



Izumi Kyōka, *Nihonbashi*, 1920s.

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NIHONBASHI

IZUMI KYŌKA

TRANSLATED BY M. CODY POULTON

By the Taishō era, the novelist and playwright Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939) was as famous for his stories and plays about the demimonde as for his ghost stories, and the former—works like *A Woman's Pedigree* (*Onna keizu*, 1907) and *The White Heron* (*Shirasagi*, 1909)—quickly became staples of the *shinpa* stage. *Shinpa* was a transitional and highly melodramatic form of theater that was modern in its subject matter and, later, its use of actresses. But it still retained many of the conventions of kabuki theater: male specialists for female roles (*onnagata*); the *hanamichi*, a runway going from stage right through the auditorium, which is used for dramatic entrances and exits; and *geza* incidental music, to name a few common features. Through the 1890s to 1910s, *shinpa* adapted, and even stole, a considerable amount of material from Kyōka and other contemporary novelists. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Kyōka himself began writing adaptations of his own fiction and, increasingly, original plays for *shinpa*, just as its star was falling in critical circles to the more modern, realistic *shingeki* (new theater).

Nihonbashi began life as a novel about competing geishas in the demimonde of Tokyo's old downtown, or *shitamachi*, district. In Edo (the old name for Tokyo) days, all roads pretty much led to the "Japan Bridge" of the title, but in Kyōka's time it was losing ground to the more upscale districts of Marunouchi, Ginza, and Hongō. The story involves two geishas, the elegant Kiyoha and the much less elegant, feistier Okō, and two men, Igarashi Dengo, a rough fish merchant who has abandoned his wife and child and ruined his business over love for Okō, and Katsuragi Shinzō, a neurotic professor of medicine who has fallen for Kiyoha because she reminds him of his elder sister, who

became a concubine to pay for his education. Okō resents Kiyoha's success as a geisha and steals Katsuragi away. In the scene translated here, convinced that Katsuragi has become her patron (*danna* also means "husband"), she throws Dengo out. The scene shows off Kyōka's gift for portraying strong, passionate, and tragic women: Okō's tirade (*tanka*) against Dengo provides a couple of famous *miseba* (showstoppers), in which, in kabuki style, the actor poses and the audience shouts its praise. This also marks a dramatic turning point in the play. The curious exchange between Okō and her apprentice geisha (*oshaku*) Ochise, in which Okō pretends to be Katsuragi and Ochise becomes Okō, sets up the mistaken identity that leads to Ochise's death. Vowing revenge on Okō, Dengo stabs Ochise because she is wearing Okō's scarlet *kanoko* kimono. Okō then slays Dengo with his own sword and takes her own life, by poison, in the arms of her beloved Katsuragi, who survives but has the blood of more women on his feckless hands. In an act of self-sacrifice not typical of Okō, she asks Kiyoha to look after him.

First published in September 1914 by Shun'yōdō, with beautiful illustrations by Komura Settai, the novel was staged the following March with a script by the leading playwright Mayama Seika. A close look at the stage text (*daibon*) for this first performance reveals, however, that it was the work of several hands. Kyōka's fiction was famous for its lively dialogue and intense dramatic incident, and Seika lifted many of the lines verbatim from the novel for his adaptation. Kitamura Rokurō, an actor whom Kyōka highly respected (he played Okō in the first production), also crafted much of the dialogue. The text translated here is based on Kyōka's own stage adaptation, which he published in 1917, and is found in the *Complete Works of Kyōka*. The famous *shinpa onnagata* Hanayagi Shōtarō made his debut, as Ochise, in the play's first production. *Nihonbashi* is now a standard of the *shinpa* repertoire, and Okō is one of the favorite roles of the leading kabuki *onnagata* Bandō Tamasaburō V. Director Ichikawa Kon's film version, made in 1956, features the brilliant *shinpa* actor Yanagi Eijirō in the role of Dengo.



ACT 3, SCENE 2. THE SECOND FLOOR OF INABA HOUSE

IGARASHI DENGO is wrapped in a padded jacket tied with a woman's waistband. He has been staring steadily at a fish knife with a wooden scabbard clutched in his hand. He now thrusts the knife into the sleeve of a quilted housecoat rolled up in front of the closet, and leaning back on the bedroll, he throws out his legs, his head hanging down. Then, taking his head in his hands, he glares up at the ceiling. All his actions are abrupt, rough. OKŌ adjusts the cushion in front of the hibachi and sits, half-facing DENGO. She straightens herself, as if about to say something important. The sound of a hand drum can be heard in the distance.

OKŌ: Go wash your face, why don't you.

DENGO: Heh heh. (*Sneers.*)

OKŌ: Hey, stop using my toothpicks like you'd had breakfast in bed.

DENGO: Heh heh. Who'd you be talking about now?

