

Botchan – Chapter 1

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

I was born with a reckless nature, and it's landed me in endless trouble for as long as I can remember. I once jumped from the second floor of my elementary school and was laid up for a week with a dislocated hip. Some might ask what inspired such an ill-advised stunt. There was no deep reason for it. I was leaning out from the second floor of our newly-constructed school building when a classmate taunted me jokingly, "You act like a big shot, but we all know you're too scared to jump from up there. Chicken!" My father looked at me quizzically as I arrived home on the janitor's back. When he asked, "What kind of fool jumps from the second floor and dislocates his hip?" I replied, "Next time I'll land it right and my hips will be just fine."

One of my relatives gave me a western-made pocket knife, and I was holding the shiny blade out in the sun to show my friends. One of them said, "It's definitely shiny, but it doesn't look like it could cut much." I shot back with, "I'll bet there's nothing this blade can't cut." "Then let's see you cut your finger," came the reply. I told him it could easily cut my finger, and I proceeded to slice into the back of my right thumb at an angle. Fortunately the knife was small and the bone in my thumb was hard, so the thumb is still attached. But there's a scar there that I'll carry for life.

At the edge of our yard, about twenty paces to the east, was a modest vegetable garden on a slope that rose toward the south. In the middle of this garden stood a single chestnut tree. This tree was more precious to me than life itself. In the proper season, I would slip out the back door after rising in the morning and go collect fallen chestnuts to eat during the school day. The west side of the garden was adjacent to a pawn shop called Yamashiroya, and the pawnbroker had a son named Kantarō, who was thirteen or fourteen. Kantarō was, of course, a coward. And being a coward, he would sneak over the fence to steal my chestnuts. One evening I finally caught him by hiding in the shadows of the gate. When I cut off his escape, he panicked and threw himself at me with full force. Kantarō was several years older than me, and though he was a coward, he was a strong one. As he pushed his big flat head against my chest with all his might, it slipped sideways and wound up lodged in the open sleeve of my kimono. I swung my arm wildly in an effort to work it free, but the only effect was to yank Kantarō's head back and forth inside my sleeve. When he finally couldn't take this anymore he bit my arm in desperation. His bite hurt tremendously, so I forced him backward against the fence, tripped him, and shoved him downward. There was about a six-foot terraced drop from that edge of the garden down to the Yamashiroya property. Kantarō fell head first, taking half of the fence with him, and landed with a thud in his own territory. As he fell, my sleeve detached and my arm at last was free. That evening, Mother went to Yamashiroya to apologize and was able to retrieve my lost sleeve.

There were numerous other acts of mischief. With Kanekō from the carpenter's house and Kaku from the fish merchant's house, I destroyed Mosaku's carrot patch. A layer of straw had been spread over the seed bed, and the three of us practiced sumo wrestling there for half the day, trampling the area good. I also got in big trouble for filling in the well on Furukawa's rice paddy. A thick span of Mōsō bamboo had been hollowed out and sunk deep into the earth. Water bubbled out from its center and flowed to the rice plants. At the time I had no idea how this worked or what it was for, so I proceeded to stuff the pipe with bits of

stone and sticks until I was satisfied that the water had stopped bubbling. Later, when I was at home eating, Furukawa appeared with a beet-red face and chewed me out for what I'd done. I believe my parents resolved this one by paying compensation.

Father was not at all fond of me. And Mother always favored my older brother. This older brother of mine had an eerie, pale white complexion. He enjoyed putting on feminine airs, and he looked very much like those theater actors who whiten their faces to play female roles on stage. Every time my father looked at me he would tell me how I'd never amount to anything. My mother worried that my hot-headedness would lead me into trouble. I guess it's no wonder I didn't amount to much. I became nothing more than the person I am today. I can understand why they were anxious about my future. It's a miracle I'm not behind bars somewhere.

Several days before my mother died of illness, I did a somersault in the kitchen and hurt my ribs on the corner of the stove. Mother was furious and wanted me out of her sight, so I was sent to stay with relatives. Then we received notice of her death. I had never thought she could pass away so soon. If I'd known her condition was so serious, I would have behaved myself better. As I returned home, harboring this regret, that older brother of mine told me my disrespect had hastened her passing. I couldn't bear this and slapped his face, for which I was soundly scolded.

