

The Crossroads

Where do you live? Who do you live with? And what about your birth and upbringing—?

Questions I never want to be asked. I don't even feel they're worth answering.

If someone does ask, I'll tell them my current address, as long as it seems harmless enough. It's not as though I can leave it off documents; it's set down here and there. People who've been driven into circumstances that mean they can't even report their address—their lives must be something else entirely. Even so, despite being accustomed to filling in my address, my hand falters midway. Suddenly the address looks strange—just for a brief moment. It seems that when a thing becomes very familiar, it can sometimes be reflected back as something unknown.

“The missus and my old lady”: so blurted out the protagonist of *A Strange Tale from East of the River* on being questioned by the local police not only about his name and address, but about his family, too. Perhaps the man should have more correctly answered “My wife and my mum” or maybe “My spouse and my mother”. But anyway, whether by chance or on purpose, he carried in his wallet a copy of his family register, the certificate of proof for his personal seal and the seal itself.

At some point, the conversation turns to the neighbourhood where I live now. My companion knows the area and tells me there was a time when they often went there. It appears that meeting someone who lives there has made them nostalgic, and the talk becomes friendlier. But I, the one actually living there now, find myself distanced from the conversation. My companion talks in ever greater detail and the scenery of the crossroads springs to life, the atmosphere conveyed through their voice. There is a sense of season and of time. But even so, and despite living there now, I feel a disconnect, as though someone is reminiscing to me about a place I don't know. My companion is speaking from memory, but I secretly wonder if my own memories are really just knowledge, and nothing more.

A wind springs up in the night. The first gusts come down from the mountains and the wind blows intermittently, coming closer in fits and starts. I lie in bed listening, and the wind carries the place back into the past. The fields expand before me, the groves and woods are buffeted by the wind, and the land that has been levelled reverts to its gently undulating form.

The sense of desolation has peaked and there is a feeling of relief, as though I have finally settled down where I am supposed to be after having avoided it for so long. Of course, if this land really had returned to the past, the newcomers who have been here for mere tens of years wouldn't have settled in yet; in fact, they wouldn't be here at all. The young couples looking for a place to live wouldn't have come here yet either, this place would still be unknown to them—perhaps they wouldn't even have met each other yet. The children who grew up here would be as yet unborn.

The wind gets stronger and stronger, and the incongruous sense that I am absent, stronger still than the self-evident fact of my being here, sinks into my bones. The deep emotion I feel about having stayed here for so many years swings towards the suspicion that I have never really arrived.

A big man walks in the wind, his clothes billowing. He approaches the crossroads and pauses in an interval between gusts. Standing there, he chooses his road as though he already knows where he is going, though it doesn't matter which path he takes. He doesn't know whether he is being pulled forward or pushed from behind; giving into the sense of futility, he allows his steps to be guided by the wind that has sprung up again. In this way he eventually comes to a crossroads, and he sends his hopes out ahead of him; maybe this crossroads will be the signpost he needs in his life, the sense of futility will lift, his steps will become decisive. But the truth is, he has long since passed by the crossroads without knowing. Unable to go back, his wanton steps are nothing but the left-behind remnants of his vindication. As proof of this, on the third step he becomes resolute, and begins to suspect himself of walking along with great, merciless strides.

The figure of the man moves in this direction. He comes so close you can almost hear his groaning breaths, and then he veers off at a diagonal. In a pause between gusts of wind, he approaches the crossroads once again. He is praying that the road will end there.

It was called the bridle-path crossroads. It was round about where the road down from the pass cut through the mountain and came out at the town, and it had apparently been a by-road for packhorses headed for the port. It was joined by other similar roads that met it coming in from the right and left, and they were all called *umamichi*, bridle paths. Nearby

was a little station for a single-track electric railway on which ran trains of one or two carriages, and the station was also called Umamichi.

It wasn't such a long way to the port town even on foot, but there was still no sign of the sea here. The mountains crowded in close and moisture settled at their feet, no matter the weather. Coming out into the town you would see the houses lined up with their backs to the mountains. They appeared black with damp, and if you opened the front doors you would be assailed by the odour of old tatami mats and mould.

