

## The Curtain Rises

### 1

You've got it all wrong. I'm not even a little melancholy. I received your encouraging letter, but I was confused by it and blushed from shame. Strangely, I can't calm down. Saying this may anger you, but old-fashioned came to mind when I read your letter. A new curtain has already been raised. Moreover, this curtain will rise on new experiences that none of our ancestors has ever experienced.

Are the old behaviors expected? They were mostly lies. Now, I have a disease of the chest, but am not worried at all. I've even forgotten what disease is. Not only disease, I've forgotten everything. I entered this Health Dojo because the war ended and life suddenly became precious. I'm here to regain my strength. Of course, I didn't come to somehow advance my station in life and didn't possess the touching, admirable devotion as a son to quickly recover to put my father at ease and to please my mother. I didn't come to this far-flung location out of desperation. Haven't we known for a long time that it's a mistake to attach meaning to each and every action of a person? Forced explanations often end in a distortion of lies. There are too many speculative games. And hasn't every idea been exhausted? I have entered The Health Dojo, but I want to say that it's for no reason at all. At some time on some day, the Holy Ghost crept into my chest, and tears cleansed my cheeks. After that, I cried alone often, and the strength drained from my body. My head felt cool and clear, and I became a different man. Until then, I had hidden this, but this time, I immediately told my mother, "I coughed up blood." My father selected The Health Dojo in the innards of these mountains for me. That's really all it was. Something happened at some time on some day? You probably understand this. That day. Noon on that day. That was the time I cried in a truly miraculous, divine voice and offered my apology.

Well, since that day, I felt as though I have been riding a huge, newly-built ship. But where is this ship going? Even I don't know. I'm still in a dreamscape. The ship is effortlessly leaving the shore. I have a vague premonition that it is heading in an uncharted virgin course that has never been experienced by anyone in the world. But now, only the huge new ship is welcomed and advances by yielding to the mercy of a sea lane in the heavens.

Don't get me wrong. I have not turned into a nihilist at the end of despair. Whatever the characteristics of the ship's departure, some kind of vague hope

is always felt. That is the one human quality that has never changed. You probably know the old Greek myth of Pandora's Box. By simply opening a box that should not be opened, every imaginable evil, such as the pain of illness, sorrow, jealousy, greed, suspicion, treachery, hunger, and hatred, crept out and flew up to cover the sky. Since then, humanity has had to suffer in misery for all time. But it is said that a shining stone as small as a poppy seed remained in a corner of that box, and that stone is faintly inscribed with the word "Hope."

## 2

That was decided long ago. Despair is impossible in humans. They often are deceived by hope, but are also deceived by the notion of despair. Let me state this plainly. People fall into the depths of misery, but they grope for a ray of hope as they are tumbling down. Ever since Pandora's box, this fact has been prescribed by the gods of Olympus. People who speak of optimism or pessimism or act full of themselves and boast, especially those who are too ardent, are left on the shore. Our ships of this new age will steadily inch forward. There will be no bottlenecks. This motion mimics natural phototropism that transcends consciousness, resembling the spreading vines of a plant.

From now on, let's stop posturing with words to rashly censure and treat men as traitors. This only makes this unhappy world a little more dismal. Isn't an action like censuring another also negative and corrupt? Because we lost the war this time, we say that we would be happy if there were no politicians who are quick to fabricate deceptions to temporarily escape and who conspire to act with a modicum of ability. But this shallow, face-saving talk only occurs because things went wrong for Japan. I truly want people to be careful in the future. If this is repeated a second time, we may become detested throughout the world. We should become a more open and simple people without arrogance. This newly-built ship is already slipping out to sea.

I have harbored these harsh thoughts until now. As you know, last spring, I developed a high fever and came down with pneumonia around the time of the high school graduation. I couldn't take the college entrance exams because I was ill for three months. I somehow managed to get up and walk around, but a slight fever persisted and the doctor suspected pleurisy. While I was idly enjoying myself at home, this year's exam period came and went. Around that time, I lost interest in college. I could only see blackness before me, I didn't know what to do. It was no easy matter to prevent my father from criticizing my loafing around the house and my mother from seeing me as unworthy. You probably don't understand because you have never been a ronin,

but it has been hell for me. During that time, I only weeded randomly. By pretending to be a farmer, I managed to keep up appearances. As you know, there's a field a little less than an acre behind my house. For some reason, this field seems to have had my name written on it for some time. But that's not the only reason, when I took one step onto that field, I remember feeling carefree, an escape from the pressures enveloping me. Over these last two years, I seemed to have become the ruler of this field.

