

Botchan – Chapter 4

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

There was always an instructor on night duty at the school, and each of us in turn was required to serve in this role. However, Tanuki and Red Shirt were exempted. When I asked how these two were able to avoid fulfilling an obvious duty, the answer was “executive privilege.” This struck me as scandalous. What could be more unjust than receiving the largest paycheck, working the fewest hours, and then dodging night duty? They concoct rules to their own advantage, then pass them off as due and proper. A couple of shameless rogues. I was greatly dissatisfied, but Yama Arashi advised me that one individual, however disgruntled, had no power to affect the system. Whether only one or only two, I countered, right should prevail. Yama Arashi then quoted the English saying “might is right” in furthering his argument. I had to ask the meaning of this, and he explained that it meant the mighty rule the weak. I was fully aware that the mighty rule the weak, and I didn’t need a lecture on the subject. But rule of the mighty and night duty at school were unrelated. Who ever agreed that Tanuki and Red Shirt were the mighty? However, putting argument aside, my turn had come. To tell the truth, I’m very particular and don’t sleep soundly if I’m not in my own bed. As a child, I seldom slept over with friends for this reason. If I wasn’t comfortable sleeping at a friend’s home, then I was less comfortable still in spending a night at the school. While I wasn’t looking forward to it, this duty was included in my forty-yen pay, so I resolved to give it my best.

After the instructors and students had left, it seemed a shame to remain at the school with nothing to do. The night duty room was in the west end of the dormitory, which was behind the classrooms. I entered the room, but it was receiving full sun from the west and was stiflingly hot. In this country the heat lingered well into autumn. I ordered up the usual student’s fare and finished dinner, which was astonishingly awful. Hard to believe they could subsist on this stuff and still stay so rambunctious. Even more extraordinary to think that they down it eagerly at half past four in the afternoon. I was done with dinner, but the sun was still up, and it was too early to retire. I wanted to go bathe at the onsen. I didn’t know if it was permitted to leave the school while on night duty, but I couldn’t bear to suffer here in idle confinement. On my first arrival at the school I had asked after the night duty instructor and learned from the janitor that he was out on an errand. This had struck me as odd at the time, but now that it was my turn here I saw things differently. Going out for a bit was the correct course of action. I informed the janitor that I was leaving, and he asked if I needed something. I told him no, I was just going out to bathe, and then promptly departed. I was sorry to have left my red towel at home, but I could borrow one at the onsen.

I took my time at the onsen, entering the hot bath a number of times. Finally, as the sun was beginning to set, I rode the train back to Komachi station. From the station to the school was a short walk. As I started at a leisurely pace, Tanuki approached from the opposite direction. He was probably heading for the onsen on the same train. He was walking at a brisk pace, but he noticed me as we passed, so I greeted him. He then assumed a serious air and asked if I wasn’t on night duty. He needn’t have asked. Two hours earlier he’d confirmed with me directly that today was my first turn at night duty and thanked me in advance. Apparently school principals speak in veiled nuances rather than direct statements. This annoyed me, so I said, “Yes, I’m on night duty. I’m on night duty, so I’m headed back to spend the night at the school,” and promptly took my leave. At Tatemachi crossing I ran into Yama Arashi. One couldn’t take two steps in this little town

without running into someone. “Aren’t you on night duty?” I replied that I was. “Then don’t you think it improper to be out here walking?” Not about to back down, I stated that, on the contrary, I thought it improper not to take a walk. He replied, uncharacteristically, that my indulgence would land me in hot water if Tanuki or Red Shirt were to see me. I informed him that I’d just met Tanuki, who’d complimented me for beating the heat with an evening walk. To avoid further debate, I quickly made my way back to the school.

