



Yukio Mishima  
Death in  
Midsummer



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*Death in Midsummer*

Yukio Mishima was born in 1925 in Tokyo, and is considered one of Japan's most important writers. His books broke social boundaries and taboos at a time when Japan found itself in a state of rapid social change. His interests, besides writing, included body-building, acting and practising as a Samurai. In 1970 he attempted to start a military coup, which failed. Upon realizing this, Mishima performed *seppuku*, a ritual suicide, upon himself. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature three times.

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YUKIO MISHIMA

*Death in Midsummer and  
Other Stories*

*Translated by Edward G. Seidensticker, Donald Keene,  
Geoffrey W. Sargent and Ivan Morris*



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## *Death in Midsummer*

*La mort . . . nous affecte plus profondément sous le regne  
pompeux de l'été.*

*Baudelaire: Les Paradis Artificiels*

A. Beach, near the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula, is still unspoiled for sea bathing. The sea bottom is pitted and uneven, it is true, and the surf is a little rough; but the water is clean, the slope out to sea is gentle, and conditions are on the whole good for swimming. Largely because it is so out of the way, A. Beach has none of the noise and dirt of resorts nearer Tokyo. It is a two-hour bus ride from Itō.

Almost the only inn is the Eirakusō, which also has cottages to rent. There are only one or two of the shabby refreshment stands that clutter most beaches in summer. The sand is rich and white, and halfway down the beach a rock, surmounted by pines, crouches over the sea almost as if it were the work of a landscape gardener. At high tide it lies half under water.

And the view is beautiful. When the west wind blows the mists from the sea, the islands off shore come in sight, Ōshima near at hand and Toshima farther off, and between them a little triangular island called Utoneshima. Beyond the headland of Nanago lies Cape Sakai, a part of the same mountain mass, throwing its roots deep into the sea, and beyond that the cape

known as the Dragon Palace of Yatsu, and Cape Tsumeki, on the southern tip of which a lighthouse beam revolves each night.

In her room at the Eirakusō Tomoko Ikuta was taking a nap. She was the mother of three children, though one would never have suspected it to look at the sleeping figure. The knees showed under the one-piece dress, just a little short, of light salmon-pink linen. The plump arms, the unworn face, and the slightly curled lips gave off a girl-like freshness. Perspiration had come out on the forehead and in the hollows beside the nose. Flies buzzed dully, and the air was like the inside of a heated metal dome. The salmon linen rose and fell so slightly that it seemed the embodiment of the heavy, windless afternoon.

Most of the other guests were down on the beach. Tomoko's room was on the second floor. Below her window was a white swing for children. There were chairs on the lawn, nearly a half acre wide, as well as tables and a peg for quoits. The quoits lay scattered over the lawn. No one was in sight, and the buzzing of an occasional bee was drowned out by the waves beyond the hedge. The pines came immediately up to the hedge, and gave way beyond to the sand and the surf. A stream passed under the inn. It formed a pool before spilling into the ocean, and fourteen or fifteen geese would splash and honk most indelicately as they fed there every afternoon.

Tomoko had two sons, Kiyoo and Katsuo, who were six and three, and a daughter, Keiko, who was five. All three were down on the beach with Yasue, Tomoko's sister-in-law. Tomoko felt no qualms about asking Yasue to take care of the children while she had a nap herself.

Yasue was an old maid. In need of help after Kiyoo was born, Tomoko had consulted with her husband and decided to invite Yasue in from the provinces. There was no real reason why Yasue had gone unmarried. She was not particularly alluring, indeed, but then neither was she homely. She had declined

proposal after proposal, until she was past the age for marrying. Much taken with the idea of following her brother to Tokyo, she leaped at Tomoko's invitation. Her family had plans for marrying her off to a provincial notable.

Yasue was far from quick, but she was very good-natured. She addressed Tomoko, younger than she, as an older sister, and was always careful to defer to her. The Kanazawa accent had almost disappeared. Besides helping with the children and the housework, Yasue went to sewing school and made clothes for herself, of course, and for Tomoko and the children too. She would take out her notebook and sketch new fashions in downtown store windows, and sometimes she would find a shopgirl glaring at her and even reprimanding her.

She was down on the beach in a stylish green bathing suit. This alone she had not made – it was from a department store. Very proud of her fair north-country skin, she showed hardly a trace of sunburn. She always hurried from the water back to her umbrella. The children were at the edge of the water building a sand castle, and Yasue amused herself by dripping the watery sand on her white leg. The sand, immediately dry, fell into a dark pattern, sparkling with tiny shell fragments. Yasue hastily brushed at it, as if from a sudden fear that it would not wash off. A half-transparent little insect jumped from the sand and scurried away.