Asahara came down towards the town on the right-hand road. It was morning, during an interval of fine weather between the spring rains, in the year he had turned eighteen. His father had called for him, saying that he had something to tell him. Asahara had a strained relationship with his father, and it had been three months since his uncle had intervened and Asahara had come to stay with relatives in the village above the bridle path.

Asahara didn't understand the cause of his father's hatred. He, too, was knotted up in his own way; he had been born to his father's second wife when his father was in his mid-forties and his mother not yet thirty, and there was quite an age difference between Asahara and his half-siblings. In middle school, Asahara had heard the others gossiping that he was actually a child from his mother's previous marriage. The story became further distorted, and rumours abounded that Asahara's real father would have nothing to do with him when he was born, and his mother, who had no close relatives, had been forced by circumstance to remarry and bring the child along with her. Before the local children ever became aware of sex, they were already used to rumours about adult affairs.

But by the time the gossip was reaching Asahara's ears, he had already internally tidied up any doubts about his birth. Back then he would steal glances at the mirror when no-one was looking. Sometimes he saw his father's face there and sometimes his mother's, and he would turn away. In this respect he was more sensitive than the average child.

Asahara's mother showed reserve towards Asahara's father and siblings in everything she did, and if anyone's emotions ran high, she would be visibly at a loss. However, on the whole it was a calm household. Asahara's father hadn't been so domineering back then. Asahara's siblings kept a prudent amount of distance between themselves and their father, as well as their stepmother. The age gap was too great for them to really be companions to their

young half-brother, but if they didn't dote on him, they weren't unkind either. It was not a talkative household.

It was not a particularly expressive household either. As for how the youngest child, the son of the second wife, was brought up there, the relatives saw early on that he wouldn't demand a lot of effort. When he was a little older, they were impressed by how he did what he was meant to without being told. Asahara couldn't remember having lived in a particularly constrained way, but then he himself couldn't know what kind of face he had actually been putting on.

When Asahara was ten, it was decided that his older sister would marry into another family. This caused some upset in the household, and Asahara felt suddenly gloomy watching his mother fretting around on the periphery and trying to calm things down.

He moved up to middle school, and one evening he witnessed his two grown-up brothers sitting at the dining table with his mother, the three of them eating in silence. Lying next door with a fever, a room apart, Asahara observed them as though it was a scene he wasn't meant to see. His mother looked as though she had steeled her nerves. This would have been around the time when the second-oldest brother was getting involved with a middle-aged woman from the port.

Within around a year and a half of Asahara entering high school, his brothers, too, had moved out and started their own households.

As he reached the passage where the road had been cut through the mountain, Asahara was seized by a strange feeling of rapture. High up in the mountains, pale purple flowers danced here and there among the thick foliage that accompanied the rainy season, and countless tiny white flowers trembled deep in the dark thickets. Asahara could hear the sound of the sea, faint and muffled. Framed by the rock faces that hemmed him in on either side, today he could clearly see the bridle-path crossroads further down the road. The crossroads was perfectly distinct, and it seemed as though it would be that way forever, with no hope of him ever reaching it. He thought, dreamlike, that perhaps he would keep walking towards it like this his entire life.

The second-oldest brother's wedding approached, and for whatever reason, a copy of the family register had been sent for. Asahara had come across it on the living-room table

when nobody else was about, and he had picked it up and was looking at it when he realised his father was standing out in the corridor by the sliding door. Asahara's father met his gaze and then averted his eyes, lines of displeasure wrinkling his forehead. Asahara could see no issue with what was recorded in the family register. He had long since graduated from any interest in searching for secrets and he didn't think he had been reading the register particularly avidly. But from the look in his father's eyes, he sensed too late that it might have looked like he was scrutinising it closely. His father passed by the living room without saying anything. Asahara's hands, returning the copy to the table, hesitated in mid air, and he was struck by a feeling of guilt. His father's scowl transferred itself to his own face as he stood stiffly in front of the table. Suddenly a fury that hardly seemed like his own forced its way up inside him, and he glared, wide eyed. He couldn't tell if the anger was directed at his father or himself. That was perhaps the first sign in Asahara.