Soon after the sun went down. I invited the janitor to my room and we talked for several hours. Tired of talking, I decided to get into bed, even if I couldn’t sleep yet. I changed into my pajamas, lifted the mosquito netting, pushed aside the red blanket, plopped down on my rear, and lay on my back. Plopping down into bed is a habit I’ve had since I was a child. When I was lodging in Ogawamachi, a law student from the floor below once came to complain. Law students are ninnies, but they love to bicker. He went on at great length with idiotic objections against my nighttime ritual. I countered that the party at fault was not my rear end. Our building was poorly constructed, and that’s why the noise bothered him. If he wanted to make a case against something, he could make his case against the building. He didn’t complain to me again. This room was not on the second floor, so I could plop down as hard as I liked, and the harder I plopped the better I slept. It was a nice feeling as I stretched my legs, until I felt something jump against them. It was surprisingly rough, not like fleas or such, so I reflexively shook my legs under the blanket. As I did so, the rough encounters suddenly multiplied in number. I felt five or six on my legs, two or three on my thighs, one go squish under my hips, and one land all the way up at my navel. Startled, I sprang out of bed and threw aside the blanket. Fifty or more grasshoppers flew out of the bed. Fear turned to anger as I identified the intruders and grasped the situation. I grabbed my pillow roll and swung it for all I was worth, but they were too small for this approach to yield any return. I sat back down and pounded around me at random with the pillow roll, just as one beats the dust out of an old tatami mat. The beating of the pillow sent them flying in panic. They bumped and clung to my shoulders, head, and even the tip of my nose. I wasn’t about to beat them off of my face with the pillow, so I grabbed them by hand and flung them away with all my might. To my chagrin, no matter how hard I flung them against the surrounding mosquito netting, it simply yielded and left them unharmed. The grasshoppers clung in place to the nets, very much alive. Finally, after thirty minutes, I’d managed to subdue them. I fetched a broom and swept up their remains. The janitor came in and asked if there was a problem. “Of course there’s a problem, you half-wit! Do you s’pose I keep grasshoppers in my bed as pets?” After my scolding he pleaded complete ignorance. I told him “I don’t know” was not acceptable and hurled the broom out into the corridor. He crept out timidly and walked away with the broom on his shoulder.

I called for three students to appear before me as delegates, and six came. It didn’t matter whether six or even ten. I sat down in my pajamas, rolled up my sleeves, and starting questioning.

“What’s the meaning of grasshoppers in my bed?”

“What’s a grasshopper?” asked the student in front of me, in a much too casual tone. It wasn’t just the principal at this school with aversion to direct and honest dialogue.

“If you don’t know what a grasshopper is then I’ll show you.” But unfortunately I’d swept up all the grasshopper remains and not a single specimen was left. I called the janitor back and told him to go get the

grasshoppers. He replied that he'd already dumped them in the rubbish heap and asked if he should pick them out. I told him yes, and he hurried off. After a while he came back with ten or so on a sheet of paper. "I'm sorry, but it's dark out and these were all I could find. I can go pick out more for you in the morning." This janitor too was an idiot. I picked one up and showed it to the students. "This is a grasshopper. How could you grow up not knowing what a grasshopper is?" A round-faced fellow on my left refuted me audaciously with, "That's a long-headed locust." I first berated him for speaking in the local dialect while addressing an instructor. Then I threw in a sarcastic remark on their local speech that went over their heads and landed flat.

"Long-headed locust or grasshopper, what were they doing in my bed? I don't recall asking anyone to put them there."

"No one put them there."

"If no one put them there, then how did they get there?"

"Long-headed locusts like warm places. Most likely they went in there on their own."

"Nonsense! Grasshoppers don't gather as guests in one's bed. What's the idea here? Fess up!"

"How can we fess up to something we didn't do?"

These were lowlifes, one and all. If a fellow can't own up to what he's done, then he shouldn't have done it in the first place. Unless I produced absolute proof, these guys were dug in to shamelessly feigning ignorance. I may have made some mischief in my own time, but never once did I hesitate to come clean when questioned. I was always forthcoming about what I had and hadn't done. Who makes mischief then lies to evade due punishment? Mischief and punishment are mutually entwined. Punishment cleanses the mischievous soul. Do they imagine a world where sordid minds rule the day? Where mischief runs unchecked? These are the types, no doubt, who borrow money after graduation and then repay their debts with "sorry." What are they doing in middle school? They show up here, tell lies, practice deception, lurk in the shadows, and orchestrate dastardly deeds. Then they graduate and proudly declare themselves "educated," when in fact they're nothing but ignorant louts.

