”

Yajiemon returned to the hut, emerged with the flute, and silently handed it to Kihei.

“Please do not forget what I told you. Take great care that a similar fate does not befall you.”

“Thank you kindly,” Kihei stammered.

“Now return, before you are seen,” Yajiemon cautioned.

There was nothing he could do but obey. He took the flute and stood up, stiff like a marionette. Then without a word, he bowed politely, and left.

On his way back, Kihei was overcome with guilt and regret. Even as he felt the joy of possessing this masterpiece of a flute, he lamented his shameful behavior. Yajiemon had meekly handed him the flute. That in itself caused Kihei as much remorse as if he had stabbed the man and taken it. That he had been able to apologize and leave him alive was perhaps the one saving grace.

He decided that when morning came, he would return to the *rōnin*’s home, apologize for his actions, and offer him some sort of thanks for the flute. With that thought, he sped home, but he remained wide awake that night, unable to sleep.

With daybreak still too far away, Kihei set out early to the site of the previous night’s incident. He carried three *koban* coins with him. The autumn mist still hung over the riverbed, and in the distance, he heard the call of a wild goose.

He emerged from the grass to find a shocking sight. Iwami Yajiemon lay dead in front of his hut. His hands gripped Kihei’s bamboo spear, which he had plunged through his own throat.

Kihei married the following spring. It was a happy marriage that produced two sons. Life went on smoothly for him and his family, but in the seventh autumn after Yajiemon’s death, a failure at work led him to be ordered to commit *seppuku*. As he knelt in his house ready to die, he asked the officer standing watch for permission to play one last tune on his flute. The man assented.

It was the flute Iwami Yajiemon had ceded to him. He played the flute calmly, and just as the tune was about to end, the flute made a strange noise, and split in half. He quizzically looked down at it to find the following carved on the inside:

TO END AFTER 990 YEARS -HAMANUSHI

As a practitioner of this hobby, Kihei knew who Hamanushi was. Owari no Muraji Hamanushi was revered as the man who first introduced flute playing to our country. It was currently 1838, the ninth year of the Tenpo era. Counting back 990 years would lead to 848, the first year of Emperor Ninmyō’s reign. That in turn was four years after Hamanushi was said to have played his flute at the imperial court, in the twelfth year of Jōwa. Though he was known for his flute playing, Hamanushi had made his own flutes at first. It would seem that his name carved into it indicated that the flute was his handiwork. But *how* would anyone etch this many *kanji* not on the surface, but on the *inside* of this narrow pipe? That was a mystery.

Still more strange was the idea that the “after 990 years” of the inscription would seem to correspond to this year. Had Hamanushi himself crafted the instrument, and decided when it would

meet its end? It seemed that Yajiemon's tale was true after all: The unlucky flute had been destined to bring suffering to all who possessed it for 990 years, until at last it died along with its final owner. Kihei was surprised, and realized that it would have been difficult to escape this sad fate. He revealed the story of the flute and all he knew of its secrets to the officer, and then proceeded to commit *seppuku*.

The story gave an eerie sensation to all who heard it from the officer. Kihei's remaining family members and those in the clan who had been close to him during his lifetime discussed what to do with the flute. They decided to rejoin the two halves and bury it in the place where they estimated Iwami Yajiemon to have killed himself. They marked the spot with a stone tablet, engraved with two *kanji* spelling the words "flute grave." That tablet remained on the riverbank through the Meiji period, until the river overflowed twice, removing any trace of it.

Fuezuka

Kido Okamoto

1

I am from the northern country.

There is a mysterious legend in my region that goes like this:

Before I talk about it, I want to introduce a part of an essay from Mimibukuro which was written by the famous bugyo Negishi Hizennokami in Edo.

The story goes like this:

When the bakuhu administration took away the property of Kanamori Hyobenosuke's family, a karo was asked to do a seppuku (suicide). The karo said to the administrator.

"I am not ashamed and even proud to do a seppuku for my family's sake, but to say the truth, I have a hidden sin. When I was young, I went on a trip and stayed in a traveler's inn. I met a yamabushi who stayed in the same room with me. While we were talking about some things, he pulled out a sword and showed it to me. It was such a well-crafted sword that I begged him to sell it to me for a reasonable price. But he refused, saying it was his family's treasure. But then I could not give it up that easily, so the following morning, when I was walking together with the yamabusi, we passed along some isolated pine trees, I suddenly killed him, stole the sword and escaped.

