

Botchan – Chapter 7

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

I vacated my lodgings that very night. When I returned home and packed my things, the master's wife asked if there was some sort of problem. She said if I were upset over some matter then I should tell her, and she would try to make things right. I was flabbergasted. How can there be so many clueless people in this world? I couldn't tell anymore if they were throwing me out or asking me to stay. It was sheer madness. To have it out with these folks was beneath my dignity as a Tōkyō man, so I brought in a rickshaw man and promptly moved myself out.

I'd taken my leave, but I had no place to go. The rickshaw man asked me, "Where to?" I told him to keep quiet and follow, that he'd find out soon enough where to, and I set off at a brisk pace. I thought of going back to the Yamashiroya Inn as an expedient, but then I'd just have to relocate again. If I walked for a bit I was bound to see a sign for a lodging house or some such suitable accommodation. I'd accept the first thing I found as the will of heaven and make it my new home. While thinking thus and wandering through quiet and pleasant quarters, I found myself in Kajiyachō. This area was home to the estates of samurai families and not the kind of place that takes in boarders. I thought to turn back toward the livelier districts, but then had a better idea. Uranari, whom I hold in the highest regard, lives in this vicinity. He's a native of this town and still resides in his ancestral residence, so he no doubt knows the particulars of the neighborhood. If I call on him, he may be able to recommend a place. Fortunately, I'd visited him once before, so I could locate his house easily enough. I navigated my way to his door, drawing on both memory and intuition. I called out twice from the entrance, and a woman of about fifty appeared with an old-style paper lantern. I don't dislike young women, but when I see an older woman I feel immediately at ease. Most likely, my fondness for Kiyō causes me to think favorably of other older women as well. This woman, I thought, must be Uranari's mother. She was a graceful woman who wore her hair loose in a widow's cut, and she bore a clear resemblance to Uranari. She invited me in, but I asked her instead to call Uranari out to the entryway. I explained my situation to him and asked if he could offer any advice. He listened sympathetically, thought for a moment, and then told me of an old couple named Hagino who lived on the back lane. There were just the two of them. They had remarked how it was wasteful to keep empty rooms, and they had put out a request for introduction of a good boarder. Uranari didn't know if they were still willing to rent, but we could go together and ask. He kindly showed me the way.

From that evening, I became a boarder at the Hagino residence. To my astonishment, Noda took over the room I had vacated at the Ikagin place from the very next day, in an entirely carefree manner, as though we'd coordinated our movements. This was over the top even for Noda. Then again, maybe this world is teeming with such scoundrels, whose sole source of satisfaction lies in out-cheating each other. I shuddered at the thought of it.

If this is how the world works, then I'll have to respond in kind, ever on my guard, in order to hold my own. Then again, if it's really the case that one can't manage three meals a day without immersing oneself in villainy, then one has to ask if life is really worth living. That said, hanging oneself in the prime of youth is both disrespectful vis-à-vis one's ancestors and disgraceful in the public eye. In retrospect, I should have

used my six hundred yen as capital to start a milk delivery business, rather than squandering it on mathematics study at a physics school. Then Kiyō could have remained with me, and I wouldn't have to worry about her from afar. I didn't appreciate her when we were together, but after my time in the country I recognized her great virtue. One could search Japan high and low and find few women of such gentle disposition. She had had a mild cold on the day of my departure, and I wondered how she was faring now. I expected she must have been happy to receive my letter. Her reply should arrive at any time now. Such thoughts occupied my mind for the next several days.

I was anxious to hear from Kiyō, so I would occasionally ask the old woman of the house if a letter from Tōkyō had arrived. Each time I asked, she would reply with a sympathetic look that none had been received. The couple here, unlike in the Ikagin household, were of samurai descent and both of noble character. I had to put up with the old man's practice of chanting Noh passages every evening in a strange sort of voice, but at least he didn't filch my tea like Ikagin had. The old woman would sometimes come to engage me in conversation. She asked me why I hadn't brought my wife along to live with me here. I asked her if I looked like a married man and reminded her that I was only in my twenty fourth year. She replied that it was perfectly natural for a man of my age to be married, and she countered my objection with numerous examples. Such-and-such had taken a wife at twenty, and so-and-so had two children already at twenty two. I told her in that case I'd take a wife, and I asked her, in my best country accent, to find me one. She asked me, with a serious look, whether I meant it in earnest.

"I do indeed mean it. I'm desperate to have a wife."

