The two met at a Go parlor in Ginza. For a friendship deeper than a shared love of Go to begin in such a place was unusual, but Shōkichi Ubukata approached Taihei Ochiai with a kind of blunt, brazen frankness that ignored all sense of decorum. Shōkichi was a distinguished gentleman in his fifties. A gold watch chain peeked out from the chest pocket of his expensive suit, and his neatly groomed hair was slicked straight back, streaked with gray. His face, shaped in balanced lines that reflected intelligence and resolve, still retained a youthful elegance, and his well-composed figure carried a quiet, unadorned dignity.

It was strange enough that Shōkichi approached Taihei Ochiai, a down-on-his-luck hack writer, but the way he did it, with such blunt and overbearing frankness, could almost be called abnormal. After their first game together, he handed over his business card and introduced himself. From then on, he would look for Taihei at the entrance since Taihei came almost every day, and plop himself down right beside him. Shōkichi, who was always busy, appeared only rarely. Yet no matter how many days had passed, he would drop into the parlor and sit heavily beside Taihei as if simply continuing from where they had left off the day before. Since there was no shortage of opponents to play Go with, Taihei found this special friendship somewhat suspicious at first. Yet Shōkichi never made friends with anyone else there, not even the kind who exchanged greetings

with a glance. Thinking it must be a kind of instinct peculiar to an eccentric man, Taihei accepted it without question. Any later notion that Shōkichi was a man facing some deep loneliness and gazing into a special kind of human suffering was probably an idea he added only afterward.

One day, the two happened to meet on the road in an industrial district on the outskirts of town. Taihei's apartment was in the area, but Shōkichi, a machinery broker (though he himself was also a small factory owner), was here as a salesman. They played Go at a parlor on the outskirts and began drinking once night fell. Shōkichi muttered things like how the trains would stop running soon and that he wouldn’t be able to get home, but he seemed perfectly calm, as if anticipating that he wouldn't be able to return.

When Shōkichi awoke the next morning in Taihei's humble home, he appeared to take in every detail of the barren room with the youthful vigor of his student days, squinting as if committing each feature to memory. He was filled with a sense of nostalgia. “Today's your turn to come hang out at my place,” Shōkichi urged Taihei, leading the way to his home. Yet the origin of their connection is nothing more than what has been described before. “I'd been wanting to invite you over sometime,” Shōkichi remarked that day too. Even if somehow their chance encounter on the street

hadn't come to pass, they were likely destined to follow the same path sooner or later.

A few days later, he received a phone call from Shōkichi's wife, Kimiko. There was going to be a gathering, and she invited him to come play. There he became acquainted with the professional storyteller Seiseiken, Captain Hanamura, engineer Maze, actor Sayotarō, factory owner Tominaga, and the owner of restaurant Hisago. Saburō Funaki, a musician, was the only one who did not stand out.

From then on, Kimiko would call every two or three days. For the most part, the same people would show up: those who played mahjong, those who played Go, those who played traditional *Hanafuda* cards, those who played rock-paper-scissors, and those who drank alcohol. Shōkichi's country accent was the loudest among the noises in the room. If anyone was even slightly paying attention, they would notice he really was the only one who did not belong at the gathering, standing out from everyone else in attendance. Of everyone there, Kimiko was the center of attention. She was a former *geisha*; it was only later that he learned around half of those present had known her from that time.