It was a long time ago, fortunately until now, nobody found out about what I did.

Now, thinking about my evil deed, its enough reason for me to deserved death;

And he committed seppuku".

The story that I am about to tell is similar to this one.

But I'm hoping that you'll think that it's much more complex and mysterious.

A long time ago, there were already songs and nou kyogen (stage plays) in my country.

So, there were also a lot of masters of songs and kyogen. Relatively, there were some who can sing, dance, play the flute and the tutumi (drums) even with in the samurai clans. Among them, was a man named Yagara Kihei. His name sounds like an old man, but at that time, he was only nineteen years old and was working as a horseman.

His father was also named Kihei. He died of sickness during one summer when his son was sixteen. So being an only son, when he celebrated his coming of age day, he inherited his father's name and properties without any conflict. After that, for four years, young Kihei worked smoothly without any bad incidents. He was trusted by his mother and relatives and they were all looking forward to a good marriage for him following year when he will turn twenty.

As I mentioned already, Kihei learned to play the flute since childhood according to the

country's tradition. While in other prefecture he might be seen as a weak person, in this part of the country, people prefer the ones who have a sense of decency as a samurai. So nobody minded him at all even when he played the flute frequently.

Since long ago, people would say that the one who was born on the year of marudoshi has normal teeth and would be good at playing the flute. Kihei being born on February of the year of marudoshi plays the flute very well. Since he was a child, people already recognized his ability which made his parents proud, so he did not give up this hobby even now.

One autumn night, in the first year of Tenpo, Kihei, tempted by the beautiful moon, took his favorite flute and went out of his house. Stomping the night dew, he went to the riverside outside of the castle. Along the way, the waving bushes of pampas grasses and reeds were visible under the moonlight, and he could hear the sound of the insects nearby. Kihei played the flute while walking down the riverside, and then, from the direction he was going he could hear the melody of another flute. He thought it's not a reflection of his flute from the water but somebody else was playing somewhere, so he listened for a while. The melody from the other flute was becoming clearer in the riverside at night. He came to realized that the other man's flute was of superior quality, and the player himself was quite good at what he does that he wanted to be acquainted with him. Not only the autumn deers were interested in the melody of the flute, but it was Kihei who was touched the most and went to the direction from which the melody comes. The melody was coming from the bushes of the pampas grasses along the river. Kihei was delighted that somebody else enjoyed playing the flute on this wet dewy night tempted by the same moonlight like him. He tiptoed through the bushes of the pampas grasses and he found a small shed covered with broken bamboo blinds. Kihei knew it was called the poor's shed and the one living there was a homeless beggar. He thought it was not common that an excellent melody would come from such a place, and he stopped momentarily. "I wonder if a fox or a raccoon is trying to fool me." He had his doubts for a moment wondering if a fox or an otter was making a fool of him knowing how he loves to play the flute. But Kihei, a samurai who always carry on his waist an inherited Nagasone Kotetsu sword, went inside with confidence thinking he could easily kill whatever evil comes his way. There he found a man sitting down while playing a flute. The blind on the entrance of the shed was kept opened.

"Hello, hello." The man stopped playing the flute and looked up at Kihei anxiously. The moonlight reflected on him and he looked like a beggar. At the first impression, Kihei noticed that the man looks twenty seven or eight years old and somewhat different from any ordinary homeless or beggar who used to live here. So he asked

respectfully, "Were you playing the flute here?" "Yes," the man answered in a low voice.

"I came here because I was fascinated by the way you played the flute, such a clear melody." Kihei said with a smile. The man noticed soon enough that Kihei also had a flute in his hand, so he relaxed and his voice became friendly. "I am ashamed of the tune I played, my skill is not that good at all." "No, as what I heard before, I think you trained pretty well. May I see your flute?" "It's just for my own enjoyment and it has no worth showing it to a person like you," he said, but he wiped his flute by the grasses growing on the foreground and handed it to Kihei respectfully without hesitation.