When Asahara was seventeen, he fell in love with a girl who was a year below him at a different school. It was a fairly normal relationship for people their age, and the two often spent time together after school and on days off. However, Asahara's father's reacted unexpectedly badly on hearing of it. He called for his son, and it transpired that he had been thoroughly investigating the girl's family, who lived on the other side of town. He pressed Asahara again and again to end the relationship, saying that he had been to see a fortune teller and had been warned in the strongest terms that it was inauspicious. He didn't pick any other faults with the girl's family, but Asahara said nothing, tense at the fact that his father was sniffing around the person he loved.

Conflict arose in the relationship between Asahara and his father, and even when they sat across from each other at the dinner table, few words were spoken. True to form, all Asahara's mother did was watch their faces anxiously. When the second-oldest brother had been involved in the problematic relationship with the middle-aged woman their father had said nothing, simply making a pained face and averting his eyes whenever the topic was brought up. Compared to that, the way he harangued Asahara, who had done nothing more than hold hands with a girl when no-one else was around, pushed Asahara beyond anger and into suspicion. Once would have been bad enough, but it was something that happened often.

"She's a devil woman," Asahara's father spat out one evening to his son's face. Asahara was speechless at the fact that his father would say something like that about a

sixteen-year-old girl, and the anger that he had first felt half a year ago reared its head again. He was on the verge of making a grab for his father, and then a pang of fear ran through him as he realised that while his father was well built, he himself was even bigger—and what was more, they were extremely alike. His father’s eyes were wide and glaring, and Asahara recognised the expression as the same as his own that day when he had picked up the family register in the living room. Deep lines were etched on his father’s brow, but his slack, open mouth looked as though it might let out a sob; it trembled as though on the verge of twisting into an even more pathetic sneer. Asahara wordlessly left the room.

After that, when Asahara’s father got himself worked up into a rage, at the height of his agitation and just before he began to settle down he would spit out throwaway remarks about women’s deceptions and women’s manipulations, sometimes stooping to blunt, snide insults. Asahara would shake with humiliation each time, but he couldn’t respond for fear of further tarnishing his sweetheart by discussing her on those terms. He could only glare back until his father’s eyes clouded over. It was as though his father wasn’t really registering his son’s face at all, let alone that of the girl in question. Asahara gradually came to realise that his father had never even set eyes on her.

“Women know everything from the start, but they act like they don’t so they’re difficult to deal with,” Asahara’s father said one day. Asahara looked at his father, whose eyes were white and filmy, and wondered what woman he could possibly be thinking about.

Nonetheless, the power of words was frightening. Listening to what Asahara’s father was actually saying, his remarks weren’t just the sorts of clichés used to disparage woman that you would expect to hear from a precocious local boy.

“I don’t even touch her,” Asahara said, trying to fend off his father’s onslaughts. But his father’s words called up before him the figure of a strange woman, so far away it seemed she was out of reach. At night in his dreams he accused the women, whose face was hidden, with words even harsher than his father’s. He berated her over and over until she couldn’t get away, and when she submitted and he was about to impose his will upon her, she would raise her eyebrows at him in a look that said she had known everything all along.

It was his mother, more than his father, who angered Asahara. When there had been trouble with the second-oldest brother their mother hadn’t got upset or made a fuss, but had waited patiently for the boy’s emotions to settle. In the end, Asahara’s brother had had to say it was for their mother’s sake that he’d calmed down, rather than their old man’s.

But now she had completely returned to her former weak state. She was bewildered and helpless in the face of her husband's rage, and moreover, when these insults to women, these words that didn't bear listening to flew from his mouth, she hung her head as though ashamed. It looked to Asahara as though his mother felt the shame physically. The situation became more and more dismal, and because his mother simply took it all without saying anything, Asahara was worried for his father's sake that this badmouthing would run on and on until his father said something he could never take back.

Asahara watched his father illogically casting blame on his mother, her head hanging, and wondered if this was how things really were. He forced down his hatred and brushed off the thought, telling himself that he didn't know anything about the whys and wherefores of his parents' relationship—and then he found himself amazed at the fact that if it hadn't happened, he would never have been born.