The further I conversed with this depraved lot, the more I felt my stomach churn, so I told them, "If you can't fess up to what you've done then I'm through with you. I pity you all, calling yourselves middle schoolers yet still incapable of discerning decency from indecency." And with that I sent the six of them away. I may not be refined in my speech and appearance, but I believe myself far nobler in spirit than these folks. The six of them calmly took their leave. Outwardly they comported themselves with a dignity that I, their instructor, lacked. But in fact they were all the more malicious for maintaining their composure. I would never have had such gall.

When I got back into bed, I could hear the buzzing of mosquitos. They must have flown in during all the commotion. I couldn't go after them one at a time with the candlestick, so I unhooked the netting rings, folded the netting lengthwise, and shook it back and forth. One of the rings whipped round and banged

smartly against the back of my hand. The third time in bed I was able to relax, but I couldn't quite fall sleep. The clock showed ten thirty. I thought about what a fix I'd wandered into. If this was the plight of middle school teachers, then we surely formed a pathetic crowd. It's a wonder there are any of us left. Those who stay at it must be highly persevering. Either that or they're social misfits. It didn't seem something I was up to. As I thought these thoughts, I was struck with admiration for Kiyō. She's an old woman with no education or social standing, but in human terms she's remarkably noble. I'd never been particularly thankful when she'd gone out of her way to care for me so. But now, finding myself alone in a distant land, I began to appreciate her kindness. If she wanted sweets from Echigo, then I would gladly travel to Echigo, however far out of my way it might be, to bring some back to her. Kiyō used to praise me for humility and an upright nature, but these were really her traits rather than mine. I longed to see her.

As my mind was wandering back to thoughts of Kiyō, a great stomping sound erupted from the floor above. It must have been thirty or forty pairs of feet stomping in rhythm, and it seemed as though the floor would collapse on top of me. The stomping was followed by a great war cry that equaled it in force. I jumped out of bed thinking something had happened, then immediately realized this was payback from the students for our previous exchange. A transgression is never settled until the guilty party comes clean. They were certainly aware that they were in the wrong. Their proper response should be to sleep with their consciences and apologize in the morning. Even if they were too ashamed to apologize, the least they could do was to sleep quietly. So what was this commotion? One surely doesn't put up a school dormitory with the intent of raising pigs. Time to put a stop to this madness! I ran out of the night room in my pajamas and sprang up to the second floor taking three stairs at a time. Curiously, after the rioting that had just occurred above my head, it was now deathly still, with not a single voice or footstep to be heard. This was odd. The lamps had been extinguished, so I couldn't see clearly in the darkness, but I could judge from the atmosphere whether anyone was present. In the long east-west corridor there was not so much as a single mouse in hiding. Moonbeams provided a faint brightness at the far end of the corridor.

It all seemed strange. As a child, I'd often dreamt and then sat up talking nonsense in my sleep. I did this many times and was teased as a result. One night when I was sixteen or seventeen I dreamt I'd found a diamond, sat up abruptly in bed, and pleaded vigorously with my older brother to tell me where my diamond was. Much to my chagrin, this incident made me the laughingstock of the household for three whole days. Maybe that uproar was just a dream, but I was quite confident it really had happened. As I sat in the middle of the corridor pondering, I heard a, "one, two, three," followed by thirty or forty voices raised in unison. Then came a stomping of the floorboards as before. It had not been a dream! I yelled back at them with equal force, "Quiet! It's nighttime!" and took off running toward their end of the corridor. My path toward them lay in darkness. I was guided only by the moonlight at the far end. About four meters into my run, my shin hit a large, hard object in the middle of the corridor. I went hurtling forward in agony and landed with a thud on the floor. I cursed and rose to continue onward but was unable. My mind urged me forward, but my one leg would not cooperate. In frustration, I hobbled forward on the other leg. By the time I'd advanced, I was again greeted by a deep silence, with not a footstep or voice to be heard. It was hard to fathom how any human beings could stoop to such cowardice. Genuine pigs! At this point I resolved to drag them forth from their hiding places and demand an apology. I tried the door of a bedroom to check inside, but it wouldn't open. They had either locked it or piled furniture against it, but in any case I couldn't push it open.