This kind of attitude is somehow not that of an ordinary beggar. Kihei guessed that provably he was from a samurai family and for some reason ended up in this pitiful situation, so he greeted more respectfully. "So, let me see it." He took the flute and saw it through the moonlight. And then, after asking the man's permission he tried to play it. The tune was not an ordinary one but very rare in this world, so Kihei guessed that the man was not what he seemed to be. Of course his own flute was of good quality, but it simply cannot be compared to that of the man's. Kihei wanted to know why he came to own such an outstanding flute. Curiously, he gave back the flute, laid down some grasses on the ground and sat down beside him. "Since when did you arrive here?"

"I have been here since two weeks ago. "And where did you come from?" Kihei asked.

"Having been in a situation like this, I do not have a fixed destination. I was traveling around Chugoku, Kyoto, Osaka, Iseji, and Omiji, among many places." If I may ask, are you from a samurai family?" The man did not answer and remained quiet. Kihei took it as a confirmation to his question. So, he went nearer and asked, there must be a reason how come you're wandering while having with you this extra ordinary flute. Would you like to tell me the details if it's not any trouble for you?

But the man remained quiet still. Kihei asked him again and again, so he finally answered; "Because I am being cursed by this flute!"

2

The man was a samurai named Iwami Yajiemon of Shikoku. He loved playing the flute since his childhood just like Kihei. One evening in spring, when Yajiemon was nineteen, He attended his bodaiji and on his way home, he found a Shikoku pilgrim lying down on the isolated rice field. He stopped by, went to check the man who looked about forty years old who seemed to be suffering from sickness. Yajiemon brought clean water from the neighbor, let him drink and gave him medicines from his purse. He did what he could for the pilgrim but he was such in a very serious condition that he finally died.

The man was very grateful for the kindness of Yajiemon and told that he could not thank him enough, thus in return, he would like to give him a token of his gratitude.

The man took out a flute in a pouch from his waist line and handed it over to Yajiemon. "This is one of a kind in this world. Just be very careful not to have the same fate like mine." He died having parted with these mysterious words. Yajiemon asked where he was from or his name but he refused to answer shaking his head instead. Yajiemon took care of the body and buried it on his bodaiji for he thought it was the right thing to do. The flute from the unknown Shikoku pilgrim was really an excellent one. Yajiemon wondered how he was able to have it in his possession. Anyway he was so glad to have received such an unexpected treasure from an unexpected event so he kept it accordingly. About a half year later, while Yajiemon was on his way home from his daily visit to his bodaiji, he passed by the same rice field where he found the Shikoku pilgrim, a young samurai was standing there waiting for him. "Are you Yajiemon Ishimi, sir?" The young samurai approached and asked him. When Yajiemon said yes, he came nearer still and said: According to the rumor, you took care of a sick Shikoku pilgrim here in this place and got a flute in a pouch as a token of gratitude. The Shikoku pilgrim was my enemy, and I came here from very far to get his head as well as his flute. But since he died of sickness already, I just want to get the flute. I had been waiting for you for several hours." Yajiemon, having doubts in his mind as to what was the true purpose of the young samurai, answered back that nothing could be done without him knowing anything about the background of the young samurai. So if he could tell Yajiemon his name, the place where he came from and why the Shikoku pilgrim became his enemy only then would he be able to do something about it. But then, the young samurai urged him strongly to hand over the flute without further explanation. But Yajiemon was not convinced at all, he told the young samurai that he had no intention of giving up the flute to him for he failed to explain anything about his background and the reasons why he became the enemy of the Shikoku pilgrim. Having heard this, the color was gone from the young samurai's face, and he took a grip of his sword. When Yajiemon saw this, he finally thought that there's no room for negotiation anymore so he did the same with his sword. After exchanging some words, they drew their swords and fought, after which the unknown young samurai fell down with blood in front of Yajiemon; "The flute courses you." after telling so, he died. Having killed without knowing the reason why, Yajiemon felt like he was in a dream for a while. Afterwards, He reported the incident to the authorities, but there was no reason why he should be made accountable for death of the young samurai, so the case was settled as such. Of course the identity of the Shikoku pilgrim who gave the flute to Yajiemon was still unknown as well as that of the young samurai. But then another problem occurred. The rumor about the flute and the killing of the young samurai had spread all over the

