

7. When the Empress Moved

When the Empress moved into the house of the Senior Steward, Narimasa, the east gate of his courtyard had been made into a four-pillared structure,¹⁹ and it was here that Her Majesty's palanquin entered. The carriages in which I and the other ladies-in-waiting were travelling arrived at the north gate. As there was no one in the guard-house, we decided to enter just as we were, without troubling to tidy ourselves; many of the women had let their hair become disordered during the journey, but they did not bother to rearrange it, since they assumed that the carriages would be pulled directly up to the veranda of the house. Unfortunately the gate was too narrow for our palm-leaf carriages. The attendants laid down mats for us from the gate to the house, and we had to get out and walk. It was extremely annoying and we were all very cross; but what could we do about it? To make matters worse, there was a group of men, including senior courtiers and even some of lower rank, standing next to the guard-house and staring at us in a most irritating fashion.

When I entered the house and saw Her Majesty, I told her what had happened. 'Do you suppose it is only people outside the house who can see what a state you are in?' she said. 'I wonder what has made you all so careless today.'

'But, Your Majesty,' I replied, 'the people here are all used to us, and it would surprise them if we suddenly took great trouble over our appearance. In any case, it does seem rather strange that the gates of a house like this should be too small for a carriage. I shall have to tease your steward about it when I see him.'

At that very moment Narimasa arrived with an inkstone and other writing implements, which he thrust under the screen, saying, 'Pray give these to Her Majesty.'

'Well, well,' said I, 'you really are a disgraceful man! Why do you live in a house with such narrow gates?'

'I have built my house to suit my station in life,' he laughingly replied.

'That's all very well,' I said, 'but I seem to have heard of someone who built his gate extremely high, out of all proportion to the rest of his house.'

19) The Empress moved to Narimasa's house because she was pregnant and pregnant women were considered impure, so she could not live in the palace.

This is her third child, she will die at the end of this pregnancy.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Narimasa. 'How remarkable! You must be referring to Yü Ting-kuo.²⁰ I thought it was only veteran scholars who had heard about such things. Even I, Madam, should not have understood you except that I happen to have strayed in these paths myself.'

'Paths!' said I. 'Yours leave something to be desired. When your servants spread out the mats for us, we couldn't see how uneven the ground was and we stumbled all over the place.'

'To be sure, Madam,' said Narimasa. 'It has been raining, and I am afraid it is a bit uneven. But let's leave it at that. You'll be making some other disagreeable remark in a moment. So I shall be off before you have time.' And with this he went away.

'What happened?' asked the Empress when I rejoined her. 'Narimasa seemed terribly put out.'

'Oh no,' I answered. 'I was only telling him how our carriage could not get in.' Then I withdrew to my own room.

I shared this room with several of the younger ladies-in-waiting. We were all sleepy and, without paying much attention to anything, dozed off immediately. Our room was in the east wing of the house. Though we were unaware of the fact, the clasp of the sliding-door in the back of the western ante-room²¹ was missing. Of course the owner of the house knew about this, and presently he came and pushed open the door.

'May I presume to come in?' he said several times in a strangely husky and excited voice. I looked up in amazement, and by the light of the lamp that had been placed behind the curtain of state²² I could see that Narimasa was standing outside the door, which he had now opened about half a foot. The situation amused me. As a rule he would not have dreamt of indulging in such lecherous behaviour; as the Empress was staying in his house, he evidently felt he could do as he pleased. Waking up the young women next to me, I exclaimed, 'Look who is there! What an unlikely sight!' They all sat up and, seeing Narimasa by the door, burst into laughter. 'Who are you?' I said. 'Don't try to hide!' 'Oh no,' he replied. 'It's simply that the master of the house has something to discuss with the lady-in-waiting in charge.'

'It was your gate I was speaking about,' I said. 'I don't remember asking you to open the sliding-door.'

20) Story is from the Chinese classics, normally only taught to men.

22) The "curtain of state" is a portable screen set in front of doors so that men could enter room to talk to women, but not see them. It might also be moved to cover one part of a room to separate women and men.

'Yes indeed,' he answered. 'It is precisely the matter of the gate that I wanted to discuss with you. May I not presume to come in for a moment?'

'Really!' said one of the young women. 'How unpleasant! No, he certainly cannot come in.'

'Oh, I see,' said Narimasa. 'There are other young ladies in the room.' Closing the door behind him, he left, followed by our loud laughter.

How absurd! Once he had opened the door, he should obviously have walked straight in, without bothering to ask for permission. After all, what woman would be likely to say, 'It's all right. Please come in?'

On the following day I told the Empress about the incident. 'It does not sound like Narimasa at all,' she said, laughing. 'It must have been your conversation last night that roused his interest in you. Really, I can't help feeling sorry for the poor man. You have been awfully hard on him.'

