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The Mountains Are Living
Mikiko Tsunoda

The first sunrise of the year
With countless stars twinkling and the moon also shining in the clear sky above the tops of the cedars, I do not need to use my torch to light the way ahead. It is so bright. Climbing higher, we find yesterday’s snow piled a foot deep and frozen hard among the leafless trees. With the branches casting their clear-cut shadows on the snowy trail, I feel as if I am stumbling over the branches themselves. The moonlight is so bright. The eastern sky is now faintly grey. Half an hour and the sun rises. We must hurry up.

‘Here we are. We’ve made it!’

We are now at the summit of Mt Yakuradake, 2,800 feet high, which has taken two-and-a-half hours to walk up.

Nobody else is here on the wide, flat top, which is covered with snow. In the twilight sky we can clearly see the Hakone mountains in the foreground and Mt Fuji with a gently sloping foot to the south-west. Edwin, my fellow climber, points his finger.

‘Look! The sun is rising over there!’

The red shining sun rises as if protruding from the orange-coloured horizon of Sagami Bay on our left. In a twinkling the snow-covered top of Mt Fuji becomes pink-coloured. It is a breathtaking scene. It is more spectacular than I had expected.

How happy we are to view the first sunrise of the year from the top of the mountain!

With fingers stiff with cold I take some pictures. We set up a tent and rest inside. I take out a portable gas-cylinder.
The Mountains are Living

It is almost too cold for the gas to burn strongly. It takes a long time to boil water. At last we pour the hot water into a cup of dried noodles for breakfast.

Every time I climbed this mountain in the past, I wanted to view the first sunrise of the year from its summit and asked some friends of mine to join me, but without success. At last Edwin, a mountain-loving student from abroad, said yes.

I am grateful to him for getting up as early as 2 a.m. on the morning of the first day of the year and accompanying his mountaineering-crazy host mother.

Mt Megamiyama with the remaining snow

It is now May, but in the Tohoku provinces, the northern district of Japan, it is still early spring. Mt Megamiyama stands hazy in the intermittent rain falling. It is fresh with the new-born leaves of beech trees. I notice the barks of trees which are smooth and characteristically speckled.

This is a mountain among the Ou Mountain Range, located in the county border between Akita-ken and Iwate-ken. About 3,300 feet high, it has a primeval pure beech forest. As we, two friends and I, climb higher, I find the trail covered with the remaining snow and the new-born leaves sparse on the tree-tops. It makes me realize we are now fairly high up. There is complete silence except that we sometimes hear birds chirping. My friends also walk up in silence. Although we do not say a word to each other, we know we are very happy now that we are cradled in the mountain air.

I stumble on countless baby beech trees at my feet. I kneel down and touch one of them. Two round leaves, which have sprung from a cupule, face each other. These new-born trees have already taken root in the humus soil, which is composed of fallen leaves. I have never seen baby beech trees, although I have been climbing mountains for many years.

Around us we find trees as young as two or three years. Above us big trees as old as two hundred years spread their branches majestically like patron-gods of the forest. The primeval forest of beech