“Apologise, apologise to your father,” his mother repeated over and over again.

Asahara continued to meet his sweetheart once every few days. He hadn't told her about his father and so he found himself not saying much. In response to this the girl also became reticent, and whenever they parted early and went their separate ways home without even having held hands, Asahara would realise that she had been afraid that he would want her body. It would have been a complete misunderstanding—but when Asahara recalled the silences that sometimes fell between them, his mood darkened at the thought of what he might do, caught up on an impulse. The old doubts resurfaced and he wondered if there hadn't been something abnormal about his birth after all. Observing himself as he searched for some sign or another, he saw a gait that was becoming more and more like his father's.

One day Asahara's uncle, his father's younger brother by about ten years, happened to be there when Asahara and his father were quarrelling. After silently listening to the father's railing, he quietly invited his nephew outside. Walking alongside Asahara, he spoke kindly to him in acknowledgement of what he was putting up with, and said it was due to his father's age. Asahara's father was already past sixty, and it seemed that a latent characteristic had emerged: their own father's temperament had changed at around the same age and apparently so had their grandfather's, though Asahara's uncle himself couldn't speak to that.

A while ago now, his uncle said, their grandfather had built up the family land over just one generation (though little was left of it now) and by the time he had reached fifty he

was quite content. But for some unknown reason, when he passed sixty he began to speak ill of women, regardless of who they were or where they came from, and it became a source of constant strife between him and the men of the family. People gossiped that it was a curse caused by his hard-hearted behaviour when he was younger. Even so, Asahara's uncle grumbled, he didn't understand why the old man lending out money and clawing together land should result in this ill will towards women in his later years. It was really his older brother's health that he was worried about more than anything else, he muttered. Once their father had gone this way he hadn't been long for the world, and apparently it had been the same with their grandfather.

The situation was fairly incomprehensible to Asahara, but he had gained at least some sort of understanding, and from then on he maintained his composure whenever he dealt with his father. He even waited for an opportunity for reconciliation. In response to this, Asahara's father began avoiding him. Occasionally he would work himself up into a rage and call for his son. When his father began to fling harsh words at him, Asahara simply waited for the verbal abuse that usually followed—but then any sense of composure would flee from his father's eyes and he would glare at his son before little by little averting his gaze. Asahara concluded that his father probably thought him impudent for waiting it out so impassively. But one night he noticed something familiar in his father's gaze, which was averted as though he had seen something unpleasant. It was not the same gaze he had averted from his youngest son, son of his second wife, when he had picked up the family register.

The second-oldest brother had returned late at night. Though Asahara had only been in middle school at the time, he could tell his brother had been with a woman; it was almost like he could smell it on him. It showed on the face of their mother, calmly welcoming his brother home. His father left the living room. It was *that look* in his eyes right there. From his father's expression, Asahara bypassed imagination and sensed directly for the first time what it was for a man and woman to touch.

Now, that hatred was directed towards him. He could check on the look in his father's eyes again and again, but there was no mistake.

As a result of one thing on top of another, Asahara met his sweetheart less and less often. When they did meet there was a distance between them, originating from neither of them in particular, and when they talked it was as though they were tiptoeing around taboo subjects that lurked everywhere.

Asahara's father never called for him after he had come home from meeting the girl. But when his father averted his eyes from him, that same smell Asahara had noticed on the second-oldest brother when he had come back from being with a woman now emanated from his own body. The word "sweetheart" was stripped away and a woman's bare skin was visible beneath.

Asahara's father used to turn his back on the second-oldest brother and lament that he looked as though he'd go so far as to kill his own parents for a woman. Asahara didn't know what imaginations his father was harbouring about him, but he bore in mind the last thing his uncle had muttered, and brooded over the thought that this was probably a bad sign for his father.

After days had gone by without father and son looking each other in the eye, Asahara's father came out with something unexpected.

"Your mother thinks you're strange as well, you know. She was crying and saying she's terrified when you go near her," he said.