After Mother died it was just my father, my older brother, and me. Father was never helpful in any way, and every time he saw me his habitual greeting was to tell me I was no good. What he really meant by that I still don't understand. I had an odd father. My older brother was intent on becoming a businessman and was always studying English. He was effeminate by nature and therefore untrustworthy, so we did not get along well. Once every ten days or so we quarreled. On one such occasion we were playing shōgi. He employed a cowardly tactic. Then he looked on at my distress with a smug and self-satisfied air. This made me so angry that I hit him across the forehead with the shōgi tile I was holding in my hand. The tile cut him, and his forehead bled a little. Then he went and told Father, and Father vowed he was going to disown me.

At the time I figured there was nothing I could do and resigned myself to being disowned, but Kiyō, an old maidservant who had been with us for over ten years, cried to Father and begged him to forgive me. With Kiyō's intercession, Father's anger finally subsided. This incident didn't make me fear Father, but I did feel some sympathy for Kiyō. I had heard that this maidservant was of noble birth, but her family had been ruined when the government fell, and she had ended up a domestic servant. That's why she's on now in years. I don't know why, but this old woman showed extreme affection for me. It's a strange thing. I lost my mother's love three days before her death; I was a constant burden to my father; I was ostracized by the townsfolk as an ill-mannered roughneck. But Kiyō took a liking to me for some reason. I thought I was thoroughly unlovable, and it no longer bothered me in the least that others treated me as worthless, so I even felt some distrust when this Kiyō doted on me. Sometimes in the kitchen, when no one else was around, Kiyō would complement my honest and upright nature. But I didn't really understand what she was trying to say. I figured if what she said were really true, then others should see it too and treat me better. My usual response was to tell her little I cared for flattery. She would tell me that this was due to my honest character, and she would gaze at me with contentment. She seemed to value me as though I were her own creation. I found this eerily disquieting.

Kiyo showed me even more affection after Mother was gone. In my childish heart, I couldn't understand this, and I sometimes doubted the sincerity of her affection. I thought her pathetic. Even so, she continued to show me kindness. Sometimes she would buy me sweets or crackers with her own pocket money. She secretly laid up a store of buckwheat flour, and on cold nights I would wake find warm broth that she had brought to my bedside. Sometimes she also bought me hot udon noodles. And her gifts weren't limited to food. She bought me socks, and pencils and notebooks too. Some time later, she even lent me three yen. I never asked her for money, but she brought it to my room and said how I must find it hard to not have any spending money. Of course I told her I didn't need it, but she insisted, so I took it. Truth be told, this made me very happy. I put that three yen into a coin purse, which I put in my pocket. Then I proceeded to go out to the bathroom and somehow dropped the purse into the pit toilet. What was done was done, so I came sheepishly back from the bathroom and explained to Kiyo what had happened. Kiyo immediately found a bamboo pole and told me she would retrieve it for me. After a while I heard water running by the well and went out to see Kiyo rinsing off the purse, which was hanging by its strings from an end of the bamboo pole. After she finished, I opened the purse and unfolded the bills. They had turned brown, and their markings were partly faded. Kiyo dried them over charcoal and returned them to me. When I smelled them and expressed dissatisfaction, she took them back and said she would exchange them. I don't know how she managed it, but in place of those bills I received three silver coins. I've forgotten how I used that money. I told her I'd soon pay her back but didn't. I wish now I could pay her back ten times over, but I can't.

Kiyo only gave me things when my father and older brother weren't present. There's nothing I dislike more than being singled out to receive favors on the sly. I didn't care much for my brother, but I didn't want to be receiving sweets, colored pencils, or other such things behind his back. I asked Kiyo why she gave things to me but not to him. She seemed unconcerned and said not to worry about my brother because Father bought him things. That would be entirely unfair. Father may have been hard-headed, but he was not the type of man who plays favorites. However, to Kiyo it probably seemed that way. She was determined to indulge me thoroughly. And while she may have been from a noble house, she was an old woman and had not received any formal education, so there was no reasoning with her. Her bias toward me went beyond gifts. She was convinced that I would succeed splendidly in the world. On the other hand, she thought that my brother, who studied so, would never have anything to show for it but a fair complexion. There was no point arguing with her. She believed firmly in the future success of those she liked and the future failure of those she didn't. At the time I held no particular conviction that I would amount to anything of importance. However, Kiyo kept telling me otherwise, and I even came to think that maybe I could make something of myself. Looking back now, such thoughts were ludicrous. At one point I asked Kiyo what she thought I might become. Though she didn't seem to have any specific idea, she was sure that I would ride in a rickshaw and build a house with an imposing entry hall.

