

**Beneath a Forest of Cherry Trees in Full Bloom**  
**By Ango Sakaguchi**  
**(Part 1)**

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When the cherry trees bloom, people make merry swinging about bottles of rice wine and eating skewered dumplings as they stroll under the blossoms taking in the magnificence of spring in all its glory. But, it is all a lie. Allow me to tell you why this is so. Talk of people gathering in crowds under the cherry blossoms, getting drunk, vomiting, brawling, and the like dates from the Edo Period. In ancient times, though one may have thought that under the cherry blossoms was a place of fear, no one considered it a magnificent scene. Nowadays, if the subject of cherry blossoms comes up, people are convinced that to be under them is just fun and games judging from the crowds, the drinking, and the brawling. However, if man is removed from beneath the blossoms, it becomes a scene of dread. Thus, even in Noh drama there appears a story in which a certain mother goes mad searching for her precious child who has been abducted. Happening to come upon a forest of cherry trees in full bloom, she gazed all around and had a vision of her child in the shadow of the petals. Driven to her death by madness, she was buried under the petals of the cherry blossoms. (This story is a digression on my part.) A grove of blooming cherry trees without a trace of man is no less than a patch of terror.

Long ago, Suzuka Pass also had a point where travelers were forced to pass beneath the blossoms of a forest of cherry trees. When there were no blossoms, all was well. In the cherry blossom season, though, all travelers who passed beneath the blooms went mad. Hoping to escape as quickly as possible from under the blossoms' influence, they would run as fast as they could in any direction where there was a green tree or a withered one. A lone traveler had a good chance. All he had to do was run for his life to the right tree for shelter sighing in relief when he made it to safety. A pair of travelers, though, were in a difficult situation. In other words, everyone has their own pace. One would always lag behind, but even if he screamed with all his might for his companion to wait, his friend would run madly away abandoning him. This is what happened to those who passed beneath the blossoms of the forest on Suzuka Pass. Travelers who had been friendly companions became alienated, no longer trusting each other's friendship. Travelers, therefore, naturally avoided passing beneath the blossoms of this forest, taking pains to use a roundabout path through the mountains. As time passed, the forest of cherry trees came to be off the beaten path, left to the loneliness of the mountain without a soul passing through.

Many years passed before a lone bandit took to living on the mountain. Here was a cruel Bandit who would set out on the highway, mercilessly stripping travelers of their clothes and taking their lives. Yet, even he was seized with terror and driven mad when he first dared to pass beneath the cherry trees when they were in bloom. From that time on he hated flowers, seeing them as full of

dread, somehow disgusting. Such feelings churned in his gut. Beneath the cherry blossoms the wind seemed to roar....but there was no wind. Despite the feeling, there was not even a breath of wind, absolutely not a sound. There was only the Bandit and the sound of his footsteps enveloped by a silent, cool, unmoving breeze. Just as the blossoms' petals flutter away, one might feel as if his soul was being scattered about and the very life within him withering away. An urge would follow to close one's eyes, scream something, and flee, but this is out of the question for you would bump into the cherry trees if you did so. Even worse, you would go mad.

Since this Bandit, however, was a cool-headed individual who never regretted anything, he did not think of his experience as strange. He just thought, "I'll think about it next year. That was all. He had no desire to think about it for the time being. "Yea, when they bloom next year, I'll give it a good thought." That was it. Year after year, it was the same old thing. Ten years had already passed, and it was the same thing again. "Wait till next year. Then I'll think about it." Thus another year passed.

In the meantime, as he continued to think this way, the number of wives he kept grew from the original one to reach seven. He added number eight to his collection, snatching her along with her husband's clothes as they traveled along the highway. The Lady's husband was killed.

After killing the Lady's husband, the Bandit was overcome with a strange feeling. It was not the same as usual. He could not understand exactly what it was, but it was strange. Not being of a disposition to be bothered by such matters, he did not take it too seriously at the time. The Bandit had no desire to kill the man at first, so he was just going to strip him of his belongings and give him a good swift kick to send him on his way as he usually did. This time, though, the Lady was so beautiful that he cut her companion down without even thinking. This was not only an unexpected occurrence to the Bandit himself. As a sign of the Lady's disbelief, her legs gave way and she stared at him in a daze when he turned to face her. "You're my wife from now on," he said. She answered with a nod. When he took her by the hand and helped her up, she said she could not walk and demanded that he carry her. The Bandit gave in, lifted her effortlessly onto his back, and began to walk. When he came to a tough uphill climb, he told her to get off and walk because it was too dangerous, but she protested refusing to get down, continuing to cling tightly to his back.

"What makes you think I can climb a hill that is so gruesome even for a mountain man such as you?"