I weeded and plowed the earth so much I couldn't feel my body. I also built supports for the tomatoes. Well, this may help to increase food production an iota. Each day I was deceiving myself, unlike you who could never deceive yourself. Anxiety was trapped in the depths of my heart, like a formation of black clouds I could not break free of. By living this way, what will my fortune be? There is nothing. Am I simply a sickly man? I am staggered by these thoughts. What should I do? I have no direction, nothing. I think that this reckless life of mine is only a nuisance to others and is devoid of meaning. This is quite hard to bear. A talented guy like you probably doesn't understand, but no thought in the world is worse than the realization that, "My life is a nuisance to others. I am useless."

### 3

But while I continued being this spoiled-brat, distressed like some old-fashioned fool, you are a windmill turning round so fast in the world that you become invisible. I know almost nothing about the total destruction of the Nazis in Europe, the decisive battles in the Philippines and Okinawa in the East, the bombing of the interior of Japan by American warplanes, and the military tactics of the soldier in me. But, I carry a young, sensitive antenna inside of me. This antenna can be trusted. This antenna immediately senses depression and crisis in the country. There is no theory. It's only intuition. Around the beginning of summer this year, this young antenna of mine sensed the sounds of huge tidal bores that I have never experienced, and I trembled. But I have no plans, only confusion.

I worked hard but chaotically in the field. While sweating and moaning under the hot sun, I swung and turned a heavy hoe to dig up the earth in the field and planted sweet potato vines. I still can't understand why I continued to toil everyday in the field. Although my body was useless, out of what felt like desperation, I acted out a hateful, scathing punishment. There were days when each time I lowered the hoe, I would groan, "Die! Just die and end it! Die! Die and end it all!" I planted 600 sweet potato vines.

At dinner, my father would say, "Don't overwork in the field. You're being a little hard on your body." In the dead of night on the third day after that dinner, while dreaming, I had a severe coughing fit. There was some kind of rumbling in my chest. I suddenly realized that this was bad and woke up. I had read in some book that before you spit up blood, there is a rumbling in your chest. It came suddenly just as I lay down on my stomach. As my mouth filled with a foul smelling substance, I trotted off to the bathroom. As expected, there was blood. I stayed in the bathroom a long time, but no more blood came up. I snuck to the washroom and gargled with salt water, then washed my face and hands, and went back to bed. I slept quietly so that I would breathe without coughing, and felt a curious indifference. I even felt like I had been waiting for that night for a long time. The words "heart's desire" came to mind.

Tomorrow, I thought, my silent work in the garden will continue. I have no choice. I am a person with no reason to live. I know my lot. Yes, it would be great to die one day sooner. Now, I will make better use of my body and be useful by increasing food production just a little, then I will bid farewell to this world. It would be good to lighten the burden on this country. That is my path to best serve my country as a useless invalid. I want to die soon.

The following morning, I woke up more than an hour earlier than usual. I quickly folded up my futon and went out to the field without eating. I chaotically worked that day in the field. Thinking about it now, it was like a hellish dream. Of course, I intended to die without telling a soul about my illness. Without anyone knowing, I would secretly deteriorate. These are probably rather depraved thoughts. That night, I snuck out and drank my fill of rationed rice alcohol from a rice bowl.

In the dead of night, I coughed up blood again. I awoke in a start, and when I lightly coughed two or three times, it came gushing up. This time, I didn't have time to run to the bathroom. I opened the glass door and jumped barefoot into the garden and threw up. My throat kept filling up, and it felt like blood was spraying out of my eyes and ears. It didn't stop until I threw up about two cups of blood. I don't know how much bloodstained earth I had turned over with a stick before the air-raid sirens sounded. Thinking about it, that was the final nighttime airstrike of that awful world in Japan. When I crept out of the air-raid shelter feeling numb, dawn had broken on the morning of August 15.