"I would guess you are. Such are the yearnings of youth." I was impressed with this answer and could offer no reply.

"However, if I'm not mistaken, you've already chosen your bride. I can see through your guise."

"You must have a keen eye. How is it you've seen through me?"

"How? Aren't you anxiously awaiting, day after day, correspondence from Tōkyō?"

"I'm impressed. You really do have a keen eye."

"Am I right?"

"Well now, maybe you are."

"However, one can't be too cautious with women these days. Things aren't like they used to be. You'd best watch out."

"What do you mean? Do you suppose my wife has a man on the side in Tōkyō?"

"No, no. I'm sure your wife is true."

"I'm relieved to hear that. Then what is it I should watch out for?"

“Your wife may be true. Your wife may be true, but ...”

“There are others who aren’t?”

“There are many hereabouts. Perhaps you know of the Tōyama girl?”

“No, I can’t say I do.”

“You haven’t heard of her? She’s the foremost beauty in these parts. She’s of such beauty that the teachers at the school all call her Madonna. You’re not aware?”

“Madonna? Yes, but I’d thought they must be referring to some geisha.”

“Not at all. Madonna is a foreign word, and it means a woman of great beauty.”

“Really? That’s news to me.”

“Most likely that name came from the art teacher.”

“From Noda, you mean?”

“No, his name is Yoshikawa.”

“And this Madonna’s untrustworthy?”

“This Madonna is an untrustworthy Madonna.”

“Sounds like trouble. Women who sport nicknames have never been respectable, so maybe the same goes for Madonna.”

“That’s the truth. Remember Kijin no Omatsu and Dakki no Ohyaku? Frightful women they were.”

“Do you suppose Madonna is that same type of woman?”

“Let me tell you. That gentleman Koga, who brought you to us. Well, she was promised to him as his bride.”

“Incredible. I never took Uranari for a ladies’ man. One can’t judge a book by its cover. I’ll take that as a lesson.”

“However, the senior Mr. Koga passed away last year. Up to that point they were a prosperous family, with money and an ownership stake in a bank. After his passing, for whatever reason, their circumstances took a sudden turn for the worse. It could be that someone took advantage of young Mr. Koga’s good nature and cheated him. Things being what they are, the wedding was put off. Then that head teacher entered the scene, intent on taking Madonna for his own.”

“Red Shirt? That scoundrel! I knew there was more to that shirt than just a shirt. Then what?”

“He approached through a go-between, but the Tōyama house had an obligation to the Koga house, so they were in no position to accommodate him. All they could say was that they would consider things carefully. At this point, Red Shirt began calling regularly to shore up his influence, and over time he won the young lady over. This brought both Red Shirt and the young lady into disrepute. After once committing to the Koga house, to run now into the arms of this scholar is surely offensive to heaven.”

“Offensive indeed. Not just against heaven, but the earth and the moon as well. Utterly despicable.”

“Feeling sympathy for Koga, his friend Hotta paid a visit to the head teacher on his behalf. Red Shirt denied any intention of usurping a young lady betrothed to another. He might take her for his bride if she broke her engagement, but for now he was merely a social acquaintance of the Tōyama family, which was in no way an affront to Koga. Hotta could press the matter no further and left it at that, but they say there’s been bad blood between the two of them ever since.”

“You seem to know a lot. How is it you know so much? I’m impressed.”

“This is a small town. Everyone knows everything.”

It struck me that much too much was known. At this rate, she could well know of my tempura and dumpling outings. Bothersome place. But thanks to her I was now in the know about Madonna, and the relationship between Yama Arashi and Red Shirt. This was valuable intelligence. However, it still wasn’t clear to me which was the villain. I’m a simple man, so I need things spelled out in black and white. Otherwise, I can’t know whom to trust.

“Of Red Shirt and Yama Arashi, which is the better man?”

“Who’s Yama Arashi?”

“Yama Arashi means Hotta.”

“Well Hotta is the stronger of the two, but Red Shirt, as a scholar, is more capable. When it comes to kindness, Red Shirt is the gentleman. But they say the students like Hotta better.”

“So which is the better man?”

“I suppose whichever one brings home more pay is the greater of the two.”

