Visiting a Shrine on New Year’s Day

I make it a rule to pay a visit to the shinto shrine near my house on New Year’s Day. I have sometimes visited famous shrines on that day, but, as I have visited my local shrine on every important occasion, such as the traditional Japanese celebration of a newborn baby and that of a child’s third, fifth and seventh birthdays, it has become so familiar to me that I always go there on New Year’s Day.

We Japanese usually have noodles for dinner on New Year’s Eve, because noodles are thought to be the symbol of long life. At midnight all the temples ring their bells, bidding farewell to the old year. When we heard the sound of the temple bells after having noodles, my husband said, ‘Let’s go, shall we?’

We then got ready to go to the shrine. Of course, we put on warm clothes to protect ourselves against the chilly night air.

It is a twelve or thirteen minutes’ walk to the shrine. While walking quietly in the shadows, I wondered how many people would be in the queue in front of the oratory this year. As it was midnight, the familiar road looked quite new to me. On my way some groups of two or three people joined us in heading for the same place. The shrine is located at a section of a residential district. Its fine oratory stands on a plot of ground surrounded by a stone wall. The ground occupies approximately 2,300 square metres.

As I approached the shrine, I found a queue of people ahead of me. I stood at the end of the queue. I anticipated that it would take thirty or forty minutes to get to the oratory.
At the Beginning of a Year

After paying homage we were given sacred saké, which was served in a small paper cup. I felt the cold saké sinking into my body. I joined the people warming themselves around an open-air fire which was burning charms of the old year. The flames leapt high producing sparks and crackling sounds. I felt a glow inside and outside, and then made my way home, wishing that this might be a good year for me.

New Year’s Gift

On the second day of the new year, I paid a visit, as is usual every year, to my husband’s parents' home in Hachioji, about a hundred kilometres west of central Tokyo.

As our car began to cross the Tama River, which borders Tokyo, my husband cried out, ‘Oh, look! Mt Fuji!’

The magnificent view was of the mountain gleaming white clearly visible against the blue sky. I too enjoyed the surprise of seeing it even though it was more than a hundred kilometres away. It is really worthy of being called 'the highest and greatest in Japan'. During the first three days of the new year, the Tokyo air is far clearer than during the rest of the year, which might be the reason why it is easier to see Mt Fuji. Anyway, it was a rare chance to enjoy its startlingly beautiful view. Though the view was sometimes interrupted by tall buildings, my eyes constantly followed the mountain. I never grew tired of it. As I watched it, I felt my mind purified by it.

Since the road was not busy, we reached our destination earlier than we had expected. Just as I was addressing my mother-in-law, the four members of my son’s family arrived. Akiko, a fourth-year student at primary school, said happily that she had seen Mt Fuji on the way. My son confessed that he was so absorbed in the view of the mountain that he missed his turning. We kept our New Year compliments short and spent most of the time talking about Mt Fuji.

My eighty-seven-year-old mother-in-law looked very happy when she gave her New Year's gift to her grandchildren, thanking them for coming all the way. She said:

‘You can see Mt Fuji very well today from the veranda. Go upstairs and enjoy the view.’