"Hm, that so? Okay," he answered in good humor even though he was tired and hurting. "But get down just once. I'm plenty strong. It ain't because I hurt and want to rest. I ain't got eyes in the back of my head, you know. I been carrying you along, but it ain't enough. It bugs me. I can't help it. Get down and let me have just one look at your pretty face."

"No! No!" she answered and gripped him even more desperately about the neck. "I can not stand still for a moment in such a lonely place as this. Get me to the place you call home at once without a moment's rest. If you do not, I will not deign to be your wife. If you are to make me feel so lonely, I shall bite my tongue and die."

"Okay. Okay. I got you. I'll do anything you want."

The Bandit was overcome by a melting feeling of happiness thinking of the fun he would have with this beautiful wife as a partner. Once again he swaggered, squaring off his shoulders. He turned slowly showing the mountains before them, behind them, to the left, and to the right.

He said, "All these mountains, they're all mine." But the Lady completely ignored him.

Surprised, he once more said disappointedly, "Listen here. All these mountains you see before you, all these trees, all these valleys, they're all mine!"

“Hurry up and walk. I just do not want to be under this rocky cliff anymore.”

“Okay! Okay! Right away. When we get home, I’ll whip you up a treat you’ll never forget.”

“Is this as fast as you can go? Run!”

“Even if it was only me, this would be a rough hill to run up.”

“One would never know that you have no pride by looking at you. As for me, I have become an absolutely good-for-nothing wife. Ah! Where can I turn to be taken care of.”

“What kind of stupid...? Such an easy hill.”

“Ah. So slow. Are you already tired?”

“Cut it out. Once we get past this hill, I’ll run so fast a deer couldn’t even keep up. I’ll show you.”

“But you seem to be running out of breath.”

“Anything’s like that at first. Once I get going, I’ll go so fast it’ll make your eyes spin.”

However, the Bandit was so tired that he felt as if his body was going to fall apart at its joints. Upon arriving in front of his home, his vision was blurred, his ears rung, and he did not even have the strength to squeeze out one hoarse word. His seven wives came out of the house to greet them, but it was all the Bandit could to untangle himself from the Lady on his back and put her down.

The seven wives were struck by a kind of feminine beauty which they had never seen before. The Lady, however, was shocked by the seven wives’ filth. There had been women of considerable beauty among the seven at one time, but now not even a shadow of this remained. The Lady retreated apprehensively behind him and asked, “Who is this mountain woman?”

“This’s my old wife,” he said, quickly adding the word “old” not knowing exactly what to say. It was a good answer on the spur of the moment, but the Lady did not spare him.

“Good heavens. Is this your wife?”

“Well...you.... It’s because I never knew there was a pretty thing like you.”

“Take your sword and kill her.”

The Lady pointed at the one who had the best facial features and screamed.

“Bbbbut, even if I don’t kill her, can’t you think of her as a maid.”

“You who had the nerve to kill my husband, can you not even kill your own wife? You still plan to make me your wife in spite of this?”

A groan leaked out of his closed mouth. He bounded, almost flying toward the designated woman and cut her down with his sword.

“This one! Next! There! This woman here!”

He hesitated but soon he walked directly toward the woman and sunk his sword into her neck with a thud. Before her head could even stop rolling, the Lady’s clear voice, in all its fullness and luster, beautifully reverberated singling out the next victim.

“Next, this one!”

The chosen one covered her face with her hands and shrieked at the top of her voice. Held aloft with the scream, the sword was driven through the air with a flash. The remaining women suddenly froze in their steps for a moment and then fled in all directions.

“Even if only one escapes, I will not forgive you. There, in the shadow of the thicket. There’s one! She’ll get completely away.”

The Bandit dashed madly into the mountain forest waving a bloody sword in the air. Then, only one was left, scared to death, and too slow to escape. This was the ugliest of them all, a lame woman. The Bandit returned having cut down those who escaped, sparing none. As he raised his sword carelessly....

“Enough! Just this one. I will use her as my maid.”

“We have the chance. Let’s get it over with.”

“Are you not a fool. I am telling you not to kill her.”

“Hm. Yea. That’s right.”

He flung his bloody sword away and flopped down on his rear. All at once his exhaustion welled up and his vision blurred. A feeling of heaviness came over him as if his rump were rooted in the earth. He suddenly became aware of the silence. A kind of terror rose, practically leaping from within him. Startled, he turned around to see the Lady standing motionless with a somehow dreadful air about her. The Bandit felt as if he had awoken from a nightmare. His eyes and his soul were absorbed in her beauty, and he could not move. But he was uneasy. What kind of uneasiness, why, or what made him uneasy he knew not. The Lady was too beautiful and this drew his soul, so that as the swell of anxiety engulfed his heart, he was merely there, able to do nothing.

He thought that it somehow resembled something, a similar thing he had felt sometime. Yes, that’s it. He was shocked when he realized what it was.