There was no use pursuing this further, so I left it at that. Several days later, the old woman greeted me with a big smile as I returned home from the school. “It’s here at last, finally. Take your time and enjoy,” she said as she handed me a letter and then withdrew. I picked it up and saw that it was from Kiyō. There were forwarding tags attached, and on inspection they showed that it had come by way of Yamashiroya and then the Ikagin residence. They’d held it for a week at Yamashiroya. Being an inn, they must like to host things, even letters, for an extended stay. On opening it, I found she had written at length. “I intended to reply immediately after receiving your letter, but unfortunately I was in bed for a week with a cold. Please pardon the delay. Also, I’m not skilled in reading and writing like today’s young ladies, so it’s cost me considerable

effort to put down even these awkward words. I thought of asking my nephew to take dictation, but I was reluctant to send you anything less than the effort of my own hand. I wrote out a rough draft first and then copied it over to a clean draft. I finished the copy work in two days, but it took me four days before that to compose the draft. It may be hard to read, but I've made my best effort, so please do read to the end." The introduction touched on this and that, covering more than a meter of scroll paper.

It was, in fact, hard to read. Not only were the characters malformed, but it was written for the most part in hiragana, so I struggled to find where one word ended and the next began. I'm impatient by nature, and ordinarily you couldn't pay me to read a letter so long and so difficult. But just this once, I forced myself to concentrate and read through from beginning to end. I read it through, but I struggled such that I couldn't follow the flow, so I started again from the beginning. The room had grown dim, and it was becoming harder to see, so I moved myself out to the edge of the veranda and continued carefully. An early autumn breeze stirred the plantain leaves, blew cool across my exposed skin, and then rustled the end of the scroll that hung loose toward the garden. If I'd let go, the letter would have flown over to the opposing hedge, but my attention was firmly fixed. "Your nature is straight as split bamboo, but your volatile temperament worries me -- Be careful in assigning nicknames to others, as they may resent it. If you must do so, share them privately with me in your correspondence -- They say that country folk are devious, so take care to keep yourself out of harm's way -- The weather there must certainly be more changeable than in Tōkyō, so avoid the night chill and don't catch cold. Your letter was so short that I don't know much of your situation. Please make your next one at least half as long as mine -- It's okay to leave a five yen tip at the inn, but are you sure you won't regret it? Out there in the country, your money is all you can depend on. Be as frugal as possible to prepare against any contingency -- You may not have enough pocket money, so I'm sending you ten yen by money order -- I put the fifty yen you gave me into a postal savings account. I'm saving it for your return to Tōkyō, to help establish your household. There's still forty yen after withdrawing this ten." Women truly are fastidious creatures.

I sat on the edge of the veranda, lost in Kiyō's letter as its loose end fluttered in the breeze. Mrs. Hagino slid the partition aside and brought out my dinner. She asked if I was still reading and remarked that it must be quite lengthy. I gave some absent-minded response about reading against the wind before turning my attention to dinner. It was boiled sweet potatoes, again. The Hagino couple were more courteous, considerate, and refined than my former Ikagin landlords, but regrettably, their food was inferior. Yesterday was potatoes, the day before yesterday was potatoes, and today was potatoes again. I may have told them I'm fond of potatoes, but I can't subsist day after day on potatoes alone. I shouldn't jest over Uranari as the pale-faced Squash Man. In the not too distant future, I was going to end up his sidekick, the Potato Man. If Kiyō were here she'd feed me my favorites, like bluefin sashimi or broiled fishcake, but I was stuck with the stinginess of a samurai family that had come down in the world. I realized I needed Kiyō. If my tenure at the school looked to be a long one, then I would summon her from Tōkyō. The life of an educator was tough. I'd been told to refrain from tempura soba or dumplings, so here I sat in my lodgings, turning myself yellow through overconsumption of potatoes. Zen monks most surely ate better than I did. After polishing off the dish of potatoes, I took two raw eggs from my desk drawer and cracked them over the edge of the bowl, enough to get me by. Without the added nutrition from these raw eggs, how could I hold up through twenty one hours of teaching each week?

After reading Kiyō's letter, it was past my usual bathing time. However, I'd made it my routine to visit the baths daily and didn't want to skip. I decided to take the train and headed for the station, dangling my signature red towel. A train had departed just prior to my arrival, so I would have to wait for a bit. As I sat on the bench and smoked, Uranari happened to arrive. Having learned his story, I pitied him now even more than before. The way he carried himself so meekly, like a sheepish interloper between heaven and earth, had always evoked a sense of misery, but tonight the word "misery" seemed grossly inadequate. I wished I could double his salary, see him married to the young Tōyama lady without delay, and send the two of them off to Tōkyō for a month. "Headed for the baths? Have a seat." I called to him gallantly and made room for him on my bench. He seemed uncomfortable, asked me not to trouble myself on his account, and out of deference, or for whatever reason, remained standing. "The train will be a while. No need to tire yourself standing." I repeated my offer for him to sit beside me. To tell the truth, I felt so bad about his situation that I desperately wanted him to sit with me. He finally relented and, excusing the intrusion, accepted my offer.