I tried the opposing room on the north side of the corridor next, with the same result. As I stood there, stymied in my effort to open their doors and seize them, the same war cry and stomping arose again from the east end. I realized that east and west squads were coordinating to play me for the fool, and I didn't know how to respond. To speak honestly, I lack in wisdom to match my grit. I had no idea how to deal with this situation. I didn't know what to do, but I had no intention of going down to defeat. Giving up at this point would reflect on my dignity. I could never let it be said that the instructor from Tōkyō was a spineless pushover. If it became known that I'd been tyrannized by these driveling brats during night duty, hadn't been able to handle it, and had retreated downstairs to cry myself to sleep, then disgrace would be mine for life. I was descended from direct retainers of the shōgun, and they in turn were descended from men of noble birth. Unlike these peasants, we're born of superior stock. Only my lack of wisdom was regrettable. I wished I knew what to do. But being stumped doesn't mean defeat. I'll honestly say I didn't know what to do. In this world, if honesty doesn't prevail then what does? If I didn't prevail tonight, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow then the next day. If not the next day, then I'd send out for meals and remain here for as long as it might take.

Thus resolved, I planted myself in the middle of the corridor to wait for daybreak. Mosquitos buzzed around me, but what of it? I felt my shin where I'd bumped it earlier. It felt slimy, most likely blood. If it wanted to bleed then let it bleed. After a while, fatigue from the night's happenings overcame me and I dozed off. I woke to activity around me and quickly straightened myself with a curse. The door to my right was half open, and two students were standing in front of me. As I woke fully and regained my senses, I immediately grabbed at the legs in front of my nose and yanked with all my might. A student landed on his back with a great thud. Served him right! The second student was momentarily confused, and in that moment I pounced, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. He was dumbfounded and blinked back at me in bewilderment. I told them to come with me and marched them down to my room. Being a couple of cowards, they followed in tow without complaint. Night was long over.

I started grilling the two I'd brought to my room, but no matter how much you beat or berate pigs, they're still pigs. These fellows seemed determined to feign ignorance to the end and confessed to nothing. As the grilling continued, others came down one or two at a time and gathered in my room. All of them had tired eyes with swollen lids. What a shabby crew. They show up with sorry faces after one sleepless night and call themselves men? I told them we'd continue after they'd washed their faces, but not a one of them stirred.

I'd interrogated fifty or so students for almost an hour when Tanuki suddenly appeared. I learned later that the janitor had gone and notified him that there was a disturbance at the school. Only a spineless mouse would call for the principal over a such a trifling affair. That's no doubt why he's a only a middle school janitor.

The principal listened to my explanation, and he also took a statement from the students. "I'll deal with this matter in due course. Until then you're to attend classes as usual. Hurry now. Wash up and eat your breakfast or you'll be late. Move!" With that he dismissed the entire lot of boarding students. What leniency. I would have expelled them, one and all, right then and there. This easy-going approach is what emboldens these students to play the night duty instructor for a fool. Next he turned to me and said that I must be upset and exhausted, and that I needn't teach for the day. "I'm not in the least upset. Let every night be just like the

last. As long as I live and breathe, I'll not be deterred from my duties. I'm going to teach. If I'm ever incapable of teaching after just one sleepless night, then I'll refund the school my salary for time missed." I'm not sure what the principal thought of this, but he studied me intently for a moment and then cautioned that my face was terribly swollen. My face did, in fact, feel strangely heavy, and it itched all over. No doubt I'd been eaten alive by mosquitos. I rubbed my face over vigorously and informed him that my mouth worked fine in spite of my face, so there was no reason I couldn't teach. He smiled at me and praised my youthful energy. In truth, there may have been more ridicule in his tone than praise.