Kiyo wanted to come with me when I someday became master of my own house. She asked me many times for a position in my household. I began to feel like I could own my own home, so I assured her she'd have a place. This woman had a vivid imagination. She asked whether I preferred Kōjimachi or Azabu. She talked of building a swing to enjoy in the garden. She planned out details, like having just one western-style room, which would be enough. At that time I had no real interest in owning any kind of house. I told Kiyo I had

no interest in either a western-style or Japanese-style or any style house. She praised my lack of desire as evidence of a pure heart. Kiyō found praise for anything I said.

We continued on in this manner for five or six years following Mother's death. Father scolded me. I quarreled with my older brother. Kiyō gave me sweets, along with occasional words of praise. I didn't lack for anything in particular, and I was content with things as they were. I figured things were about the same for me as for any other boy. Except that Kiyō would often mention how I was unfortunate, and how I was to be pitied, so I wondered if maybe there was something to this. Otherwise I had no particular concerns, apart from the lack of any pocket money from Father.

In the sixth year after Mother's death, Father died of a stroke during the New Year's holiday. In April of that same year, I completed my studies at a private middle school. In June, my older brother graduated from business school and joined a company that had an opening in their Kyūshū branch. I needed to stay behind in Tōkyō to complete my studies. He proposed to sell off the house and property before departing for his new post, and I told him to do as he pleased. I had no intention of becoming a burden to him. If I were under his care we'd only quarrel, and sooner or later he'd find reason to run me out. In exchange for his half-hearted guardianship I'd be forced to feign respect. I was resolved to earn my own living, even if I had to deliver milk bottles.

He proceeded to call in a second-hand dealer and unloaded our ancestral belongings at rock-bottom price. He sold the house and grounds through a broker to a wealthy buyer. This apparently netted a large sum, but I know nothing of the details. A month prior to the sale, I took up temporary lodging in Ogawamachi in Kanda to wait for things to settle. Kiyō was terribly disappointed to see the house she had lived in for so long pass to a stranger, but she had no stake in the property, so there was nothing she could do. She remarked dolefully how if only I were a little older I could inherit the house. If I could inherit the house when I was a little older, then there's no reason I couldn't inherit it now. The old woman had no understanding of such matters. It was my older brother's property, yet she believed that if I were just a little older it would somehow be mine.

My older brother and I thus separated, but what to do with Kiyō was not resolved. He was about to set out for a new job, and he was in no position to take a maidservant along. And Kiyō had no intention of following him all the way down to Kyūshū. At the same time, I myself was holed up in tight, cheap lodgings that I might need to vacate at a moment's notice. I asked Kiyō whether she would seek new employment, but she replied that she would impose on her nephew until I married and started a household. This nephew was a clerk at the courthouse and was managing a fair living. He had invited Kiyō several times to come live with him, but she had preferred to stay in the house she was accustomed to and continue her duties. However, her only option now was new employment in an unfamiliar household. Rather than establish herself in a new household at this point, she thought it better to finally take her nephew up on his offer. Even so, she encouraged me to buy a house and marry soon so she could come and care for me. She seemed more attached to me than to her own kin.

Two days before leaving for Kyūshū my older brother called at my lodgings and presented me with six hundred yen. He told me to use it as I pleased to fund my studies or start a trade, and that this marked the

end of his obligation to me. I thought I could probably get along without taking his money, but I was impressed with the uncharacteristic honesty of his behavior, so I accepted it and gave him my thanks. He then produced another fifty yen and asked me to give it to Kiyō, a task I was happy to accept. Two days later he departed from Shinbashi Station, and that was the last time I saw him.