It wasn't anger that first assailed Asahara but an emotion that he couldn't quite place—not quite fear, not quite remorse—and he wondered if his father had finally gone mad, if this was what his uncle had been afraid of. Unable to read his father's expression, he looked to his mother for help. She was drooping as though the attack had been aimed at her, the way she always did when harsh words were spoken—but this time the impression Asahara got was different. Looking closely, he could see that while she hung her head, her back was straight and her posture settled, hands placed one on top of the other on her lap, composed, as though in acceptance. Her closed mouth rejected any notion that she might step in. Asahara recalled something awful in his mother's eyes when she had come upstairs to get him just now, and he stormed out of the room.

It was the son who was dominated by evil thoughts. He discovered that having these evil thoughts felt almost the same as having a clear mind. Even now he couldn't summon up any resentment or hatred, nor did he spend any time worrying. It was simply that he was filled to the brim with malice. It saturated him like some transparent liquid, though there was not a ripple on the surface. Turning this feeling it on its head, it was almost like satisfaction.

Asahara's behaviour about the house didn't change; in fact, in all respects it was more settled than usual. In demeanour he became more of an adult day by day. It was as though he was bypassing his teens and entering the prime of manhood. Even when eating at the dinner

table sitting opposite his parents, he didn't say a word. It wasn't a tense silence; he made no move to react to his rejection and didn't get himself twisted up over it. Even if his parents had wanted to say something to him, it was Asahara who was remote and unapproachable.

Sitting and eating silently in front of his parents, he sometimes wondered at himself for not even slightly considering the idea that the whole thing might be based on his own groundless suspicions. But he avoided holding pointless grudges against things that had long since been determined and he made no palliative attempts to restore things to the way they were. He wasn't shaken by it. Sitting before their son with his endless appetite, Asahara's parents seemed to shrink before him.

Once, he was struck by an image that was like something from a nightmare, despite the fact that it was breakfast time on a beautiful day. A big man, a stranger, had come along at some point and lodged himself in the house, and was even trying to usurp the seat of the head of the household. It was then that Asahara wondered whether, transparent though it was, the thing that was filling him up might be fear after all.

His parents were doing their utmost to remain calm, but the exhaustion was starting to show on their faces; it was just then that Asahara's uncle stepped in.

Accompanied by his uncle, Asahara left home and came to the bridle-path crossroads. There his uncle remarked that actually, this wasn't the first time he had taken Asahara to the upper village. Asahara had been to his relatives' house often as a child and knew it well, but he couldn't remember ever having gone with his uncle. But his uncle said that when Asahara had been around a year and a half old, he had put him on a cart and pulled him up here by himself.

"I can still remember you, eyes open wide, sitting quietly on the mattresses piled on top of the cart," his uncle said, glancing backwards from between the cart's handles. "It was an autumn evening," he said, as they looked out over the crossroads on this early spring morning.

It transpired that when Asahara's grandfather had died, his great-aunts had started saying all sorts of distressing things and kicking up a fuss, as though they had been possessed by the deceased. Because of this, for a while Asahara and his mother had been looked after in the upper village. Asahara's uncle, then in his mid thirties, had been called back from the city where he had been making a half-hearted living and told that his father's disinheritance of

him would be rescinded on the condition that he sorted out the trouble. That was how he had ended up pulling the moving cart.

He had felt sorry for the child who was being carried away, not knowing what was going on. But when he had looked back at Asahara, concerned because he was so quiet, he saw the child looking from side to side in awe. The boy didn't seem uneasy. In fact, even though his mother had been shaken up at the time, Asahara had barely grizzled. He looked as though he understood everything that was happening, and his uncle felt all the more pity for him.

They had started up the hill and passed along the road cut through the mountain all without stopping, and then his uncle had paused for a rest and looked up at the mountains on their right. They were now almost completely in shadow right up to their heights, but one area near the ridge was illuminated red in the setting sun. Asahara's uncle turned to ask Asahara what kind of trees he thought they were and found the child looking up, captivated by the autumn colours.

Asahara's uncle managed to negotiate with his parents so that no matter how long Asahara was to stay in the upper village, they would send him off to university in the city next spring. It was later decided that Asahara's oldest brother, who was living in a nearby town, would also be moving his family in and would commute to work from there.