In this world there are insolent fellows like Noda, who always show up when least wanted. There are fellows like Yama Arashi, who see themselves as indispensable champions of justice and carry their faces like badges of honor. Then there are types like Red Shirt, a self-anointed ambassador of dandyism and charm. There are also fellows like Tanuki, who fancies himself the spirit of higher education, incarnate in a frock coat. Each and every one, in some manner or other, displays 'fore the world his own merits. But I'd never before met a man like Uranari, utterly self-effacing, a captive puppet yielding to the strings of fate. His face may be swollen, but I can't fathom how this Madonna could be so fickle. How could she discard such a fine man in favor of Red Shirt? Let Red Shirts court her by the dozens. She'll find among them no better man.

"Is your health okay? You look a good bit fatigued."

"Nothing in particular to complain of."

"Glad to hear that. Poor health is the end of a man."

"You seem the hardy type yourself."

"That I am. I'm skinny, but I'm tough. Illness doesn't suit me, and I won't have it."

Uranari smiled at my answer.

At this point a young woman's laughter carried to us from the entrance. I turned reflexively and was captivated by what met my eyes. A tall beauty, with fair skin and hair done up stylishly, stood with a middle-aged woman before the ticket vendor's window. I'm not artful in describing the beauty of women, so I can't elaborate, but a beauty she was, without doubt. I felt as though I were gripping, in the palms of my hands, a smooth sphere of crystal, warmed and fragrant. The older woman was shorter, but they bore a resemblance. Most certainly they were mother and daughter. Since noticing their arrival, my attention had been fixed on the young lady, and I'd completely forgotten Uranari. As I watched her, Uranari suddenly rose from my side and, to my surprise, walked leisurely toward the two women. It struck me it must be Madonna. The three of them conversed politely in front of the ticket counter. I couldn't hear what they were saying on account of the distance.

The station clock showed five minutes until the next departure. I was growing impatient, having lost my conversation partner, when a man dashed into the station. It was Red Shirt. He was wearing a flimsy kimono, fastened hastily with a silk-crepe sash, and was dangling his signature gold chain. That gold chain was imitation. Red Shirt flashed it brazenly, thinking no one could tell, but I knew for a fact it was fake. As soon as he'd dashed in he'd glanced around busily. He'd politely engaged the three who were conversing in front of the ticket counter. After exchanging several words, he'd suddenly turned my way and walked over with his usual cat-like steps. "So, you're headed for the baths too? I'd thought I was late for the train and hurried over, but I see it's still three or four minutes. I wonder if that clock is correct." He took out his own gold watch, remarked that they differed by two minutes, and then seated himself beside me. He rested his chin on his walking staff and gazed ahead, without looking back toward the women. The elderly woman occasionally glanced his way, but the young lady fixed her gaze elsewhere. She had to be Madonna.

Finally, the whistle sounded and the train arrived. The waiting crowd filed on board and vied for their seats. Red Shirt jumped into the first class compartment ahead of all others. First class here was hardly anything boastworthy. The first class fare to Sumita was five sen, and the second class fare was three. The difference was a mere two sen. Even one like myself could splurge on first class and hold a white ticket in his hand. But country folk are tightfisted by nature. They seemed to fuss and stew over this two-sen difference, and the great majority rode second class. After Red Shirt, Madonna and her mother also entered the first class compartment. Uranari rode second class by force of habit. As he stood in the entrance of the second class carriage, he seemed to hesitate, but as soon as our eyes met he quickly jumped on board. I felt myself overcome with sympathy and followed him into the same carriage. There's certainly no rule against riding second class on a first class ticket.

At the onsen, I made my way down from the third floor to the bathing area in my cotton robe, and I again met Uranari. I'm a man whose throat constricts and is rendered speechless when put on the spot in a meeting. However, I'm quite talkative under ordinary circumstances, and I made my best effort to engage Uranari in conversation. Given his situation, I considered it my duty, as a Tōkyō man, to provide some words of solace. Unfortunately, Uranari seemed distant and detached. Whatever the topic, he responded with only a simple yes or no. Even these yes or no answers seemed to tax him, so finally I left off and politely took my leave.