I lay in my room and thought about how to use my six hundred yen. It wasn't really enough to start a serious business. And starting a business would take a lot of effort and likely end in failure. Even if it did succeed, I would never earn respect in the world without an education. I decided to forget about working capital and invest the full amount in further studies. If I split it into three parts, I could study for three years on two hundred yen per year. If I worked hard for three years I should be able to accomplish something. So now the question was which school I should attend. I had never cared for any kind of learning whatsoever. I especially dislike languages and literature. When it came to modern poetry, I could read twenty lines and not understand a single one of them. Since I disliked everything, I figured it didn't much matter which subject I chose. However, it just so happened that I passed a physics college and saw a notice calling for new student enrollment. Thinking it must be fate, I stopped immediately and filled out the application paperwork. Looking back, this was another blunder I can chalk up to my reckless nature.

I put forth a solid effort for three years. I wasn't a particularly sharp learner, so it was always easier to count my class rank from the bottom of the list. However, even to my own surprise, after three years I did graduate. Though I found it hard to believe I had actually earned a degree, I had earned one nonetheless, so I received my diploma without further ado.

Eight days after graduation the school principal summoned me. When we met formally he told me that a certain middle school in Shikoku was looking for a mathematics teacher. The salary was forty yen per month, and he asked if I would be interested. I'd studied for three years, but I'd never thought of becoming a teacher, not to mention heading off to teach in the country. Then again, I had no better idea, so I accepted his offer on the spot. This quick decision was, yet again, the curse of my reckless nature.

Having accepted the teaching post, I had no alternative now but to go. I'd lived quietly in my cramped quarters for these three years without a single complaint lodged against me. I had quarreled with no one. It was the easiest and most carefree period in my life. However, I would have to pack up and leave these lodgings. The only time I had ever set foot out of Tōkyō was on a class trip to nearby Kamakura. This would be nothing like Kamakura. I would have to travel a great distance. On the map, my destination was a point no larger than the tip of a needle. It was clearly not a place of any renown or import. I had no idea what kind of town it was or what kind of people lived there. I didn't need to know, and I wasn't concerned. All I had to do was go, though getting there would certainly take some effort.

I had occasionally checked in on Kiyō since we sold our house. Her nephew turned out to be a splendid fellow. If he was there when I called, he never failed to show me the kindest hospitality. Kiyō would put me in the place of honor and boast of my virtues to her nephew. Once she announced that after graduation I would buy a grand house in Kōjimachi and go to work in the nearby government offices. It embarrassed me when she came up with these things on her own and blurted them out to her nephew without warning. This was by no means an isolated incident. Worse yet were her stories of me wetting the bed as a child. I don't

know what Kiyo's nephew made of all this boasting and storytelling. Kiyo was an old-fashioned woman who modeled her relationship with me after the servants and masters of feudal times. Since she still regarded me as her master, it followed that her nephew should also show due deference. Her nephew humored her and played along to a fault.

All arrangements were finally made, and I was scheduled to depart in three days' time. When I stopped by to pay my respects to Kiyo, she was in bed with a cold in a small room on the north side of the house. She sat up when she saw me and immediately asked, "Botchan, when will you be setting up your household?" She seemed to imagine that money automatically bubbles up in one's pocket upon graduation. If I were a man of such means, then it would be all the more idiotic for her to still be calling me Botchan. I told her directly that I would not own a house for some time. When I explained that I was leaving for the country, she looked terribly disappointed and vacantly stroked her gray side locks. I felt bad for her, so I promised that I would return soon, certainly by next summer's vacation. She still seemed upset, so I asked what she would like me to bring her when I returned. She said she would like leaf-wrapped sweets from Echigo. I'd never heard of these, and Echigo was in the opposite direction. I told her I didn't think I could get those where I was going, so she asked which way I was headed. I said I was going west, and she asked whether I would be going as far as Hakone. Exasperated, I gave up explaining further.

Kiyo came over on the morning of my departure and insisted on helping me prepare. She had stopped on the way and bought me a toothbrush, toothpick, and washcloth, which she had packaged up in a jute travel bag. It was no use trying to tell her I didn't need such things. We rode to the station together and stepped up onto the platform. She looked at me intently after I was seated in the railcar and said with a small voice "Maybe this is farewell. Take good care." There were tears in her eyes. I didn't cry, but I almost did. After the train pulled away a bit, when I thought maybe she was gone, I leaned out the window and looked back. She was still standing there, and she looked so very small.