Stretching her legs and leaning back on her hands, Yasue looked out to sea. Great cloud masses boiled up, immense in their quiet majesty. They seemed to drink up all the noise below, even the sound of the sea.

It was the height of summer, and there was anger in the rays of the sun.

The children were tired of the sand castle. They ran off kicking up the water in the shallows. Startled from the safe little private world into which she had slipped, Yasue ran after them.

But they did nothing dangerous. They were afraid of the roar of the waves. There was a gentle eddy beyond the line where the waves fell back. Kiyoo and Keiko, hand in hand, stood waist-deep in the water, their eyes sparkling as they braced against the water and felt the sand at the soles of their feet.

'Like someone's pulling,' said Kiyoo to his sister.

Yasue came up beside them and warned them not to go in any deeper. She pointed at Katsuo. They shouldn't leave him there alone, they should go up and play with him. But they paid no attention to her. They stood hand in hand, smiling happily at each other. They had a secret all their own, the feel of the sand as it pulled away from their feet.

Yasue was afraid of the sun. She looked at her shoulder and her breasts, and she thought of the snow in Kanazawa. She gave herself a little pinch high on the breast. She smiled at the warmth. The nails were a little long and there was dark sand under them – she would have to cut them when she got back to her room.

She no longer saw Kiyoo and Keiko. They must have gone back up on the beach.

But Katsuo was alone. His face was strangely twisted, and he was pointing toward her.

Her heart beat violently. She looked into the water at her feet. It was receding again, and in the foam some two yards away a little brown body was rolling over and over. She caught a glimpse of Kiyoo's dark-blue swimming trunks.

Her heart beat still more violently. She moved toward the body as if she were fighting her way out of a corner. A wave came farther in than usual, loomed over her, broke before her eyes. It struck her square in the breast. She fell back into the water. She had had a heart attack.

Katsuo began crying, and a youth ran up from near by. Several others ran out through the shallows. The water leaped up around their naked black bodies.

Two or three saw the fall. They thought nothing about it. She would get up again. But at such times there is always a premonition, and as they ran up it half seemed to them that there had been something wrong with that fall.

Yasue was carried up to the scorching sand. Her eyes were open and her teeth clenched, and she seemed to be gazing in horror at something planted squarely in front of her. One of the men felt her pulse. There was none.

‘She’s staying at the Eirakusō.’ Someone recognized her.

The manager of the inn must be called. A boy from the village, determined not to let anyone steal this proud work from him, ran over the hot sand at top speed.

The manager came. He was about forty. He had on shorts and a sagging T-shirt, and, worn through here and there, a woolen band over his stomach. He argued that Yasue should be given first aid at the inn. Someone objected. Without waiting for the argument to be settled, two young men picked Yasue up and started to carry her off. The wet sand where she had lain showed the outlines of a human form.

Katsuo followed wailing after them. Someone noticed and picked him up.

Tomoko was aroused from her nap. The manager, well trained for his work, shook her gently. She lifted her head and asked what was wrong.

‘The lady named Yasue . . .’

‘Has something happened to Yasue?’

‘We’ve given her first aid, and the doctor will be here in no time.’

Tomoko jumped up and hurried out with the manager. Yasue lay on the lawn beside the swing, and a near-naked man knelt straddling her. He was giving her artificial respiration. To one side was a heap of straw and broken-up orange crates, and two men were doing their best to start a fire. The flames would immediately give way to smoke. The wood was still wet from a

storm the night before. A third man fanned away the smoke as it curled toward Yasue's face.

Her head thrown back, Yasue looked for all the world as if she were breathing. In the sunlight that filtered through the trees, sweat glistened on the dark back of the man astride her. The white legs, stretched out on the grass, were plump and chalky. They seemed apathetic, quite divorced from the struggle going on above.

Tomoko knelt in the grass.

'Yasue! Yasue!'

Would they save Yasue? Why had it happened? What could she say to her husband? Weeping and incoherent, she jumped from question to question. Presently she turned sharply to the men around her. Where were the children?

'Look. Your mother's here.' A middle-aged fisherman held a frightened Katsuo in his arms. Tomoko glanced at the boy, and nodded her thanks to the fisherman.

The doctor came and continued the artificial respiration. Her cheeks burning in the firelight, Tomoko hardly knew what she was thinking. An ant crawled across Yasue's face. Tomoko crushed it and flicked it away. Another ant crawled from the shaking hair up toward the ear. Tomoko crushed it too. Crushing ants became her job.

The artificial respiration went on for four hours. There were finally signs that *rigor mortis* was setting in, and the doctor gave up. The body was covered with a sheet and carried to the second floor. The room was dark. A man left the body and ran ahead to switch on the light.