OKŌ: Oh, you really scare me. You were listening, weren't you?

DENGO: You'd make a man deaf with that racket. You thought I couldn't hear what was going on downstairs? You've got a voice like a gunshot.

OKŌ: Yeah. I thought that seeing as how you've got such a thick skull, you'd be hard of hearing, too. But please go wash your face. There's something else I have to say, if you don't mind.

DENGO: You want to tell me you're sorry 'cause I found out you've had it off with another man? Hey, Okō? (*Sits up.*) I don't have to wash my face to hear that, surely. If it was all just a dream, it'd be one thing, but if you're asking me to wake up and wash my face for this news, you've got another thing coming to you.

OKŌ: You think I'm just going to lie back and take it?

DENGO: If you don't, I hope you're ready for the consequences. You're really asking for it, you know.

OKŌ (*Resignedly*): Go ahead, I'm ready for anything. . . .

DENGO: What I'm saying is, if you don't shut up, I'm not going to leave you in one piece. Bitch! You want to get yourself killed?

OKŌ: I don't know if I've been killed or coddled, spoken my mind or given a piece of somebody else's. Have I loved and been wronged, have I gone through hell? Sometimes I've wanted to spend the rest of my life with him; other times I've just wanted to die. I don't know anymore. Don't ask. Just get out, go home. I've got a good man now.

DENGO (*Rises abruptly*): What? Go home?

OKŌ: Yeah, for good. I'm not letting you in here again.

DENGO: You must be crazy, Okō.

OKŌ: Don't "Okō" me. —You call me crazy? I am *not*. I've never felt so sane as I do right now. . . . The good doctor's diagnosis is that I'm madly in love. Madly in love, you hear? Not crazy. I'll stake my life on it. I'll be kind to strangers—you don't have to wash your face. Listen: Okō of Inaba House has got herself a husband. Mr. Katsuragi is his name. You and I are through.

DENGO (*Suddenly goes limp*): What? A husband? That's all right by me if it's just a husband we're talking about. I got a big heart, so I'll overlook that. I'll be a good boy, or my name ain't Igarashi Dengo.

OKŌ (*Looks away and sighs*): I've said all I can, so just be a good boy and get out. Right now. Stay away and there won't be any more trouble around here.

DENGO: Nah. If that "husband" of yours shows up, what's wrong with my being here? If he drops by without warning, why, I'll just throw this quilt over me and stow away in the clothes closet. That's one of my favorite games from 'way back.

OKŌ: Be my guest. But if you do, we'll be overrun with roaches. So forget your bedroom pranks and just get yourself straight down the stairs and out the door.

DENGO: Okô, try saying that again.

OKÔ: I told you, stop calling me "Okô." —All right, I'll say it as often as you like. —We'll be overrun with roaches if you don't—

DENGO: What do you take me for? Just what do you take me for?

OKÔ: A seal in a bearskin, that's what I take you for. —Listen, you staked your fortune on a boatload of lumber, and you left Hokkaido and swam into that harbor over there and set yourself up in the seafood business for a time. Your fishy friends got you a free pass into the best bars on the embankment, didn't they? And once you'd laid eyes on Kiyoha, well, the sky was the limit for you! Like some mole who'd found the wings of an angel. No doubt you tugged on her sleeve and she tugged back, and before you knew it, your eyes rolled and you fell head over heels for her. What a laugh! . . . If it's somebody Kiyoha threw over, I thought to myself, who cares if he's a caterpillar, or even a cockroach? I'll sew him into the hem of my skirts and wave him in her face just to spite her. And when it happened to be a seal in a bearskin, folks couldn't help but notice. Every tongue in town was wagging. The fact I ended up with you must be one of the seven wonders of the quarter. Better yet, one of the wonders of the world . . . You remember, don't you? When I listened to your story, it certainly wasn't for love. Nor for the money, no . . . I did it just to get even with Kiyoha. When the time comes and I get tired of you, I'll call it off, I said. And you made a solemn promise that it was all right by you, didn't you? You've got no grounds for complaint. I'm tired of you, so let's call it quits. Go on, get out! Go home this minute. And don't ever come back. From now on, the two of us don't even know each other. You understand?

DENGO (*Rubbing his eyes, silently glares at OKÔ. Finally bursts out laughing*): Hah, hah, hah! Crazy dame! Hah, hah, hah! What an outburst! I don't have anything to add to that, that's for sure. A regular little fireball, you are. I love it! Hah, hah, hah! You're so cute when you're mad. (*Again he leans back on the bedding, his head hanging down, and thumps out his legs. Belying his words, he shakes his legs as if to fan the flames of agony in his heart.*)

OKÔ (*Sharply*): I told you, get out! . . . This is the Inaba House, Okô's place. No, it belongs to Mr. Katsuragi. It's his . . . second residence.

