

Botchan – Chapter 5

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

“Would you like to come fishing?” Red Shirt asked me. Red Shirt speaks in an eerily soft voice; one can’t tell whether it’s a man’s or woman’s. If he’s a man, then he should speak with a man’s voice. Especially since he holds a university degree. In comparison to my voice as a mere physics school graduate, Red Shirt’s voice must certainly be an embarrassment to the community of scholars.

When I hesitated to give a direct answer, he had the impudence to ask if I’d ever fished before. I hadn’t actually done much, but as a child I once caught three crucian carp at the Koume fishing pond. At the Bishamon temple fair in Kagurazaka I even hooked a twenty five-centimeter carp. I’d thought I had it, but it escaped back into the water with a splash. When I confided to Red Shirt that remembering that carp still brought feelings of disappointment, he thrust his chin forward and let out a laugh. I could have done without his haughty air and superficial laughter. “Then you’ve never really experienced fishing. If you like, I’ll show you how it’s done.” He made this offer with a great deal of self-satisfaction. Who would want to be taught anything by this guy? At any rate, those who fish and hunt are a cold and heartless lot. That’s why they rejoice so in the destruction of living beings. Whether fish or bird, all creatures prefer life over death. Fishing and hunting are fine for those whose livelihood depends on them, but the fellow who lacks for nothing yet can’t sleep at night till he’s killed something is extravagant in the extreme. These were my thoughts, but I was reluctant to debate a scholar, so I kept quiet.

My silence was mistaken for consent, and it was settled that Red Shirt would teach me to fish. He was going out that very day with Yoshikawa, and rather than just the two of them, it would be more fun with three. Yoshikawa was that art teacher, whom I’d nicknamed Nodaiko. With whatever intention, this Noda visited Red Shirt morning and night and followed him everywhere. Their relationship seemed much more that of lord and vassal than academic colleagues. It was no surprise that Noda would also accompany Red Shirt fishing, but it was a mystery why the two of them would invite an unsociable fellow like me to disrupt their comfortable outing. Most likely they planned to show off their fishing skills and lord it over the hapless newcomer. They were fooling themselves if they thought they could impress me. I wouldn’t bat an eyebrow if they hauled up a bluefin tuna. Any human being could toss a line into the water and wait for something to bite. If I didn’t go with them though, Red Shirt would never accept that I simply didn’t want to fish, but would conclude it was because I didn’t know how. With this in mind, I decided I’d best go along.

I finished at the school and stopped by home to prepare my things. I met up with Red Shirt and Noda at the station, and we departed for the shore. Our boat was of a long and narrow shape that one doesn’t see around Tōkyō, and it was piloted by a lone boatman. I glanced around the inside of the boat and didn’t see a single fishing pole. I asked Noda how they intended to fish without poles. He rubbed his chin, assuming the air of the expert, and informed me that one uses only a line, and not a pole, for open-water fishing. I’d rather have remained ignorant than receive such a smug answer from Noda.

The boatman rowed us out with a slow and deliberate motion, so I was duly impressed when I looked back and saw the shoreline already receding into the distance. The spire on the five-storied Kōhakuji pagoda looked like a sharp needle protruding through the roof of the forest. In the other direction was an island

called Aoshima, which they told me was uninhabited. On closer inspection, there was nothing to it but rocks and pine trees. No wonder no one lived there. Red Shirt gazed around and effused about the wonderful scenery. Noda affirmed that it was indeed a truly magnificent view. I don't know that the view was truly magnificent, but it was certainly a pleasant setting. The wide sea and the salt breeze seemed to refresh the soul. I felt a pang of hunger.

“Look at that pine tree. With that straight trunk and umbrella canopy it could be right out of a Turner painting,” noted Red Shirt to Noda. “Very much Turneresque. What a subtle curvature. Definitely Turner,” replied Noda with a proud demeanor. I didn't know what or who Turner was, and I didn't care to know, so I kept quiet. The boat cornered, keeping the island on our right. There were no waves. The water was so smooth that I could hardly believe we were at sea. Thanks to Red Shirt I was enjoying myself thoroughly. I thought it would be fun to explore the island, so I asked if it would be possible to land the boat by the rocks. Red Shirt replied that it should be possible, but for fishing it was best to keep some distance from the shoreline. I left it at that. Then Noda made the scatter-brained proposal that from here on we call the island Turner Island. Red Shirt seconded the proposal whole-heartily and agreed that we should do so. I hoped that I was not part of this “we.” The name Aoshima suited me just fine.