Exhausted, Tomoko felt a sort of sweet emptiness come over her. She was not sad. She thought of the children.

'The children?'

'Down in the play room with Gengo.'

'All three of them?'

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'All three?' The men looked at each other.

Tomoko pushed them aside and ran downstairs. The fisherman, Gengo, in a cotton kimono, sat on the sofa going over a picture book with Katsuo, who had on an adult's shirt over his swimming trunks. Katsuo's mind was on something else. He was not looking at the book.

As Tomoko came in, the guests who knew of the tragedy stopped fanning themselves and looked at her.

She almost threw herself on Katsuo.

'Kiyoo and Keiko?' she asked harshly.

Katsuo looked up at her timidly. 'Kiyoo . . . Keiko . . . all bubbles.' He began sobbing.

Tomoko ran down to the beach in her bare feet. The pine needles stabbed at her as she went through the grove. The tide had come in, and she had to climb over the rock to the bathing beach. The sand stretched out white below her. She could see far into the dusk. One umbrella, checkered yellow and white, had been left behind. It was her own.

The others overtook her on the beach. She was running recklessly through the surf. When they tried to stop her, she brushed them irritably away.

'Don't you see? There are two children out there.'

Many had not heard what Gengo had had to say. They thought Tomoko was mad.

It hardly seemed possible that no one had thought of the other two children in the whole four hours they were looking after Yasue. The people at the inn were used to seeing the three children together. And however upset their mother might be, it was strange that no warning came to her of the death of her two children.

Sometimes, however, such an incident sets in motion a sort of group psychology that lets only the same simple thoughts come to everyone. It is not easy to stand outside. It is not easy

to register a dissent. Aroused from her afternoon nap, Tomoko had simply taken over what the others passed on to her, and had not thought to question.

All that night there were bonfires some yards apart up and down the beach. Every thirty minutes the young men would dive to look for the bodies. Tomoko was on the beach with them. She could not sleep, partly no doubt because she had slept too long that afternoon.

On the advice of the constabulary, the nets were not set out the following morning.

The sun came up over the headland to the left of the beach, and the morning breeze struck Tomoko's face. She had dreaded the daylight. It seemed to her that with the daylight the whole of the truth must come out, and the tragedy would for the first time become real.

'Don't you think you should get some rest?' said one of the older men. 'We'll call you if we find anything. You can leave everything to us.'

'Please do, please do,' said the inn manager, red-eyed from lack of sleep. 'You've had enough bad luck. What will your husband do if you take sick yourself?'

Tomoko was afraid to see her husband. Seeing him would be like meeting a trial judge. But she would have to see him. The time was coming near – yet another disaster was coming near, it seemed to her.

Presently she summoned up her courage to send a telegram. It gave her an excuse to leave the beach. She had begun to feel that the direction of all the divers had been turned over to her.

She looked back as she walked off. The sea was quiet. A silvery light flashed in near the shore. Fish were jumping. They seemed quite intoxicated with delight. It was unfair that Tomoko should be so unhappy.

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Her husband, Masaru Ikuta, was thirty-five. A graduate of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, he had gone to work for an American company before the war. His English was good, and he knew his business – he was abler than his silent manner suggested. Now the manager of the Japanese office of an American automobile company, he had the use of a company automobile, half as advertising, and he made 150,000 yen a month. He also had ways of appropriating certain secret funds for himself, and Tomoko and Yasue, with a maid to take care of the children, lived in comfort and security. There was no pressing need to cut the family down by three.

Tomoko sent a telegram because she did not want to talk to Masaru over the telephone. As was the custom in the suburbs, the post office telephoned the message when it arrived, and the call came just as Masaru was about to leave for work. Thinking it a routine business call, he calmly picked up the telephone.

‘We have a rush telegram from A. Beach,’ said the woman in the post office. Masaru began to feel uneasy. ‘I’ll read it to you. Are you ready?’ “YASUE DEAD, KIYOO AND KEIKO MISSING, TOMOKO.”’

‘Would you read it again, please?’

It sounded the same the second time: ‘YASUE DEAD, KIYOO AND KEIKO MISSING, TOMOKO.’ Masaru was angry. It was as though, for no reason he could think of, he had suddenly received notice of his dismissal.

He immediately telephoned the office and said he would not be in. He thought he might drive to A. Beach. But the road was long and dangerous, and he had no confidence that he could drive it, upset as he was. As a matter of fact he had recently had an accident. He decided to take a train to Itō, and a taxi from there.

The process by which the unforeseen event works its way into a man’s consciousness is a strange and subtle one. Masaru, who set out without even knowing the nature of the incident,

was careful to take a good supply of money with him. Incidents required money.