It was as if he were under the forest of cherry trees in full bloom. Where, what, or how the wind was the same, he did not know. Anyhow, something, it was there, surely the same. As usual, that was as far as he could imagine. He was the kind of man who did not care to think any further than that.

The mountains’s long winter had passed; the only snow which remained was sprinkled on the mountain top, in the hollows, and in the shadows of trees. The cherry blossom season was preparing to visit, and the promise of spring shone across the sky. “This year, when the cherry trees bloom...,” he had been thinking. The time in which he would pass under the blossoms was not so far away. Little by little as he walked, he would lose his head. Before him, behind him, to the left and right, no matter where he looked would be the cherry blossoms above. As he neared the center of the forest, he became reckless with fear and could no longer stand it. He thought, this year, he would stand in the middle of that forest when the blossoms are in their fullest, perfectly still...no, he would go all the way. He would pump himself right down there on the ground. He suddenly had the bright idea that he would bring the Lady along when that time comes, but a glance at her face caused his heart to race madly and he hastily turned to avoid her look. He did not know why, but the thought of the terrible consequences of her knowing what was on his mind was burned into his heart.

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The Lady was incredibly spoiled. No matter what heartfelt treat he prepared, she never failed to express her dissatisfaction. He combed the mountain to catch birds and deer. The lame woman wandered about the forest searching day and night for buds and roots. The Lady, however, did not once express her satisfaction.

“You are not telling me to eat such food everyday, are you?”

“Bbbut, this here food’s the best! Till you came along, one day in ten was all we had for this kind of treat.”

“That is fine for a rustic man such as you. It is not fit for my palate. During the long nights in the lonely depths of this mountain, all one can hear is the hoot of an owl, and as for food, at best I can not eat food which is not inferior to that of the City. Ah! The breeze of the City. What is my transitoriness, I whose only boundry was the City’s breeze? You could not possibly understand this. You, having wrenched the City’s breeze from me, have in its place given me only the caw of a crow and the hoot of an owl. You think of this as neither cruel nor demeaning.”

The reasoning of the Lady's words failed to reach him for he had no idea what the City's breeze was like. He could not even guess. It did not occur to him that it was possible for there to be a lack of something in this life or its happiness. He was merely perplexed by the suddenness of her bitterness. As for the best way to handle the situation, he suffered under its cruelty for want of the facts.

The Bandit could not begin to count the number of travelers from the City whom he had killed. Since these travelers were rich and had luxurious possessions, the City was an easy mark for him. But, even if he managed to snatch their possessions, if the contents proved worthless, he would rant and rave calling them farmers and bumpkins. In other words, this was the sum total of his knowledge of the City — a place where people had luxurious possessions. He had hardly any other intention other than that of stealing these goods. He had no need even to think of which direction the sky over the City was in.

The Lady's hair ornaments and makeup were valuable possessions of which she took great care. If the Bandit's hands, covered with dirt or spattered with a mountain beast's blood, as much as brushed lightly against her clothing, he was scolded. She kept her surroundings spotless and commanded that the house be kept in order as if the clothing were her very life and it was her personal duty to do so. It was not enough that her clothing consist of one short-sleeved garment with a narrow sash. She had numerous kimonos and numerous sashes which she tied into strange shapes hanging down to an unnecessary degree, and to these she added various ornaments to complete the total effect.

He opened his eyes wide and let out a sigh. He was forced to accept it. This is how beauty is composed, and he was being supplied with it. There was no doubt about it. By bringing together meaningless, incomplete pieces and incomprehensible fragments, a single work is completed, and if this work is dismantled, it reverts to meaningless fragments. In his own way, he was forced to accept this as a kind of strange magic.

The Bandit cut down trees on the mountain and made things which the Lady ordered. While he was making it, he himself had no idea what it was or what it was for. It turned out to be a Koshō and an armrest. A Koshō, in other words, is a kind of chair. When the weather was fine she had this taken outside where she sat with her eyes closed in a sunny place or in the shade of a tree. Inside, she would lean on her armrest as if absorbed in deep thought, and in the eyes of a man looking upon her, the total appearance was no less than strange, bewitching, seductive. Magic was being worked in reality and, while he himself was its assistant, he always doubted as well as admired the results of the magic being worked.

Every morning the lame woman combed out the Lady's long black hair. The spring water used for this had to be fetched from a particularly far mountain stream, and taking special care to do it in this manner, the Bandit became endeared to his labor. A desire that he himself be a force of magic became his wish. He thought he would like to run his own fingers through the black hair being combed out. She screamed her objection at being touched by such a hand and slapped it away scolding him. He pulled his hand away like a child, humiliated. The black hair gleamed. It was tied. The face appeared. Birth was given to a work of art which to him appeared as an unfinished dream.

