

Is Sakiko guilty of arson?

The building, which resembled a slightly outdated company dormitory, was deserted and looked rather incongruous. Its tin roof was so green that one might mistake the color for verdigris. For some reason, it was that building which Sakiko now pictured as being wreathed in flames (1).

Suddenly she heard loud popping noises, like the sound of bamboo canes bursting open. She instantly leaped out of bed, thinking it was a mountain fire (1-2).

Since there was no breeze, the pillar of fire rose straight toward the sky. Just as it was turning into a sheet of flame, it suddenly shattered into countless fine sparks that continued to shoot upward. The entire spectacle seemed to be making a roaring sound, yet at the same time to be a silent drama of color and shapes. Sakiko gazed at the dire scene before her eyes with a sense of urgency, but that sense was at odds with her feeling of being rooted to the spot. The brilliant hue of the pillar of fire gradually suffused the entire sky, creating a crimson panorama (2).

If the fire wasn't next door, then where was it? On the other side of Sakiko's neighbor's house was an elementary school. But why should there be a fire late at night at a deserted elementary school? After assuring herself that there was no wind and also that plenty of fire engines had assembled, Sakiko snuggled down in her bed again, immediately forgot about the fire and everything else, and fell into a sound sleep (3).

She'd felt almost no interest in the fire, except as a spectacle of crimson flames raging in the darkness. But because of her conversation last night with that man who was apparently a police investigator, she had the strange feeling that the fire had insinuated its way into her consciousness (11).

She seemed to hear, welling up from some dark hollow deep within her, that moaning she'd heard in her dream. She stood in a daze, savoring the vague sensation that it was the arsonist who was moaning (16).

In contrast, her head reeled feverishly as the imaginary arsonist began stirring within her. Sakiko was starting to feel unbalanced, as if she had lost her moorings (17).

"The first incident was the night of January 29, at ten o'clock."

"That night I was at home, but the landlord was away, and no one knew that I was there" (22).

"The second incident was during the day, wasn't it. By chance, was it Saturday?"

"That's right. It was Saturday, February 3, at eleven in the morning."

"This is bad."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't work on Saturdays. If I'd gone to work, I wouldn't have had time to go to the elementary school. But it was a holiday, so I was at home. No one can vouch that I didn't set foot outside. The landlord and his wife were away for two weeks" (22).

I did it. Sakiko tried saying these words to herself. She felt something like red-hot iron pass through her throat and descend to the center of her body. [...] I did it. Sakiko tried saying the words again to herself. There was nothing to prove that she hadn't done it. There was a bicycle. There were empty whiskey bottles. And there was oil for an oil heater. (24).

Sakiko reflected with dismay on what she'd done the night before. Five or six empty pocket flasks of whiskey that the landlord was always drinking and throwing out had been lying on the garbage heap in the backyard. Late last night she'd taken one of those and filled it with the oil used in the oil heater. Ordinarily, if she didn't wear a coat she'd catch cold, but last night she was oblivious to the chill in the outdoor air. As she held the bottle filled with oil in her hand, she felt as if she were clenching burning coals. The throbbing of an ominous drum seemed to be coming from somewhere deep inside her and reverberating infinitely through space. She corked the bottle and placed it in the dark garden. When she took two or three steps backward she could no longer see it. But she was acutely aware of something ghastly, lurking deep in the darkness, like a newborn infant that had just begun to breathe.

She took two or three steps and looked back. "Now there's evidence," she whispered (28).

As Sakiko was on her way to work, she saw the investigator walking toward her. She walked straight toward him, smiling thinly. Why bother to use a lie detector? If she were subjected to a lie detector test, she'd surely respond the same way as the criminal, she thought (29).

"Keeping tabs'? Things already seem to be out of your control," said Sakiko, nodding toward the house next door. But the voice was silent. Only a noise that resembled stifled coughing was audible.

"Why is that?" the man asked, coming to an abrupt halt.

Sakiko resisted the urge to reply to that question. She felt like saying, "Because not only I but the old woman next door has begun to go mad" (29).

Is the old woman guilty of arson?

"Can you imagine how I felt? There was a fire roaring right in front of my house! Oh, of course, my yard is big. And there wasn't a breeze, either. But the problem is the mountains. If the fire were to spread to the mountains, my house, naturally, and yours too, and everything around here would be burned to ashes, don't you see?" The old woman's voice rose melodramatically on the final syllable (4).

The old woman mimed, with exaggerated gestures, how she had knocked on each and every gate. Her shrill voice contrasted oddly with the elegant effect created by her lovely white hair and impeccable kimono (5).

But whenever Sakiko heard that shrill, nervous voice emitting its steady stream of babble, she sensed turbulent emotions, which the old woman could scarcely contain, seething beneath her refined exterior. Sometimes at night, from her second-floor room, Sakiko would gaze next door, where lights were still on. The lights were on, but she never heard human voices (11).