He took a taxi to Tokyo station. He felt nothing he could really call emotion. He felt rather what a detective might feel on his way to the scene of a crime. Plunged less in speculation than in deduction, he quivered with curiosity to know more about the incident that involved him so deeply.

She could have telephoned. She was afraid to talk to me. With a husband's intuition, he sensed the truth. But in any case the first problem is to go see for myself.

He looked out the window as they came near the heart of the city. The sun of the midsummer morning was even more blinding because of the white-shirted crowds. The trees along the road cast deep shadows directly downward, and at the entrance to a hotel the gaudy red-and-white awning was taut, as if the sunlight were a heavy metal. The newly dug earth where the street was being repaired was already dry and dusty.

The world around him was quite as it had always been. Nothing had happened, and if he tried he could believe that nothing had happened even to him. A childish annoyance came over him. In an unknown place, an incident with which he had had nothing to do had cut him off from the world.

Among all these passengers none was so unfortunate as he. The thought seemed to put him on a level above or a level below the ordinary Masaru, he did not know which. He was someone special. Someone apart.

No doubt a man with a large birthmark on his back sometimes feels the urge to call out: 'Listen, everyone. You don't know it, but I have a big, purple birthmark on my back.'

And Masaru wanted to shout at the other passengers: 'Listen, everybody. You don't know it, but I have just lost my sister and two of my three children.'

His courage left him. If only the children were safe . . . He

began trying to think of other ways to interpret the telegram. Possibly Tomoko, distraught over Yasue's death, had assumed that the children were dead when they had only lost their way. Might not a second telegram be waiting at the house even now? Masaru was quite taken up with his own feelings, as if the incident itself were less important than his reaction to it. He regretted that he had not called the Eirakusō immediately.

The plaza in front of Itō station was brilliant in the midsummer sun. Beside the taxi stand was a little office, no bigger than a police box. The sunlight inside it was merciless, and the edges of the dispatch sheets on the walls were brown and curled.

'How much to A. Beach?'

'Two thousand yen.' The man wore a driver's cap, and had a towel around his neck. 'If you're in no hurry, you can save money going by bus. It leaves in five minutes,' he added, either out of kindness or because the trip seemed too much of an effort.

'I'm in a hurry. Someone in my family has just died there.'

'Oh? You're related to the people who drowned at A. Beach? That's too bad. Two children and a woman all at once, they say.'

Masaru felt dizzy under the blazing sun. He did not say another word to the driver until the taxi reached A. Beach.

There was no particularly distinguished scenery along the way. At first the taxi climbed up one dusty mountain and down the next, and the sea was rarely in sight. When they passed another car along a narrow stretch of road, branches slapped at the half-open window like startled birds, and dropped dirt and sand rudely on Masaru's carefully pressed trousers.

Masaru could not decide how to face his wife. He was not sure that there was such a thing as a 'natural approach' when none of the emotions he had ready seemed to fit. Perhaps the unnatural was in fact natural.

The taxi pulled through the darkened old gate of the Eirakusō. As it came up the driveway, the manager ran out with

a clattering of wooden sandals. Masaru automatically reached for his wallet.

‘I’m Ikuta.’

‘A terrible thing,’ said the manager, bowing deeply. After paying the driver, Masaru thanked the manager and gave him a thousand-yen bill.

Tomoko and Katsuo were in a room adjoining the room where Yasue’s coffin lay. The body was packed in dry ice ordered from Itō, and would be cremated now that Masaru had arrived.

Masaru stepped ahead of the manager and opened the door. Tomoko, who had lain down for a nap, jumped up at the sound. She had not been asleep.

Her hair was tangled and she had on a wrinkled cotton kimono. Like a convicted criminal, she pulled the kimono together and knelt meekly before him. Her motions were astonishingly quick, as though she had planned them in advance. She stole a glance at her husband and collapsed in tears.

He did not want the manager to see him lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. That would be worse than having the most intimate bedroom secrets spied on. Masaru took off his coat and looked for a place to hang it.

Tomoko noticed. Taking a blue hanger from the lintel, she hung up the sweaty coat for him. Masaru sat down beside Katsuo, who had been awakened by his mother’s weeping and lay looking up at them. The child, on his knee, was as unresisting as a doll. How can children be so small? he wondered. It was almost as if he were holding a toy.

Tomoko knelt weeping in a corner of the room.

‘It was all my fault,’ she said. Those were the words Masaru most wanted to hear.

Behind them, the manager too was in tears. ‘I know it’s no business of mine, sir, but please don’t blame Mrs Ikuta. It happened while she was taking a nap, and through no fault of hers.’