"Is this it? Hmmm," he wondered.

He fumbled the patterned comb and decorated hairpin around in his fingers. These were things in which, until now, he could recognize neither meaning nor value, and now, he still has nothing to say about the relations and harmony among things. He does, however, understand supernatural force. Supernatural force gave life to matter. There is life even within matter.

"You should not play with my things. Why do you always touch things in such a manner?"

“Strange things....”

“What is strange?”

“Can’t say what,” he said self-consciously. He was startled but had no idea what it was about.

Thus was born his fear for the City. This fear was not terror, but shame or apprehension about something he did not know. It resembled the shame and apprehension felt when one’s store of knowledge confronts a totally unknown matter. The Lady’s mere mention of the word “City” caused his heart to shudder with fear. But, since he had never feared that which he could see with his own two eyes, his heart was not akin to fear nor accustomed to apprehension. As for the City, he merely harbored a feeling of hostility.

He thought with satisfaction that he had attacked hundreds, even thousands, of travelers from the City and not one was able to stand up to him. No matter what past event he recalled, there was no worry about being betrayed or injured at any time. When this came to his mind, the Bandit always felt pleasure and pride. He contrasted her beauty with his own strength. Within the awareness of his strength, the only minor weakness he saw was in regard to wild boars. Since the wild boar was not such a dreadful enemy anyway, he had plenty of elbow room.

“Anybody in the City with fangs. Huh?”

“There are samurai with bows and arrows!”

“Ha, ha, Ha. With a bow and arrow, I’d shoot down a sparrow in the valley over there. There ain’t any samurai in the City with skin so tough it’d break a sword.”

“There are samurai in armor!”

“Armor can break a sword?”

“It can.”

“Hm. I can wrestle down bears and boars, I can.”

“If you are truly such a strong man, take me to the City. With your strength, surround me with all that I desire, with the very best of the City, and if I am rewarded with a life that gives joy to the very bottom of my heart, then you are truly a strong man.”

“That don’t mean a thing.”

He made up his mind to go to the City. He planned to gather as quickly as possible all the combs, hair pins, hair ornaments, clothes, mirrors, and makeup that only the City could offer and heap them around her. There was nothing to mull about. There was just one matter which weighed upon his mind. It had absolutely nothing to do with the City.

That was the forest of cherry trees.

In two or three days, the forest would be in full bloom as if it were someone dropping in for a visit. This would be the year. He made up his mind. He would show her. He would sit, not moving a muscle, in the very center of the forest in its full bloom. He snuck off to the forest of cherry trees everyday and measured the swelling of its buds. He told her to wait three more days, though she was in a hurry to be off.

“You still have lots to get ready, don’t you?” he said drawing a dark look from the Lady.

“Do you play with me! The City is calling me.”

“Maybe so, but I got something to do.”

“You? Is there someone to have an appointment with in this godforsaken place?”

“Well, there ain’t nobody here, but I got something to do.”

“You don’t say. That certainly is a novelty. Whom does one have something to do with, when there is no one.”

The Bandit could no longer lie.

"The cherry blossoms are gonna bloom."

"You have an appointment with cherry blossoms, do you?"

"The cherry blossoms are gonna bloom, so I have to go see 'em before we can go."

"Whatever for?"

"Cause I have to try and go under the cherry blossoms."

"So, why must you try and go?"

"Cause the flowers'll bloom."

"Because the flowers will bloom? Why?"

"Cause a cold breeze blows all around under the blossoms."

"Under the blossoms?"

"Cause there's no limit under the blossoms."

"None under the blossoms?"

He felt defeated, no longer understanding anything.

"Take me under the blossoms!"

"No, I can't," he flatly declared.

"Can't go unless I'm alone."

The Lady smiled sardonically.

It was the first time he had ever seen such a sardonic smile. He had not experienced such an ill-natured smile until now. He could not even come to the judgment that it was "ill-natured," but only could think of it as trying to hack something with a sword and not being able to cut it. As proof, the sardonic smile struck him as if a seal had been embossed inside his head. At the moment he realized it was like the blade of a sword, it sliced into his mind. This he was unable to destroy.

The third day came.

He snuck out. The cherry trees were in full bloom. Taking one step, he recalled the Lady's sardonic smile. It cut into his mind with a keenness of which he had no memory. That was all it took to confuse him. The coldness from beneath the blossoms closed in on him from all directions. The wind suddenly swept over his body and it became transparent. The wind roared from all directions already totally engulfing all things. Only his voice cried out. He ran. What a horrible void! He wept, prayed, and writhed; he just tried to escape. When he realized that he had managed to break away from under the blossoms, he found it to be the same feeling that one has when coming out of a dream. The difference was the physical agony he felt as he really gasped for air.

*(To Be Continued)*