“Wouldn't it make a wonderful painting if Rafael's Madonna were over there on that rock,” remarked Noda. Red Shirt responded with an uncomfortable laugh and suggested that there be no more talk of Madonna. Noda told him not to worry, since no one was around, and with that he turned my way with a smirk on his face, purposefully avoiding eye contact. I found this most unpleasant. Whether they put Madonna or kodanna (a young master) on that rock was of no concern to me. They could do as they pleased. But they were talking over my head and then dismissing my presence as no threat to their private innuendos. Disgraceful behavior. And this Noda promoted himself as a Tōkyō man. I figured this “Madonna” must be Red Shirt's pet name for his favorite geisha. Fine with me if he wants to stand his geisha under a pine tree on a lonesome island and gaze at her. All the better if Noda paints the scene in oil and puts the work on display.

The boatman told us we'd reached a good spot, and he brought the boat to a stop and lowered the anchor. Red Shirt asked him how deep the water was, and he replied about ten meters. Red Shirt threw in a line and remarked that snapper would be a challenge in ten-meter water. So the old fellow had his sights set high and intended to pull in a snapper. Noda cast in his own line and fawned on Red Shirt, assuring him that with his skill, and with this calm sea, he was sure to get his snapper. There was just a lead sinker at the ends of their lines, no bobber. Fishing without a bobber was like measuring the temperature without a thermometer. I saw no point in even trying, but they told me to give it a go and asked if I had line. I replied that I had plenty of line but no bobber, and I was informed that bobbers were only for the novice fisherman. “Like this. When your line reaches the bottom, place your index finger underneath and rest it against the side of the boat. Then carefully monitor the tension.”

“Got one!” Red Shirt suddenly began reeling in his line. I thought he had something, but the line came up empty, minus its bait. Served him right. Then Noda chimed in with his usual quirky commentary. “Most unfortunate, and it was surely a big one. If they're escaping from a master today, then we'll all have to up our game. On the other hand, better to lose one through honest effort than stare witlessly at a bobber. Those

folks who use bobbers are no better than those folks who can't handle a bicycle without brakes." At this point I was just about ready to pummel him. As a human being, I had the same right to the sea as Red Shirt. It's a big place. A bonito or such would surely have the common courtesy to bite on my line. With that I dropped in my line and sinker and went through the motion of gaging the tension with my fingertip.

After a while I detected a twitching in the line. I thought about it and concluded it must be a fish. Only a living creature would twitch so. "Gotcha! Caught one!" I reeled the line in as fast as I could. While Noda chided me with, "Oh, did you catch something? One must never underestimate the power of youth," I reeled in most of the line to where only one or two meters remained in the water. I looked over the side of the boat and saw something like a striped goldfish. It was swimming side to side but also rising as I pulled the line in hand over hand. I felt a tinge of excitement. As it broke the water it bucked with a splash, dousing my face with sea water. I seized it and tried to remove the hook, but I couldn't manage to work it loose. The hand that held the fish felt slimy and most unpleasant. Weary of struggling, I swung the line in an arc and smacked the fish down against the middle of the boat, bringing about its quick end. Red Shirt and Noda looked on in surprise. I splashed my hand in the sea to wash it and brought it to my nose. It still smelled fishy. That was enough. Regardless of what I might catch, I didn't wish to handle another fish, and no fish likely wished to be handled by me either. I wound up my line and put it away.

"Quite an achievement to reel in the first catch of the day, even if it's a goruki (multicolorfin rainbow fish)." Noda contributed yet another smart-aleck remark. "Goruki sounds like the name of a Russian literati," joked Red Shirt. "Yes indeed, just like a Russian literati," Noda immediately agreed. "Gorky is a Russian literati, Maruki is the photographer at Shiba, and Komenonaruki (a rice seedling) is the giver of life." Red Shirt loved to throw unfamiliar foreign names out at anyone within earshot. Each of us has our own specialty. As a mathematics instructor, I couldn't tell 'goruki' from 'jariki' (a cart puller), and I wished he'd dispense with the highbrow humor. He should allude to something I might understand, like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography or Marden's "Pushing to the Front." Red Shirt was known to occasionally bring a red-covered magazine titled "Imperial Literature" to the school and peruse it reverently. According to Yama Arashi, this was the source of his foreign names. Imperial Literature was a scourge on us all.