That day, however, I went out to the field. Hearing this, you are probably forcing a smile. But to me, there was nothing to laugh about. Actually, I felt that there was nothing else I could do. I had no alternatives. Shouldn't I be resolved to die as a peasant in my horribly confused final circumstance? My heart's desire was to collapse and die as a peasant in a field I tilled with my own hands. Yes, I wanted to die soon without any fuss. When I was splayed out on my back in a dense bean patch and grew faint passing through the pain of dizziness, chills, and covered in a clammy cold sweat, my mother came to get me. She told me to quickly wash my hands and feet and go to my father's sitting room. My mother always spoke with a faint smile on her lips and a solemn expression like a stranger.

I sat down in front of the radio in my father's sitting room, then at noon I cried in a heavenly voice while tears cleansed my cheeks. A mysterious light illuminated my body. I suddenly felt different as if I had stepped into another world or boarded a huge swaying ship, I was no longer what I had been.

I am not conceited about my realization of the oneness of life and death. But aren't life and death the same? Either one is equally hard. There are many poseurs among people who want a quick, unnatural death. My hardships until now were nothing more than the pains of embellishing my appearance. Are the old behaviors expected? Your letter had the phrase "sorrowful determination," but to me sorrowful seems like an expression of the handsome leading man in a corny play. This is not sorrow. That is already a false expression. The ship is slowly leaving the pier. There should always be a glint of hope when a ship sets sail. I am not depressed. I am not worried about this illness in my chest. I was actually confused by your letter filled with words of sympathy. With my mind blank, I intend to go forward by yielding to this ship. That day, I immediately confided in my mother. I was curiously calm when I unmasked myself.

"I coughed up blood last night and the night before."

I had no excuses. It was not because life suddenly became precious, but the forced pretense until yesterday had disappeared.

My father selected The Health Dojo for me. As you know, my father is a professor of mathematics. He's probably quite good at mathematical calculations, but he doesn't seem to have ever handled accounts of money. Because we have always been poor, I also never desired luxurious medical care. This simple Health Dojo is a good match for me, for that reason alone. I have no

complaints. I should completely recover in six months. Since I arrived here, I haven't coughed up blood even once, and haven't even had bloody phlegm. I have forgotten all about the disease. The Director of the Dojo said that "forgetting about the disease" is the fast track to complete recovery. That man is a bit eccentric. At any rate, he named a hospital for treating tuberculosis The Health Dojo. He probably did it to encourage more people to become patients under the special laws to fight disease that were enacted to address food and drug shortages during the war. This hospital is a queer place. Many amusing incidents happen here. I'll leisurely tell you about them the next time.

Please don't worry about me at all. And take care of yourself.

August 25, 1945

## The Health Dojo

### 1

**A**s promised, today I will tell you about The Health Dojo where I currently reside. It's about a one-hour bus ride from E City. You get off at a place called Little Plum Bridge to transfer to another bus. But it's not far from Little Plum Bridge to the Dojo, so it's faster to walk than to wait for the transfer bus. Since it's less than a mile, most people who come to the Dojo walk from there. If you go south from Little Plum Bridge on a paved prefectural road while keeping the mountains to your right, in about a mile, there is a small stone gate at the foot of the mountain. From there, you follow a row of pine trees, and near the end of the pine trees, you can see the roofs of two buildings. They constitute this peculiar sanatorium for tuberculosis dubbed The Health Dojo that is caring for me. The two buildings are the old building and the annex. The old building isn't much, but the annex is a stylish sunny building. One by one, the people who have acquired considerable training in the old building are moving to the annex. But none of this matters to me because I'm healthy and have been in the annex from the start. My room is the Sakura Room that is immediately to your right when you enter the front entrance of the Dojo. The hospital rooms are given strangely embarrassing cute names like the Verdure Room, the Swan Room, and the Sunflower Room.

The Sakura Room is a rectangular Western-style room, a little under 168 square feet. There are four sturdy wooden beds lined up so you can sleep with your head to the south. My bed is the furthest inside the room. Near the head of my bed is a large glass window outside of which is Otomegaike Pond (not much of a name), which is about one square mile. This pond is always clear and cool, and carp and goldfish can be seen swimming around. At least, I don't have any complaints about the placement of my bed. It may be the best spot. The bed is made of wood and is pretty big and doesn't have cheap springs. It's actually very practical with many drawers and shelves on both sides. Although I've surrounded myself with all my belongings, some drawers remain empty.