Asahara soon settled in to the low-ceilinged upstairs room that he had got used to as a child. The master of the house remembered the evening when a young Asahara had arrived on a cart being pulled along by his uncle, and he reminisced fondly about how he had even thought about adopting that child who had stepped up into the house with no sign of shyness. But, Asahara responded maturely, they had already had three children, the oldest in middle school, and if they had taken Asahara in too it would have been hard on them.

Home became distant. As though crossing the bridle-path crossroads with his uncle had represented some kind of boundary, Asahara thought, again suspecting his own feelings.

He crossed the crossroads in the morning to get to school. If he just carried on going straight he would soon pass the house, but he avoided going that way and instead crossed the railway line beyond the crossroads, veering off. He felt that this reluctance was only natural given that he had been put out of the house.

Then one Saturday over half a month later, his uncle came to the upper village and asked Asahara if he had gone home at all. Asahara thought his uncle was going to reproach him for not having gone to see his parents, but his uncle told him that if he hadn't gone back that was alright then, and not to visit home for the time being. He had supposed that after a month things would have settled down, but Asahara's father's anger towards his son hadn't abated at all. In the daytime he was sullen, but late at night he would spring out of bed and turn to his wife, cursing Asahara over and over for having become so impudent. He would even say that there was no knowing what kind of things Asahara might do, with that knowing look. And as if that wasn't bad enough, this Sunday past Asahara's father had gone berserk, saying his son had sneaked into the house at daybreak to look for something.

Asahara felt afterwards that his uncle had gone away harbouring some doubts about him. Supposing he noticed that he *had* left something vital behind in the house, Asahara wondered, would he go back for it quietly in the middle of the night?

He was still thinking about it when about ten days later, Asahara's uncle reappeared once more and took Asahara outside, shaking his head and saying that things weren't what he had thought. It seemed that the front and back doors of the house were now barred with a prop at night.

"I heard our grandfather did the same thing in his later years," Asahara's uncle said fearfully. He told Asahara that their grandfather had apparently been gripped by the delusion that a man—though it was unclear whether this meant his own son or someone else—would have his judgement blinded by a woman and would steal away the family assets that he had worked so hard to build up. Asahara's uncle was deep in thought as he spoke, and for a while he appeared to have forgotten his nephew beside him. But eventually he looked Asahara straight in the eye and wondered, puzzled, what it was about this child, still too young to be under a woman's curse, that his father was so afraid of.

"Make sure you don't go near the house, don't show yourself—understand?" he emphasised, and then he hurried away.

On his way to school, Asahara made a fairly long detour that avoided the bridle-path crossroads. He knew every inch of that house so well that when night came, the image of the prop barring the door rose up before him time and time again. He was cut deeply by this precaution taken by his parents, a precaution he could only think was madness. One night, he gradually became aware that he was laughing softly, a dark expression on his face. Of course,

even if his parents had barred the door, one of the shutters round the back of the house had a weak sill. On occasion the second-oldest brother, who should have been locked out, had been found upstairs the next morning, slumbering away as though nothing had happened. Their parents must have been aware of it too; that was how pointless it was trying to lock the house up. But somehow there was no humour in the thought, and the shiny black shouldering pole propped up at an angle against the door seemed all the more like a charm to ward off evil. Asahara shivered at the thought of his parents' hostility—but the thin smile never left his lips.

In bed some nights later, Asahara found himself moaning in a voice he had never heard before. *Even if I didn't sneak around the back to undo the shutter, with the house locked up like that I could easily go round the front and break the door down if I wanted to!*

The utterance was not accompanied by any emotion.

Another half a month passed and Asahara's uncle visited again. It transpired that Asahara's father had started saying that his youngest son wasn't his. His wife had lost the energy to plead with him. It was plain to see that Asahara resembled his father in face and build, but Asahara's uncle hadn't been around at the crucial time and wasn't in a position to say anything. When Asahara consulted his uncles and aunts about it they all laughed it off, saying that based on the circumstances it wasn't possible, and that Asahara's father had never shown any sign of suspicion up until now. There was no doubt it was simply a delusion.