One day when the Empress was giving orders about the costumes for the little girls who were to wait upon the Princess Imperial,²³ Narimasa asked, 'Has Your Majesty decided on the colour of the garments²⁴ that will cover the girls' vests?' This made us all laugh; and surely no one could blame us for being amused. Next Narimasa discussed the Princess's meals. 'I believe it would look rather clumsy, Your Majesty, if they were served in ordinary utensils. If I may say so, she ought to have a *smahl* platter and a *smahl* tray.'²⁵

'And be waited upon,' I added, 'by little girls with those garments that cover their vests.'

'You should not make fun of him as the others do,' the Empress told me afterwards. 'He is a very sincere man, and I feel sorry for him.' I found even her reprimand delightful.

Once when I was busy attending the Empress a messenger came and said that Narimasa had arrived and wished to tell me something. Overhearing this, the Empress said, 'I wonder what he will do this time to make himself a laughing-stock. Find out what he has to say.' Delighted by her remark, I decided to go out myself, rather than send a maid. 'Madam,' announced Narimasa, 'I told my brother, the Middle Counsellor,²⁶ what you said the other night about the gate. He was most impressed and asked me to arrange a meeting for him at some convenient time when he could hear what you had to say.'

I wondered whether Narimasa would make some reference to his own visit the other night and I felt my heart pounding; but he said nothing further, merely adding as he left, 'I should like to come and see you quietly one of these days.'

'Well,' said the Empress when I returned, 'what happened?' I told her exactly what Narimasa had said, adding with a smile, 'I should hardly have thought it was so important that he had to send a special message for me when I was in attendance. Surely he could have waited until I had settled down quietly in my own room.'

'He probably thought you would be pleased to hear of his brother's high opinion and wanted to let you know at once. He has the greatest respect for his brother, you know.' Very charming the Empress looked as she said this.

23) The Empress's first daughter, about 3 years old. As a princess, she would have her own court of little girls. Her son would not have come with her.

24) There is a word for this type of clothing, so his long description is awkward

25) *smahl* = small with a funny accent. Based on context, he was probably trying to sound classy, but Sei wrote it as a peasant dialect

26) Sei mentions this brother in other entries, and seems to have more respect for him, but still refers to Narimasa condescendingly.

34. Gentlemen Should Always Have Escorts

Gentlemen should always have escorts. Even young noblemen, however handsome and charming, strike me as dull creatures if they are unescorted.

I have always regarded the position of Controller¹⁴⁹ as a fine and honourable one; but it is a shame that the train of his under-robe should be so short and that he is not provided with an escort.

149) The Controller has a lot of real responsibilities and duties, so he has no time for long clothes and escorts.

45. To Meet One's Lover

To meet one's lover summer is indeed the right season. True, the nights are very short, and dawn creeps up before one has had a wink of sleep. Since all the lattices have been left open, one can lie and look out at the garden in the cool morning air. There are still a few endearments to exchange before the man takes his leave, and the lovers are murmuring to each other when suddenly there is a loud noise. For a moment they are certain that they have been discovered; but it is only the caw of a crow flying past in the garden.

In the winter, when it is very cold and one lies buried under the bedclothes listening to one's lover's endearments, it is delightful to hear the booming of a temple gong, which seems to come from the bottom of a deep well. The first cry of the birds, whose beaks are still tucked under their wings, is also strange and muffled. Then one bird after another takes up the call. How pleasant it is to lie there listening as the sound becomes clearer and clearer!

171) From Buddhist texts about the inherent suffering of life, but used in a petty way.

172) People in the "lower orders" were thought to have no sense of morality or ethics

173) Poem reference to hidden feelings

174) It looks like rain... so hurry up and leave!

46. A Lover's Visit

A lover's visit is the most delightful thing in the world. But when the man is a mere acquaintance, or has come for a casual chat, what a nuisance it can be! He enters the lady's room, where numerous other women are ensconced behind the blinds chatting to each other, and he gives no sign that his visit will be brief. The attendants who have accompanied him sit outside impatiently, convinced that 'the handle of his axe will rot away'.¹⁷⁰ They yawn loudly and complain of their lot. 'Oh, the bondage!' they mutter to themselves. 'Oh, the suffering!'¹⁷¹ It must already be past midnight.' Probably they do not realize that anyone is listening, and in any case their words mean little.¹⁷² Yet it is disagreeable to hear such remarks, and one's visitor finds that the things he would normally be enjoying on such a visit have lost their charm.