Now, I'll introduce you to my senior roommates.

Next to me is Ootsuki Matsuemon. His name sounds like that of a respectable, middle-aged man. They say he's a newspaperman from Tokyo. His wife died young so he lives with his teenage daughter. She was evacuated from Tokyo with him and lives in a house in the mountains near The Health Dojo. From time to time, she comes to visit her lonely father. The father is fairly

sullen. Although he's usually a quiet man, he sometimes transforms into an obstinate man who is quick to anger. His personality seems to be honorable for the most part, but at times he seems a bit philosophical. I still don't really understand him. He has a splendid black mustache and is terribly near-sighted. Small bleary red eyes peer from behind his glasses. A bead of sweat always rests on the tip of his round nose and he's constantly wiping it off with a towel. As a result, the tip of his nose is red as if dripping blood. But if I shut my eyes and think about him, what comes to mind is dignity. He is probably an unexpectedly great man. His nickname is Echigo Lion. I don't know exactly why, but it feels perfect. Matsuemon doesn't seem to be bothered much by this nickname. They say he proposed his own nickname, but I don't quite understand.

2

Next to him is Kishita Seishichi, a plasterer. He's twenty-eight years old and still single. He is the best looking man at The Health Dojo. He is a fine specimen with his pale white skin, high pointed nose, and cool eyes. However, he walks a little tippy-toed while slightly swinging his hips. It would be nice if he'd just stop walking like that. Why does he walk like that? It may be because he's musical. He's incomprehensible. He appears to know various popular songs, but is particularly good at *Dodoitsu* poetry. I've already been made to listen to five or six of them. Matsuemon closes his eyes and silently listens, but the poems make me uneasy. These stupid meaningless songs are about things like collecting a pile of money as big as Mount Fuji and spending 50 sen everyday. They are nothing more than a nuisance. And those *Monkukiri*-style *Dodoitsu* poems are terrible. There are songs that seem to be lines from plays. Hey man, no one needs to hear any of that. But he doesn't sing more than two songs at any one time. If it seems he wants to continue singing any longer, Matsuemon won't allow it. When the two songs are over, Echigo Lion opens his eyes and says that's enough. Another thing, he touches his body. The meaning of touching the singer's body or the meaning of touching the listener's body is unclear. But Seishichi is not a bad guy. He seems to like haiku, and in the evening before bed, he recites various recent works to Matsuemon and seeks his thoughts, but Echigo does not respond. Seishichi becomes very despondent and quickly falls asleep. He seemed so pitiful at those times. Seishichi has a lot of respect for Echigo Lion. The nickname of this stylish man is Crazy Legs.



The next bed is occupied by Nishiwaki Kazuo. He's a postmaster or something. He's thirty-five years old. I like him the most. His quiet, petite wife sometimes visits. Then they speak in whispers to each other. They have an air of secrecy. Both Crazy Legs and Echigo are respectful and try with all their might not to look. I think their intentions are good. Nishiwaki's nickname is Horsetail, probably because he's tall and lanky. He's not much to look at, but he is refined. He gives the impression of being a student. His bashful, slight smile is charming. Sometimes, I think it would be great if he were my neighbor. But late at night, he moans in a weird voice, so it's probably better that he's not next to me. Now I have introduced you to my senior roommates. Next, I'll give a little report on the special therapies at the Dojo. I'll begin with the daily schedule.