Nevertheless, Asahara's uncle told him that the things his father was saying were awful and that it wouldn't help if Asahara heard them and got himself worked up too. He wanted Asahara to know that from now on, he wouldn't be passing on anything he didn't need to hear.

"I know it's not your fault, so don't let it get to you," he said conciliatorily. "And there's no need to worry about your parents. Apart from the issue with you, they get on along alright as husband and wife in their own way, oddly enough. The house is neat and tidy," he said laughing, and then headed home.

The youngest daughter of the house where Asahara was staying was in the third year of elementary school. She often came upstairs when Asahara was sitting at his desk, and she would flop down on the tatami behind him and quietly read a book. One day, out of the blue, Asahara heard a voice from behind him.

“Have you ever been to the desert?”

When he replied that he hadn't, the girl asked him if he had ever seen an oasis.

Asahara turned round, thinking that this was a strange line of questioning—only to be asked whether he had ever seen a mirage. The question was asked with a very serious face. The girl didn't look like she was trying to show off her knowledge; she was simply asking. Asahara brushed off the question by telling her he'd never been further afield than on a school trip, but from then on she would abruptly ask him things like “Have you been to India?” And when he replied that he hadn't, “Have you seen giant water lilies?” She would pile the questions on. “Have you been to Africa? Have you seen the pygmies?”

At first Asahara was perplexed; he hadn't been all over the world and so couldn't be of much use. But whenever the girl asked him a question he would try to answer with whatever he'd learned from books, and although he was just spouting this second-hand knowledge off the top of his head, over time he was able to answer in more detail, and he became quite accomplished at it.

Asahara went to school during the day, and he no longer met his sweetheart, who was trying hard to avoid him. However, before long he had to throw himself into studying for the university examinations, and he was also spending time with his relatives at their home, with the result that he had no time to think about anything. Even so, when night came he would wonder again if his parents were still barring the door. When he seemed in danger of falling into a bottomless pit of gloom, he would summon up the face of the little girl, staring at him intently as she asked her questions.

Sometimes he felt disappointed in himself, telling her all those stories when he couldn't even go beyond the bridle-path crossroads. But when he likened himself to someone who *had* gone round the world in answer to the girl's dreams and had then decided that they would no longer go beyond the crossroads, he felt a pleasant sense of forlornness, though it was all just in his imagination.

Sometimes he saw the crossroads in his dreams. It alone was visible, and although there was no sign of anyone, it felt as though something had happened there. Or perhaps something was about to happen, he thought, as he stood on the road cut through the mountain—and then he too would fade away.

At the bridle-path crossroads someone called out to Asahara in greeting, and he responded with something about the fine weather as he passed on by. Ahead lay his parents' house, not ten minutes down the road. He still felt the sense of rapture that had welled up when he had set foot on the road cut through the mountain. Behind him, more and more pale purple butterflies danced above the valley. Flocks of white flowers twinkled like stars amongst the dark groves. The high-pitched sound of the sea came at intervals.

And then he faced the crossroads, and having up until now in his life endured never being able to reach it, the man advanced, step by firm, purposeful step. Passing the crossroads and drawing closer and closer to his parents' house, he distanced himself from everything that had passed, putting it all behind him.

As he stood before the gate and looked deliberately up at the nameplate, Asahara himself could tell that even in these three months he had become even more well built. His long arms hung by his sides, his hands half closed as though they had just now been grasping something tightly. They were large hands.

The wind gusted, and the leaves from the mountains at the back of the town came flying from the direction of the bridle path, whirling over and over in the wind. Asahara passed through the gate, feeling as though everything had ended and this moment was already just a memory. But this memory too would soon be forgotten, and Asahara appealed to the crossroads to remember him as he was now. He was stooping slightly.

As soon as Asahara entered the house, his father met him with an expression of raw hatred on his face.

"I don't know who you are or where you came from, but you'd better go round by the garden," his father snarled, hoarse and panting, his chin working; then he collapsed, and Asahara's mother managed to catch him, drawing him onto her lap. *Run, run away quickly*, her eyes seemed to say, as she turned an imploring gaze towards Asahara.