Sometimes the attendants do not dare put their sentiments into words but clearly show them by the look on their faces and by the great groans that they let forth. At such times I find it amusing to recall the poem about the 'waters seething far below'.¹⁷³ But, if they go and stand by a fence in the garden and say, 'It looks like rain,'¹⁷⁴ or words to that effect, I find it hateful.

The attendants who accompany young noblemen and other people of quality never behave in this rude way; but such things often happen with men of lower rank. When paying a visit, a man should take along only those attendants whose character is known to him.

170) This refers to a Taoist legend. A woodcutter in the mountains saw some wise men playing ~~on~~ a board game called "go" and stopped to watch. When he finally stops watching, the wooden handle of his axe has rotted because he was up there for decades and now everyone he knew is dead.

48. *The Women's Apartments along the Gallery*

The women's apartments along the gallery of the Imperial Palace are particularly pleasant. When one raises the upper part of the small half-shutters, the wind blows in extremely hard; it is cool even in summer, and in winter snow and hail come along with the wind, which I find agreeable. As the rooms are small, and as the page-boys (even though employed in such august precincts) often behave badly, we women generally stay hidden behind our screens or curtains. It is delightfully quiet there; for one cannot hear any of the loud talk and laughter that disturb one in other parts of the Palace.

Of course we must always be on the alert when we are staying in these apartments. Even during the day we cannot be off our guard, and at night we have to be especially careful. But I rather enjoy all this. Throughout the night one hears the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside. Every now and then the sound will stop, and someone will tap on a door with just a single finger. It is pleasant to think that the woman inside can instantly recognize her visitor. Sometimes the tapping will continue for quite a while without the woman's responding in any way. The man finally gives up, thinking that she must be asleep; but this does not please the woman, who makes a few cautious movements, with a rustle of silk clothes, so that her visitor will know she is really there. Then she hears him fanning himself as he remains standing outside the door.

In the winter one sometimes catches the sound of a woman gently stirring the embers in her brazier. Though she does her best to be quiet, the man who is waiting outside hears her; he knocks louder and louder, asking her to let him in. Then the woman slips furtively towards the door where she can listen to him.

On other occasions one may hear several voices reciting Chinese or Japanese poems. One of the women opens her door, though in fact no one has knocked. Seeing this, several of the men, who had no particular intention of visiting this woman, stop on their way through the gallery. Since there is no room for them all to come in, many of them spend the rest of the night out in the garden - most charming.

Bright green bamboo blinds are a delight, especially when beneath them one can make out the many layers of a woman's clothes emerging from under brilliantly coloured curtains of state.¹⁷⁵ The men who glimpse this sight from the veranda, whether they be young noblemen with their over-ropes inform-

ally left unsewn in the back, or Chamberlains of the Sixth Rank in their costumes of green, do not as a rule dare enter the room where the woman is seated. It is interesting to observe them as they stand there with their backs pressed to the wall and with the sleeves of their robes neatly arranged. Charming also, when one is watching from the outside, is the sight of a young man clad in laced trousers of dark purple and in a dazzling Court robe over an array of varicoloured garments, as he leans forward into the woman's room, pushing aside the green blind. At this point he may take out an elegant inkstone and start writing a letter, or again, he may ask the woman for a mirror and comb his side-locks; either is delightful.

When a three-foot curtain of state has been set up, there is hardly any gap between the top of the frame and the bottom of the head-blind; fortunately the little space that remains always seems to come precisely at the face-level of the man who is standing outside the curtains and of the woman who is conversing with him from inside. What on earth would happen if the man was extremely tall and the woman very short? I really cannot imagine. But, so long as people are of normal height, it is satisfactory.

I particularly enjoy the rehearsal before the Special Festival¹⁷⁶ when I am staying in the women's apartments at the Palace. As the men from the Office of Grounds walk along, they hold their long pine torches high above them; because of the cold their heads are drawn into their robes, and consequently the ends of the torches are always threatening to bump into things. Soon there is the pleasant sound of music as the players pass outside the women's apartments playing their flutes. Some of the young noblemen in the Palace, fascinated by the scene, appear in their Court costumes and stand outside our rooms chatting with us, while their attendants quietly order people to make way for their masters. All the voices mingle with the music in an unfamiliar and delightful way.

Since the night is already well advanced, one does not bother to go to bed but waits for the dawn when the musicians and dancers return from their rehearsal. Soon they arrive, and then comes the best part of all when they sing 'The rice flowers from the freshly-planted fields'.¹⁷⁷

Almost everyone enjoys these things; but occasionally some sober-sides will hurry by, without stopping to watch the scene. Then one of the women calls out laughingly to him, 'Wait a moment, Sir! How can you abandon the charms of such a night? Stay for a while and enjoy yourself!' But evidently the man is in a bad mood, for he scurries along the corridor, almost tumbling over himself in his haste, as though in terror of being pursued and captured.