6 am: Wake up

7 am: Breakfast

8 to 8:30 am: Bending and stretching exercises

8:30 to 9:30 am: Rubdown

9:30 to 10 am: Bending and stretching exercises

10 am: Rounds by the Director (rounds only by the instructors on Sundays)

10:30 to 11:30 am: Rubdown

12 pm: Lunch

1 to 2 pm: Lectures (Tranquility broadcasts on Sundays)

2 to 2:30 pm: Bending and stretching exercises

2:30 to 3:30 pm: Rubdown

3:30 to 4 pm: Bending and stretching exercises

4 to 4:30 pm: Nature

4:30 to 5:30 pm: Rubdown

6 pm: Dinner

7 to 7:30 pm: Bending and stretching exercises

7:30 to 8:30 pm: Rubdown

8:30 pm: Reports

9 pm: Bedtime

3

As I've recently told you, because many hospitals burned down during the war, and quite a few hospitals were shut down because of shortages of goods and workers, many patients with tuberculosis who require long-term care, especially, those like us who aren't particularly rich, lose out on spots. Luckily, there were almost no attacks by enemy planes around here. Two or three powerful local philanthropists came forward and obtained the support of the local council to build an annex to the prefecture's sanatorium beside the mountain and summoned Dr. Tajima to build an independent sanatorium for tuberculosis that did not rely on raw materials. I gave you only a brief account of the daily schedule, but you probably understand that the normal activities at the sanatorium are very different. I plan to make you discard your notions of hospitals and patients.

The hospital administrator is called the Director. The doctors under the assistant director are the instructors, the nurses are the assistants, and we, the patients, are the students. This all seems to be the invention of Director Tajima. After Dr. Tajima was invited to this sanatorium, the equipment was refurbished, and unique therapies were developed for the patients. The results were extremely good and seemed to have garnered the attention of the medical world. Dr. Tajima completely bald and looks to be about fifty years old, but I've heard he's a single man in his thirties. He's a tall, thin man who slouches a little and doesn't laugh much. This bald man is fairly good looking; Dr. Tajima possesses elegant features with a cute oval face. He seems to have the usual, dismal, difficult-to-please nature of cats that is peculiar to bald men. He's a little scary. Every day at 10 am, the Director makes rounds of the campus with the instructors and the assistants in tow. During that time, the entire Dojo becomes hushed. The students are incredibly meek before the Director. They only whisper his nickname behind his back. It's Kiyomori, the villainous samurai who usurped political power.



Now, I'll fill in a few more details about the daily schedule at the Dojo. In short, the bending and stretching exercises are for the limbs and the abdominal muscles. Too many details will probably bore you, so I'll tell you just the important points. While splayed out on my back on the bed with my arms and legs spread wide as if sleeping, I begin by successively exercising my fingers followed by my wrists, then my arms. Next, I have to do a very difficult practice where I exhale to suck in my stomach to create a depression, then inhale to expand it. This is the most important bending and stretching exercise. Next come the leg exercises, the leg muscles are extended and loosened in various ways; this usually ends one round of bending and stretching. After one round is finished, I repeat from the hand exercises until the time limit of thirty minutes. Every single day, twice in the morning, three times in the afternoon, as on the schedule, so it's not easy. According to known medical knowledge, these exercises are unbelievably dangerous to patients with tuberculosis, but it's probably a new therapy created because of shortages during the war. In this Dojo, patients who earnestly do these exercises seem to quickly recover.

Next, I'll tell you a little about the rubdown. This also appears to be unique to this Dojo. This is a role of the cheerful assistants at the Dojo.

#### 4

The brush used in the rubdown is made of stiff animal bristles; the kind usually used when cutting hair. Fortunately, the bristles soften. So at first, it is painful to be rubbed by the brush, and your skin feels prickly here and there after being beaten up by the friction. But you get used to it in about a week.

At rubdown time, the always-cheerful assistants split into groups and take turns giving the students rubdowns. A towel is folded and placed in a small basin. This towel is soaked in water. The brush is pressed against the towel to soak up water, then used in the rubdown. As a rule, most of the body is rubbed down. For your first week in the Dojo, only your arms and legs are rubbed down, but after that, your whole body. While you lay on one side, first your arm, then your leg, chest, and stomach are rubbed down. Then you turn over and they move to the arm, leg, chest, and stomach on the other side, and finally your back and waist. Once you get used to it, it feels good. Most of all, I can't describe what it feels like when your back is rubbed down. There are really skilled assistants and ones who are abysmal.

I'll tell you more about the assistants later.

You can consider life at the Dojo, both day and night, to be the two activities of the bending and stretching exercises and the rubdowns. Because shortages of materials didn't end after the war ended, for now, isn't this a good show of the spirit of fighting illness?

