

METAMORPHOSES

YOSHIRO TAKAYASU

*Translated from the Japanese by Toshiya Kamei*

THE NATURE EXPLORATION CLUB

Ryuji had lived in Tokyo all his life. After shuffling between high school and cram school, he got accepted into a well-known college in Tokyo to study law and began spending his time in great leisure. His classes didn't interest him as much as he had expected, and karaoke bars and video arcades soon lost their luster for him. Then one day someone handed him a flyer inviting students to join the Nature Exploration Club. It read, "Large cities are filled with shoddy, man-made stuff. Now is the time to rediscover nature's beauty."

"What is nature?" he wondered to himself, tilting his head. "Maybe mountain streams and jungles you see in movies and on TV? Or natural disasters like typhoons and earthquakes? What do the club members think of nature?" Out of curiosity, Ryuji visited the clubroom.

Once inside, he was greeted by Ota, the deputy director of the club. "Hey, where are you from?" he asked in a friendly manner.

"I'm from Tokyo, born and bred."

"I see, that makes sense. That's why you're longing for nature. You're very welcome to join us. Let me explain what we do." Ota took out a grimy photo album and began to turn the pages. "This is when we went camping in Tateshina last year. This is when we visited Mt. Hakkoda. Two years ago, we camped at Mt. Tsukuba. We look like we're having fun, don't we?" he boasted.

"What do you do when you go camping?" asked Ryuji.

"That really depends. Some spend their time listening to wild birds chirp while taking photos. Others gather wild herbs and eat them. Some others spend the whole day trekking. So it's really up to you."

"Sounds great," Ryuji nodded nonchalantly, thinking that he might find something he had never experienced in Tokyo if he went camping with them.

"That's right. Our ancestors lived in nature while receiving its blessings. Genetically speaking, we humans are supposed to coexist with nature. We're not meant to live in urban areas. Out of sheer laziness, humans have built civilizations that sully the atmosphere with car fumes, contaminate rivers with heavy metal, and kill off numerous wild animals. On the other hand, nature in the mountains is filled with negative ions and fresh air. If we don't regain the splendor of nature, we'll all die out eventu-

ally,” Ota uttered, intoxicated by his own words.

Ryuji agreed with Ota, and felt embarrassed at having thought Tokyo was the best place to live. “I imagine natural water tastes delicious. Our tap water here smells like a swimming pool.” He imagined natural water flowing in a valley river, which was sold as bottled water in grocery stores and convenience stores.

“You’re right about that,” Ota said, sounding proud.

That day Ryuji asked his classmate Tatsuo if he was also interested in joining the Nature Exploration Club, telling him what Ota had told him. Tatsuo was from a mountain recess in Iwate, a snowy northern prefecture.

“That’s silly. They have no idea what nature is all about,” he said casually after Ryuji finished his talk. “My grandpa died from an appendix infection because there was no hospital nearby. We have gas and water, but we heat bath water with burning wood in order to get rid of dead leaves. And you can’t drink natural water unless you go to a valley river. Because of heavy snowstorms you’re cooped up inside during the whole winter. As for the summer, homes are invaded by mosquitoes and poisonous moths. It’s not rare that you find a snake in your chest of drawers.”

“Is it really like that?” Ryuji asked as a shiver ran down his spine.

“Yeah, essentially so. But it seems like a paradise surrounded by seasonal colors to outsiders.”

“But Mr. Ota said you can’t find pleasure in large cities,” Ryuji said.

“Oh really? I’d say they were right if they had never gone to karaoke bars or diners, not even once,” Tatsuo said. “Nature is like a stubborn, inflexible father, and a city is like an overprotective mother,” he added before getting up and walking away.

“I see. You just need to learn only good things from both of them,” Ryuji thought to himself, making up his mind to join the Nature Exploration Club.