I didn't see Red Shirt. There are many bathing areas, and two people arriving by the same train will not necessarily find each other in the baths, so I didn't think this in any way curious. As I left after bathing, there was a wonderful moon in the sky. Both sides of the avenue were planted with willows, and their supple branches cast arcs of shadow into the street. I decided to stroll for a while. As I walked north and ascended to the outskirts of the town, I came to a large gate on my left. Through the gate, at the end of the lane, was a Buddhist temple, and on both sides of the lane were brothels. In previous times it had been unheard-of to house a red-light district on temple grounds. I was tempted to look around, but Tanuki might call me out again at the staff meeting for doing so. I continued on my way. Next to the gate was a small house with a latticed window and a black shop curtain. This was where I'd eaten dumplings and been later reprimanded. There were round paper lanterns with "adzuki soup" and "vegetable stew" written on them. Their light shone on the trunk of a willow that grew near the edge of the eaves. I wanted very much to stop in for a bite, but I held firm and kept moving.

It's a sad situation when a man craves dumplings yet can't partake. Then again, losing the heart of one's betrothed to a rival must be sadder by far. When I considered Uranari's plight, my own dumpling predicament seemed asinine. I had no right to complain, even if I were starved for three days straight. There can be nothing less trustworthy than human beings. One would never expect unkindness from such a face, but beauty can be callous. And Koga, with blisters like a wax gourd, is a dutiful man of virtue. One can't be too cautious. They say that Yama Arashi, whom I thought to be open and honest, incited the students against me. It seemed that indeed he had, yet then he'd appealed to the principal, in no uncertain terms, to punish the students harshly. Red Shirt, who comes across as the epitome of affectation, turns out to be sympathetic and offers me counsel, albeit in his own peculiar manner. Then he deceives Madonna, or so it seems. He insists still that he would only hope for the hand of Madonna if she first broke off with Koga. Ikagin finds fault with me and turns me out, only to immediately lodge Lord Noda in my place. However one views it, no beings are less reliable than humans. Kiyo would be aghast were I to describe all this in a letter. Maybe she would conclude that "beyond Hakone" was the land of tortured souls.

I'm carefree by nature, and I'd managed in the past to never let things get to me. But just a month in this place had me quite anxious about the state of the world. While no major calamity had befallen me, I felt as though I'd aged five or six years. Probably best to throw in the towel and return to Tōkyō as soon as possible. Such were my thoughts as I crossed a stone bridge onto the banks of the Nozeri River. "River" is an overstatement. It's really no more than a shallow trickle a couple of meters wide. If one follows the embankment downstream for a kilometer or so, it leads to Aioi Village. In the village is a temple dedicated to Kannon, the goddess of mercy.

Looking back toward the bathing district, the glow of the lanterns was washed in moon beams. I could hear drum beats, no doubt emanating from the red-light district. The river was shallow, but its flow was rapid. The water sparkled haphazardly, almost as though fretful. After I'd strolled down the embankment for half a kilometer or so, a human figure came into sight ahead. Then, by the light of the moon, I discerned that it was two figures. Probably some youngsters returning to the village after bathing, though in that case they were strangely subdued, not even rendering a tune.

I continued on, and my pace was the faster, so the shadow figures gradually grew larger. One was a woman. They heard my footsteps, and when I'd drawn to within twenty meters or so, the man suddenly looked back. The moon was behind me. I gasped to myself when I glimpsed the man's face. The couple resumed walking again as before. I had a thought, so I sped up and approached them at my fastest gait. Having taken no notice, they continued on leisurely as before. I was close enough now to catch their conversation. The top of the embankment was about two meters wide, just enough room for three to walk abreast. I caught up to them without difficulty and brushed past the man's sleeve. I planted my heel two paces in front of them, spun round on it, and looked the man square in the face. The moonlight hit me from the front and abruptly revealed my features, from my close-cropped head on down to my jaw. The man drew a breath and quickly turned away. He pressed upon the woman, hastily, that they should return.

Perhaps Red Shirt intended to brush the situation off in some brash manner, or perhaps he was too timid to face up to it. In any case, I wasn't the only one to suffer from the smallness of this town.