Red Shirt and Noda fished their hearts out for the next hour and between the two of them caught fifteen or sixteen fish. Curiously, each and every fish they brought up was a goruki. There was not the faintest hint of a snapper. Red Shirt remarked to Noda that the day's haul was all about Russian literature. Noda replied that if a fisherman as skilled as Red Shirt could manage only goruki, then it was no wonder that he himself had also caught nothing better. The boatman told me these small fish were full of bones and poor in flavor, not at all fit for eating. However, they did make good fertilizer. Red Shirt and Noda, who had given their all to reel up fertilizer, were deserving of due sympathy. I'd had enough after my first catch and had been lying in the middle of the boat, gazing at the blue sky. I found this smarter by far than fishing.

As I lay there, the two of them began talking in whispers. I couldn't hear what they were saying, and I didn't care to hear. I was gazing at the sky and thinking of Kiyō. It would be wonderful if I had money and could bring her to a beautiful spot like this. No matter how wonderful the scenery, Noda in the frame ruined the shot. Kiyō was a wrinkled old lady, but I would take her with me anywhere unashamedly. Noda could ride in a horse-drawn carriage, sail on a grand ship, or ascend to the top of Ryōunkaku (Japan's tallest building

in the Meiji era), but he still couldn't hold a candle to Kiyō. If I were the head teacher and Red Shirt were me, no doubt Noda would fawn on me and ridicule Red Shirt. Tōkyō people are regarded as superficial, and no wonder, when guys like Noda travel the countryside advertising themselves as natives of Tōkyō. Country folk, accordingly, must imagine Tōkyō the epicenter of superficiality. As I was thinking thus, the two of them began to chuckle over something. I caught only intermittent words between spells of laughter and couldn't follow their conversation.

"Huh? How so ...?" "... you don't say ... since he doesn't know ... wronged indeed." "No ...?" "Grasshoppers ... absolutely."

I wasn't following their conversation, but my ears reflexively perked when Noda said the word "grasshoppers." For whatever reason, he put particular emphasis on this word, so that I couldn't help but hear. After that he purposefully muffled his speech. I didn't move from where I was, but they had my attention.

"That Hotta again ...?" "Could well be ...?" "Tempura ... ha ha ha ha ha" "... incited?" "Dumplings too?"

Their words came to me in bits and pieces, but they had mentioned grasshoppers, then tempura, then dumplings. These words left no doubt that their private whispers concerned me. If they were going to talk they should talk so a person could hear. If they wanted to converse privately then they needn't have invited me along. What an odious pair. Be it grasshoppers or be it leather-soled sandals (batta or setta), the fault lay not with me. The principal had asked for time to address the situation, and I was showing restraint out of deference to his request. Leave it to Noda to butt in with unsolicited critique. He should crawl away and suck on a paint brush. I'd show them all, soon enough, that I was more than capable of handling my own situation. These two meddlers were of no consequence, but the words "that Hotta" and "incited" were cause for concern. I didn't know if they were implying that Hotta had escalated the disturbances by inciting my ire, or if they were implying that Hotta had incited the students to rile me. As I looked up at the blue sky, its light slowly faded, and a cool breeze began to stir. Thin clouds, like wisps of incense smoke, quietly stretched to nothingness, only to regather as gentle haze in the depths of the blue.

"Shall we head back in?" Red Shirt suddenly asked. "Yes, it's just the right time. Will Madonna be enjoying the pleasure of your company tonight?" inquired Noda. "Let's dispense with such nonsense. No point in stirring the pot." Red Shirt, who had been relaxing against the side of the boat, straightened himself a bit. "He-he, don't worry. Even if we're overheard ...?" This time as Noda glanced in my direction I hit him square on with the meanest of glares. He flinched away as though blinded by a bright light. Muttering something about how I was going to be a real handful, he shrugged his shoulders and scratched his head. Impertinent to the core.

We were rowing back toward shore through the calm sea. Red Shirt remarked that I didn't seem to enjoy fishing, and I told him I preferred to relax and watch the sky. I tossed the remains of my cigarette onto the water, and it sizzled as it went out, then floated away on the ripples stirred by the oar. "The students are quite pleased with your arrival. Be sure to give them your best effort." Red Shirt shifted the topic completely away from fishing. "They don't seem at all pleased." "I wouldn't flatter you. They really are pleased. Isn't

that right, Yoshikawa?” “More than pleased, they’re beside themselves,” Noda replied with a smirk. Why did every word from his mouth touch on my nerves? “But you’d best be careful. There are hazards to the job,” added Red Shirt. “Of course there are hazards. At this point I’m resigned to hazards.” I had, in fact, decided that I would either receive a sincere apology from the boarding students or resign my post. “Don’t box yourself into a corner. As the head teacher I’m obliged to look out for you, so I hope you won’t misunderstand me.” “The head teacher has your best interests in mind. I also, as a fellow Tōkyō man, hope you’ll have a long career with us here. I believe we should look out for each other. I’ve been working in the background, to the best of my limited ability, in support of your success.” Noda actually spoke like a human being for once, but I’d sooner strangle myself than be beholden to the likes of him.

