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The Miner

Been walking and walking through this band of pine trees. It's so long—longer than any band of pine trees I ever saw in a picture. Can't tell if I'm making headway with only trees around. No point walking if the trees aren't going to *do* something—develop. Better to stay put and try to outstare a tree, see who laughs first.

Left Tokyo at nine last night, walked like mad straight north. Worn out, sleepy, no place to stay, no money. Crawled onto a Kagura stage¹ in the dark for a nap. Hachiman shrine, probably. Cold woke me up. Still pretty dark. Pushed on without a break, but who feels like walking when there's no end to these damned trees!

Legs weigh a ton. Every step is torture. Like having little iron hammers strapped to my calves. Kimono tail tucked up for hiking, legs bare. Anywhere else, I'd be set to run a race. But not with all these pine trees.

Here's a tea stand. Through the reed blinds I see a rusty kettle on a big clay stove. A bench in front sticks way out into the road, a few straw sandals hanging over it. A man in a kimono—a *hanten* or *dotera*² or something—sitting there with his back to me.

1 A roofed, open-air stage in the precincts of a Shintō shrine for the performance of sacred Kagura dances. Here, the shrine belongs to the cult of Hachiman, the god of war.

2 Two kinds of thickly padded cloaks worn in cold weather. The *hanten* is a short jacket, the *dotera* a full-length kimono normally used for lounging at home or sleeping.

I'm moving past and peeking from the corner of my eye and wondering whether I should stop and rest or forget it when this fellow halfway between a hanten and a dotera spins around in my direction, smiling. His tobacco-blackened teeth show between two fat lips. I start feeling queasy but he turns serious. I see he's been enjoying a talk with the old lady in the tea stand and for no good reason swung around to the road where that smile of his landed smack on me. So he turns serious and I relax. I relax and then I feel queasy again. His face is serious and he keeps it sitting there in a serious position, but damned if the whites of his eyes don't start creeping up my face—mouth to nose, nose to forehead, over the visor and up to the crown of my cap. Then they start creeping down again. This time they skip the face, go to the chest, to the navel, and come to a stop. Wallet in there. Thirty-two sen inside. Eyes lock onto it right through my blue-and-white kimono. Still focused on the wallet, they cross my cotton sash and arrive at my crotch. Below that, only bare legs, and no amount of looking is going to find anything to see on them. They're just feeling a little heavier than usual. After a long, careful look at the heavy parts, the eyes finally arrive at the black marks my big toes have rubbed onto the platforms of my *geta*.³

When I write it out like this, it sounds as if I was standing there in the one spot for a long time practically inviting him to look me over, but that wasn't it at all. In fact, the second the whites of his eyes started moving, I was sure I wanted to get out of there. But knowing what I wanted to do wasn't enough, it seems. By the time I had my toes scrunched up and was ready to turn my *geta*, the whites of his eyes had stopped moving. I hate to say it, but he was *fast*. If you think

³ Flat wooden footwear raised about one-and-a-half inches off the ground by two horizontal "teeth" and held onto the feet (normally bare) by cloth thongs.

it took a long time for his eyes to creep all over me like that, you're wrong. Sure, they were creeping, and they were calm as could be. But they were fast, too. Damned fast. Here I was, trying to walk past this place, and all I could think of was how strangely a pair of eyes can move. If only I could have managed to turn away before he had finished looking me over! I was like somebody who announces that he's leaving a place *after* he's been ordered to get out. You feel like a fool. The other fellow's got the upper hand.

Once I started walking, I had a strange, angry feeling for the first ten or twelve yards. But those ten or twelve yards were all it took for the feeling to disappear—and for my legs to grow heavy again. I've still got the same legs, don't I, and the same iron hammers strapped to them? Of *course* I can't move quickly. Maybe I was born slow, but that can't be the reason those eye whites crawled all over me. When I think about it like this, my anger begins to seem pointless.

Besides, I'm not in any position to let little things bother me. I've run away and I'm never going home again. I can't even stay in Tokyo. I'm not planning to settle in the country, either. They're after me. They'll catch me if I stop. Once my troubles start running around my brain, there's no place far enough out for me to relax. So I keep walking. But since I'm walking with no particular goal in mind, I feel as if a big, blurry photograph is hanging in the air in front of my face. Everything's out of focus, and there's no telling when it might come clear. It stretches off ahead of me into infinity. And it'll be there as long as I live—fifty years, sixty—stretching out in front of me no matter how much I walk, no matter how much I run. Oh hell, what's the difference? I'm not walking to get through this foggy stuff out there. I know damn well I could never get through it if I tried. I'm walking because I can't stay still.