prefecture and was heard by the local lord. He demanded that the flute be shown to him at once. Yajiemon found no problem with that, but the thing is, the Lord's wife was known for her love of flutes. Yajiemon was aware that she collects good quality flutes without any consideration for price. So if he let the Lord see the flute without any plan, it might be taken away by his wife on the pretext that the Lord needs it for himself. But he could not just ignore the wishes of the local Lord for he was under his command. Yajiemon thought hard about it, and yet the more he thought about it, the more painful it became for him to give up the flute. So knowing that there was no other choice, he decided to escape with the flute leaving behind all his inheritance. In those days, every Daimyo (local lord) were not in a position to acquire a new staff because of financial restrictions. Even being aware of this fact, Yajiemon still choose to become a ronin (jobless or an outcast samurai), as long as he could have the flute. He traveled to far away places as far as Kyusyu, Shikoku, Kyoto and even Osaka to look for a job but he found none and he became sick, some of his possessions were even stolen and he experienced a lot of difficulties. And finally, he had to sell his swords and was no longer the respectful samurai known as Yajiemon Ishimi but was forced to lead a life of a beggar. He gave up everything he possessed except for the flute. Then, he came to this northern country, settled in this place and it was here that he played the flute, the melody of which was heard you, Yagara Kihei., after telling his story Yajiemon sighed. "As what the Shikoku pilgrim said, there must be a curse with this flute." I don't know anything about the former owner of this, the only thing I know about was the Shikoku pilgrim who died on the street, the samurai who tried to take whom I killed instead. And I also became like this because of this flute. Thinking about it now, I'm afraid that I may face the end of my life because of this so I'm trying to make up my mind to either sell it or destroy it or maybe to just throw it away. But then again, I could not make up my mind as to what to do it. So I'm still keeping it even though I know it doesn't do me any good at all. Kihei on the other hand could not stop sighing while listening to the story. Since a long time ago, there were some mysterious stories of karma about swords. But he did not think there was one about a flute also, so he just could not believe it. Perhaps this jobless beggar is afraid that I may take away his flute, so he made up a story intentionally. "No matter how important this thing is for you, I could not understand how you can hold on to it knowing all it brought you are misfortunes." Kihei said accusingly. "I also cannot understand it myself," Yajiemon said. "I tried to throw it away but I could not bring myself to do it. I wonder if it is a calamity or a curse, but it made me suffer for ten years." "Have you always suffered?" Kehei asked. "You should not tell others about it. Even if you tell, people would never think it's true," after

saying this, he became quiet. Kihei also remained quiet. The only thing they could hear were the sounds made by the insects. The moonlight's reflection on the riverside was white like a frozen mist. "It's midnight already," Yajiemon said looking up the sky. "It's midnight already," Kihei said too like a reflection. Without being aware of it, he stood up.

3

Kihei, having said goodbye to the ronin, went home. But after about two hours, reappeared at the riverside again. He had a mask this time and was wearing lighter clothes. He tiptoed to the beggar's shed just like in one of the scenes in *Daianjidutumi*, a stage play in *Revenge of Tsudurenishiki*. Kihei, was longing so much for the flute and could not bear not having it. Reflecting upon the way the ronin told his story, he could not just give it up easily. Kihei then made up his mind to kill him and steal the flute. But before that, he was hesitant to kill him at first, but then wanted the flute so badly. The opponent was just a homeless beggar despite being a ronin. If you kill him and nobody knows about it, then there will be no problem at all. Thinking like this, he became more determined to go through with it. So he went home to prepare, wait for the right time in the night, and came back here again. He was not sure if it's true or not, based on the story that Yajiemon told him, he might be very good with the sword. It looks like he has no weapon with him but then, it doesn't pay to underestimate him,. Kihei thought. "I was trained how to use a sword ordinarily, but I'm still young and off course without any experience in fighting with real sword." Even to try to kill in secret and in a cowardly way, it still needs preparation, he thought. So he cut a bamboo from the bamboo grove along the way, made a bamboo spear out of it and brought it with him. He went inside the bush calmly without making a sound and checked inside the shed. The playing of the flute had stopped and the entrance of the shed was closed and when he thought that all was silent inside, he heard a low growling voice, and it was becoming higher. It sounded like Yajiemon was having a nightmare. It made Kihei hesitate to push through with his plan for he felt bad remembering Yajiemon's story particularly about his having to suffer for ten years because of the flute. Observing calmly, the growling voice became stronger and Yajiemon suddenly grab away the cover of the shed's entrance and went out. He looked fully awake now from the terrible nightmare. And he looked around sighing. Kihei had no time to hide. And since the moon was shining brightly tonight, he could be seen clearly while standing with a bamboo spear, in front of the ronin. Kihei then panicked for he was caught in the act and there was no choice left but to attack with his spear. Yajiemon avoided it quickly, caught the spear and pulled at it strongly. Kihei fell down kneeling on the grass. He panicked some more