“The students have indeed welcomed your arrival wholeheartedly, but there are various considerations at play. You’re likely unhappy with some of the things that have transpired, but take this as a time for perseverance and work through it. You’ll find in the end that these things are not entirely to your detriment.”

“What exactly do you mean by various considerations?”

“It’s a little complicated, but at any rate you’ll understand in time. You won’t need me to explain. Better to wait and grasp the situation on your own, isn’t that right Yoshikawa?”

“Yes, it is quite complicated. One can’t understand everything from day one. Over time you’ll come to understand. You won’t need me to explain. Better to wait and grasp the situation on your own.” Noda echoed closely what Red Shirt had said.

“If it’s that onerous to explain then I don’t need an explanation, but you broached this subject from your side.”

“You’re absolutely correct. It would be irresponsible of me to introduce the subject and leave you hanging. Allow me to tell you a couple of things. Excuse me for saying so, but you’re newly graduated and this is your first experience as an instructor. Within the school setting there are myriad personal and professional motivations at work. The innocent candor of your student days will not serve you well here.”

“If candor won’t serve me, then what will?”

“You’re always so direct. That’s why I noted your lack of experience.”

“How could I not be inexperienced? As I wrote on my resumé, my age is twenty three years and four months.”

“And that’s why you’re susceptible. You can be taken advantage of by an adversary you don’t even recognize.”

“If I conduct myself with integrity, then I’m not afraid of any adversary whomsoever.”

“Of course you’re not afraid. You’re not afraid, but you’re being taken advantage of. It’s a fact that your predecessor was done in, so I’m advising you to watch yourself.”

I noticed that Noda had grown quiet. I turned and saw him in the stern with the boatman. They were talking about fishing. It was much easier conversing without Noda present.

“Who was it that did in my predecessor?”

“If I name names, then I’ve compromised another man’s reputation. I don’t have solid proof yet, so I can’t put my own person at risk. At any rate, since you’ve come all this way to join us, we don’t want to see you fail. All the effort of bringing you here would be for naught. Please do take care.”

“Take care? I can’t take any more care than I’ve taken already. Is proper conduct in my duties not sufficient?”

Red Shirt laughed heartily, though I didn’t recall having said anything humorous. Up to this day I’ve lived by my firmly held beliefs. But thinking about it, it seems that much of the world encourages and rewards shady behavior. It’s widely accepted that honesty hinders success. When worldly people happen across a sincere and genuine man, they brand him a greenhorn or junior apprentice and treat him with disdain. If that’s how it works, then our ethics teachers should stop instructing primary and middle schoolers to tell the truth. Students should be openly instructed in the art of lying, the merits of distrust, and how to scheme deceit. This would better serve both the students themselves and society as a whole. Red Shirt’s laughter had been directed at my simplicity. A world where simplicity and honesty are objects of ridicule is a lost cause. Kiyō would never have laughed in the same situation. She would have listened with great respect. Kiyō outclassed Red Shirt by a wide margin.

“Of course one must behave ethically, but adhering to one’s own principles is not enough. If one can’t recognize sinister behavior in others then one’s likely to meet a bad end. There are some in this world who appear openhearted, appear candid, even appear kind in helping a newcomer settle into his lodgings, but vigilance must be maintained at all times ... It’s become chilly. Autumn seems to be upon us. See how that haze hangs a sepia color over the beach. Hey, Yoshikawa! What do you think of that view toward the beach?” Red Shirt re-engaged Noda with a loud voice. Noda concurred that it was a remarkable view and added that it was a pity to let it pass without time for a sketch.

There was a light burning in the second floor of the Minatoya Inn. Just as the whistle of the steam train sounded, our boat dug its nose into the wet sand of the beach and came to rest. The hostess from the inn stood on the beach and welcomed Red Shirt. I jumped with a shout from the side of the boat to the shore.