175) Since your ability to layer colours was an attractive trait women would deliberately let the bottoms of their outfits show under the screens that were supposed to shield them from male gaze.

176) A relatively new festival in Sei's time, related to a specific shrine near the palace.

177) Folk song

58. One Day When the Emperor Visited Her Majesty's Rooms

One day when the Emperor visited Her Majesty's rooms, we heard that he had taken along the lute called Mumyō²³² and that some of the ladies-in-waiting were strumming it. We went to have a look, but no one was playing. One of our group toyed with the strings and asked what the instrument was called. 'It's far too insignificant to have a name,'²³³ said the Empress. Hearing her reply, I was once more reminded what an admirable mistress I served.

The Lady of the Shigei Sha,²³⁴ who had come to call on the Empress, mentioned in the course of conversation that at home she had a very fine thirteen-pipe flute which she had received from her late father. Hearing this, His Lordship the Bishop²³⁵ said, 'Please give it to me. I have a splendid seven-string zither at home which I hope you will take in exchange.' But the Shigei Sha paid no attention to him and continued chatting to the Empress. His Lordship repeated the request several times, thinking that in the end his sister was bound to reply; but still she said nothing. Thereupon Her Majesty said, 'No, she certainly has no intention of exchanging it - any more than one would exchange the Inakaeji²³⁶ flute.' It was a delightful remark; but His Lordship, priest though he was, seemed unfamiliar with the name of this particular flute, and he only felt resentful. (This was at a time when Her Majesty was residing in the Empress's Office and there was a flute known as Inakaeji in the Imperial collection.)

The zithers, flutes, and other instruments belonging to the Emperor have certainly been given some strange names. Among the lutes are Genshō, Mokuma, Ide, Ikyō, and Mumyō; the six-string zithers have names like Kuchime, Shiogama, and Futanuki. I have also heard about Suirō, Kosuirō, Uda no Hōshi, Kugiuchi, and Hafutatsu;²³⁷ and there are many others whose names I have forgotten. 'Such objects,' I remember Tadanobu saying, 'deserve to be placed on the shelf of honour in Giyō Palace.'²³⁸

238) Giyō Palace is the Imperial treasure house.

232) This lute still exists and is kept in the Imperial palace. The name means "nameless"

233) In Japanese, this pun sounds much better

234) The Empress's sister. Their father had died less than a year ago.

235) He is their brother. Are you seeing a pattern for this family? (Fujiwara family)

236) The name literally means "I will not exchange."

Genshō: above mysteries

Mokuma: horse pasture

Ide: sluice (pathway for water)

Ikyō: Bridge name

Kuchime: Decaying eye

Shiogama: Salt kiln

Futanuki: two openings

Suirō: water dragon

Kosuirō: small water dragon

Uda no Hōshi: Father Uda (the title father means he is a master of Buddhist

(law)
Kugiuchi: Nail striker

Hafutatsu: two leaves

59. A Group of Senior Courtiers

A group of senior courtiers had spent all day playing the zither and flute outside the bamboo blinds of the Empress's apartments in Seiryō Palace. In the evening they retired and went their own ways. When the lamp was brought out, the lattices had not yet been lowered and it was possible to see clearly through the blinds into the Imperial apartments. There sat the Empress, holding her lute lengthwise. She wore a magnificent scarlet robe, and beneath it several layers of beaten and stretched silk. Her sleeve was elegantly draped over the glossy, black lute; and nothing could have been more splendid than the contrast between her dazzlingly white forehead and the dark wood of the instrument. Having glanced at this scene, I went up to one of the women who was standing near by and said, 'The girl whose face was half hidden can certainly not have been as beautiful as this. And she, of course, was a mere commoner.'²³⁹ When she heard this, the woman forced her way into the Empress's room and reported what I had said. Presently she came back and told me that Her Majesty had laughingly asked, 'And do you know what Shōnagon meant by that?', which amused me greatly.

60. Once in the Fifth Month

Once in the Fifth Month during the long spell of rainy weather Captain Tadanobu came and stood next to the bamboo screen by the door leading to the Empress's apartments. He used a most delightful scent, which it was impossible to identify. The air was very damp.²⁴⁰ Even though nothing noteworthy took place, there was something peculiarly elegant about the entire scene, which makes me feel bound to mention it. The Captain's scent permeated the screen and lingered there till the following day. Small wonder that the younger ladies-in-waiting should have felt this was something unique!

239) This is a reference to a Chinese story. The girl hides her face because she used to be high-ranked, but is now reduced to low status. But even if she was high-ranked, compared to the Empress, she is a commoner.

240) Enhances smells.

*Tadanobu is a recurring figure. We'll be reading more about their relationship next.