because his opponent was much stronger than what he thought. Instantly, he threw away the spear and try to take out his sword, but Yajiemon said, "Wait a minute, Do you really want my flute?" Since it was true, Kihei could not say anything. He hesitated for a moment while keeping his hand on his sword. Yajiemon said calmly: "If you want it so much, I will give it to you." Yajiemon went inside the shed, took the flute and gave it to Kihei who was kneeling down silently. "Don't forget about the story I told you before and be aware of the curse." "Thank you." Kihei answered in a trembling voice. "Go home quickly while nobody else is around." Yajiemon told him cautiously. Kihei received the flute, stood up like a machine, bowed respectfully without any word and obediently went home. On his way back, he was full of remorse and regretted what he just did. He felt contented that he got the best flute in this world, but at the same time, was ashamed of what he did tonight. In the end, the man gave up the flute willingly. And somehow, he felt relieved that he did not kill the man. He decided to go back to the ronin, to apologize for what he did and to pay for the flute. He walked faster and returned to his house. He remained awake that night for he could not sleep. The following day, he went to the place where he met the ronin and he had three kobans in his pocket intending to give them to him as a payment for the flute. The fog in the autumn morning was still remaining in the riverside, as he heard the crying sound of the wild goose. Crawling between the bushes, Kihei approached the shed and he was shocked to have found the dead body of Ishimi Yajiemon in front of it. He had in his hand the bamboo spear that Kihei abandoned the night before and used to kill himself by pushing it to his throat. .

In the spring of the following year, Kihei got married. He was having a good relationship with his wife, who bore him two boys. So he was living smoothly without any problem. Until the autumn of the seventh year, he came to a situation where he must do the seppuku (suicide) to take responsibility for his lord's mistakes. When began his preparation for the seppuku, he asked first if could be allowed to play his flute for the last time. The flute was the one which was given to him by Ishimi Yajiemon. When the officer allowed him to, he started playing the flute in peaceful mind. When he was almost finished, the flute was suddenly broken into two pieces with a strange sound. He felt something was amiss and checked it. There were letters engraved inside the flute that reads like this: "It lasts nine hundred ninety years." "Hamanushi" Kihei knew the name of Hamanushi because he was studying shido. Hamanushi was a muraji of Owari. He was the first man in our nation who taught how to play the flute. He was well admired as the founder of shido. This was in the 9th of Tenpo and counting back from now, nine hundred ninety years before was the first of Kisyo the same as after four

years of 12th of Jochi the year Hamanushi played the flute in the imperial palace. Hamanushi was a flute player. He would make the flute and played by himself. Perhaps, this flute was made by him because his name was engraved on it. It was a question of how he engraved the kanji letter inside of the slim tube and not outside. The most puzzling is that, it may be just the nine hundred ninetieth year as he wrote "It lasts nine hundred ninety years."

I wonder if Hamanushi made the flute by himself and decided when it will last.

Thinking now, the story of Ishimi Yajimon might also be true. Having mysterious karma, this flute cursed owners to owners and its nine hundred ninety years life span was finished with the last owner. Kihei was surprised by the mystery that surrounds the flute and at the same time, he knew it is also an unavoidable karma that his fate would be tied to the flute. He explained all these to the officer and after that, he finally did the seppuku. This story was told by the officer and everybody was amazed by the strangeness of it. Some people in the prefecture who were acquainted with Kihei when he was still alive consulted with his family, and they joined the two broken parts of the flute together, buried it in the place where Ishimi Yajimon committed suicide and set up a stone with an engraved word, "Fuezuka" I heard that the mound has remained up to the Meiji period but it disappeared completely due the floods.