In addition, there are lectures at 1 pm, nature at 4 pm, and reports from 8:30 pm. The lectures are talks given by the Director, the instructors, or prominent people from various fields who have come to inspect the Dojo. They take turns using the microphone. Their talks flow to our rooms through the loudspeakers placed strategically in the halls outside the rooms. We sit on our beds and listen in silence.



The lectures were suspended temporarily during the war because loudspeakers were useless due to power shortages. But after the war, when restrictions on power use were eased a bit, they began again. At that time, the Director resumed the lectures with themes like the history of scientific advances in Japan. Although they may be called intelligent lectures, they have an insipid tone and simply explain the hardships of our ancestors. Yesterday, the talk was about "The Beginnings of Dutch Studies" by Sugita Genpaku. Genpaku and his team were the first to study Western books, determined what would be a good way to translate them, and wrote "like a rudderless ship adrift on the vast sea, until reaching the point of being dismayed at being dismayed." It was actually good. My high school history teacher, Kiyama Ganmo, taught me about the hardships faced by Genpaku's team, but he left an entirely different impression.

Ganmo only said vapid things like doesn't Genpaku's face seem to be terribly pockmarked. The Director's daily lectures are particularly enjoyable to me. On Sundays, he broadcasts records instead of giving a lecture. I don't care much for music, but listening to it once a week isn't bad. Between records, they broadcast *a cappella* singing by the assistants. Listening to the songs is more unsettling than enjoyable. But the other students seem to welcome the singing the most. Seishichi listens with his eyes narrowed. In my opinion, he is dying to broadcast the *Monkukiri* style of *Dodoitsu*.

## 5

Nature at 4 pm is a restful period. At this time, our body temperatures are the highest. The body is tired, you feel terribly irritable and become grim; it's quite distressing. They give us thirty minutes of free time to do as we please. But most of the students just quietly lie down on their beds during this period. At the Dojo, aside from sleeping at night, you aren't allowed to put bedding on your bed. During the day, you sleep on the bed in your nightclothes with no blankets, nothing, but it's refreshing when you get used to it and feels good. The reports at 8:30 pm are daily information about the world's situation. A variety of news is reported in the nervous tones of the office staff on duty through those loudspeakers in the hall. At the Dojo, we are forbidden to read books, of course, as well as newspapers. Reading compulsively is probably bad for your body. While here, I have been flooded with crazy thoughts, but I only firmly believe in the new ship setting sail, living simply, and playing. I think that's okay.

I have so little time to write you and am at a loss. Usually after meals, I quickly take out my writing pad, but there's so much I want to write. It took me

two days to write this letter. As I gradually become accustomed to life at the Dojo, I'll probably use these short breaks more adeptly. I have become a very optimistic scholar about everything. I have not a worry in the world. I have forgotten them all. I must make one more introduction, my nickname at the Dojo is Skylark. Now, that name is lackluster. My full name is Koshiha Risuke, but people hear Kohibare, a small skylark, so I'm Hibari, Skylark, and that seems to be how I got this nickname. It's not very distinctive. Firstly, it's horrible, as well as being embarrassing and not suited to me. But I have become magnanimous about these kinds of things and cheerfully respond even to people who call out Skylark. Do you understand? I have been Koshiha for a long time. Now, there is a skylark in this Health Dojo. This one is chirping loudly and noisily. So from now on, please read my letters with this in mind. I'm a frivolous guy. Please stop frowning.



"Skylark," shrieks an assistant from outside my window.

"What?" I calmly respond.

"Ya doin' it?"

"I'm doin' it."

"Keep it up."

"I got it."

Do you understand this exchange? This is the greeting at the Dojo. The assistants and the students have this exchange whenever they pass each other in the halls. I don't know when this started. Do you think the Director

agreed to this? This is, no doubt, an invention of the assistants. Resilience and toughness, a little like boys, seem to be the shared disposition of the nurses. The providers of sarcastic nicknames to everyone, the Director, the instructors, the students, and the staff, are the assistants. They're always a little sly. I have closely observed the assistants. I'll tell you more about them in my next letter.

This concludes my sketch of the Dojo. Goodbye for now.

September 3