DENGO: I don't give a damn if it's a warehouse. If I'm in the way, I'll just crawl into the closet. Hah, hah, hah! (*Laughs mirthlessly.*)

OKÔ: What's the point of losing my temper? You're a cockroach, not a man. Just listen to what I have to say. If I'm a real geisha, it doesn't make a damn bit of difference whether I've got a patron, a client, or even a guy on the side. But from this day forward, by the grace of the gods, I'm Katsuragi's wife. (*Sits up.*) I won't have the smell of another man hanging over my house for three blocks around. Do you really think some animal in a housecoat, like some oversexed badger figurine, is the sort of thing I'd decorate my bedroom with? (*Bolts up.*) Look! There's this filthy oaf stinking up my tatami! I don't need your kind in my place. Get out of my way! Just clear off! (*She yanks on the quilt that DENGO is leaning against. The knife with its wooden scabbard falls out with a clatter. DENGO leaps up, fixing his eyes on it.*)

OKÔ (*Draws back a step*): Hey. Did you have this on you last night?

DENGO: It's for you, bitch. I got a whiff of Katsuragi, you see, and I've made up my mind. If you don't shut up, it'll be this. Understand? (*Draws the knife from its sheath.*) How about it?

(*Kicking up her skirts, OKÔ makes for the stairwell. DENGO reaches out and pulls her back by her obi. OKÔ falls on her haunches, shaking loose the trapdoor over the stairwell, which slams shut. Barred from escape by her own hands, she quietly returns to her seat. Dumbfounded, DENGO stands bolt upright.*)

OKÔ: Kill me. Go ahead and run me through.

DENGO: Whore! (*Draws back a step.*)

OKÔ: Kill me! Do it! Run me through! That's what a knife is for, isn't it? Cut me, slash me, right to the bone, a stroke for every letter in Katsuragi's name. How many does that make? (*Counts on her fingers.*) "K" for "kill." "A" for "assassin." "T" for "torture." . . . Who knows how many strokes it takes? But I'll take it! I'll take it as long as I draw breath. I'll watch you engrave his name on my heart. I'll show you how a woman dies! Go on, stab me. (*Edging up to him.*)

DENGO: Uh . . . (*Retreating.*)

OKÔ: If the blade can't cut, I'll take off my kimono. (*Laying her hands on the waistband.*) Is my skin too thick? Shall I take that off, too? How about it, eh, hairy bear? Shall I scrape off my scales for you?

(*DENGO still retreats inch by inch and, as if unaware of his own actions, raises the trapdoor to his shoulders and tumbles down the stairs. OKÔ turns around in the direction of the noise, then looks about her. Seeing the cherry blossoms arranged in the alcove and adjusting her dress, she takes a sprig in her hand and steadily gazes at it, smiling faintly.*)

OKÔ (*To the flowers*): There's not a breath of wind, but little cherry blossom, you tremble so.

OCHISE (*Dashing in, embraces OKÔ*): Okô!

OKÔ: Well now. Your lessons over for the day?

OCHISE: Why, you talk as if nothing happened! Okô, I hadn't the faintest idea what to do. We were all huddled together at the bottom of the stairs, at our wit's end. . . . Well, thank goodness you're through with your bear friend, hm?

OKÔ: Just forget about it. I've got something to show you instead. (*From the carefully folded clothes in her dresser, she takes out an undergarment. It has a dappled kanoko design on a scarlet and pale blue ground.*) Once—I can't remember when—I met Kiyoha on the way back from Ichikoku Bridge, and she was wearing one just like this. With her black hair and pure white skin it was a little on the flashy side, but it suited her. She cut a real figure, she did. Quite the coquette, I can tell you. Oh, I wanted so much to wear something like that myself, but I'd never have looked good in it unless it was maybe a dinner party and I had a dance to perform. So I thought I'd give it to you, and I placed an order at the tailor's to make up one in a hurry. They brought it over last night. You'll look just right in it. Go ahead, try it on.

OCHISE: *But* Okō, you'd waste it on me.

OKŌ: You're my kid sister, aren't you? Might as well be. Go ahead, put it on over top.

(OKŌ *has* OCHISE *stand, puts it on, and tidies up her appearance. OCHISE, blushing happily, stands before the mirror.*)

OKŌ: It looks good on you. (*She says, and then collapses onto OCHISE's lap.*) Okō—

OCHISE: . . . ?

OKŌ: Call me Katsuragi. (*Laughs.*)

OCHISE: Ho ho ho. Madame Katsuragi.

OKŌ: You make me sound like a prostitute. . . . No, *Mister* Katsuragi.

OCHISE: Mr. Katsuragi. . . .

OKŌ (*Impersonating KATSURAGI, embraces OCHISE*): Yes? Or, rather (*More gruffly*), yeah? . . . Okō! Let me spoil you, girl.

CURTAIN