"Well, if this isn't something. This makes one more day. Fifty-four days. Splendid weather, indeed! It's imperial weather, as they say. Miss Namioka, do you know that expression-- 'imperial weather'? It means a clear blue sky without a single cloud, just like today's. Day after day, we're blessed with imperial weather, lucky us! Imagine how dry the mountains must be getting! Can't you almost hear the sound of flames crackling? Just look at that" (19)!

"You're going to keep another [bird], even though you already have so many?" Sakiko was forced to exert her feeble voice.

"There aren't any others. They all died."

When the old woman said, "They all died," her voice was strangely cheerful (20).

“Apparently he came by bicycle. Afterward we learned that just before the fire someone saw a bicycle parked nearby, both the first time and the second time” (22).

“The first incident was the night of January 29, at ten o’clock.”

“Do you know Public School Number I in the next town?”

“Yes, because an acquaintance of mine lives near there. It’s the wooden building near the river, isn’t it?”

“And of course you know R Elementary School on the outskirts of town, don’t you” (23)?

“If the arsonist is the same guy as before, he always sets two fires at the same school” (10).

The second incident was during the day, wasn’t it (22).

She walked alongside her next-door neighbor’s hedge. The blue sky was growing brighter by the moment; it was definitely developing into a fine day. Whether the old woman was still snug in her bed or had already gone out somewhere, her house was shrouded in silence and darkness. Sakiko heard an intermittent muffled sound, as if a cough was being stifled, coming from the veranda on the south side of that house. It sounded like the old woman’s cough. Suddenly there was a voice.

“I set the fires! I set the fires!”

It was that mynah bird talking. The voice resembled the old woman’s, but it was slightly different from the shrill voice in which she chatted with people. It was a mumbling voice, as when she was talking to herself (29).

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Is the landlord guilty of arson?

“I think the landlord has an old bicycle in the shed” (17).

She remembered that there was a bicycle in the shed at her landlord’s home. She remembered that in the garbage pile in the backyard were empty pocket flasks of the whiskey that her landlord was always drinking (22).

“That night I was at home, but the landlord was away, and no one knew that I was there” (22).

“I don’t work on Saturdays. If I’d gone to work, I wouldn’t have had time to go to the elementary school. But it was a holiday, so I was at home. No one can vouch that I didn’t set foot outside. The landlord and his wife were away for two weeks” (22).

Five or six empty pocket flasks of whiskey that the landlord was always drinking and throwing out had been lying on the garbage heap in the backyard (28).

Sakiko and Children

Sakiko disliked the din that came from the elementary school, the high-pitched shrieks of the young children scattering in all directions.

The charred gymnasium came into view. Against the background of the blue sky it looked all the blacker, and its insides were gutted. It still had a sinister air about it, probably because Sakiko imagined it wreathed in fierce flames. The racket was coming from the classroom building. The din, which sounded full of irritation and also made the hearer feel irritated, drifted from the entire building. Just then, the spectacle of children trapped in the burning gymnasium, emitting piercing screams, flashed across Sakiko's mind (12).

"Interested?" she rejoined. She pictured the young children burning, packed together in the blazing gymnasium (13).

"Are there fires at elementary schools during the daytime?" Sakiko asked. Again she envisioned countless young children shrieking, roasting to a crisp in that inferno with no exit (14).

Sakiko thought of those youngsters, the elementary school pupils, especially those in the lower grades, with their soft, plump bodies, who could do nothing for themselves but squeal. The arsonist had wanted to burn those little children to death. The little children packed into the classrooms would be roasted alive. Not in an instant, but slowly, slowly, enveloped in flames, enveloped in smoke, shrieking like locusts, they would burn on and on (23).

The imaginary arson, with its vivid flames and smoke and children's screams, resumed its part-painful, part-pleasurable burning inside her (27).

Newspaper Articles

In the foggy city of London, you sometimes see a certain type of woman. She is no longer young, nor is she old; it's hard to judge her age. Usually she is walking by herself. She leans slightly forward as she trots along, clicking her heels, through that turbid city where the sun never shines because of the fog. She wanders around through the huge metropolis as if she has nothing to do. I could always spot such women, no matter where they were. Because they all bore the same mark. They exuded a peculiar blend of decay and vigor. It wasn't that they shared a certain occupation. It wasn't that they shared a certain social status. It wasn't that they shared a certain physical resemblance. Even when they were laughing, that mark remained visible through their laughter. Even when they were eating, that brand stood out on their hunched backs like a birthmark. I noticed such women in every social class. It wasn't that they constituted a separate class. There is only one phrase to describe such a woman. In the sprawling city of London she is called a "lonely woman" (18).

"What annoys me is why no one seems to think, 'my life isn't worth a fig.' It's because they don't feel that way that they rush to be inoculated with that resolute look on their faces. I can't stand such mobs."

"Then why do you go on living?" he asked.

"Because I have no reason to die" (25-26).