

Botchan – Chapter 11

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

I woke the following day sore from head to toe. The first brawl after a long hiatus is hard on one's body. At this rate, my tough guy reputation was in peril. As I lay there in bed, the old woman brought me the Shikoku News. I was really too beat to look at a newspaper, but no respectable man lets a minor altercation disrupt his routine. As I forced myself onto my stomach and opened the paper to the second page, I was shocked by what I saw. Yesterday's brawl had been written up. I wasn't shocked that it was written up, but rather by what they had written. "A certain middle school instructor named Hotta, along with a brazen newcomer from Tōkyō, incited our good students to civil disturbance. Both were at the scene directing their students, and both wantonly assaulted teachers' college students without provocation." An editorial piece followed. "Our middle school, with its gentle and virtuous spirit, has long been the envy of the entire nation. This honored position has now been jeopardized through the insolence of these two novice instructors. Since the entire community has been disgraced, we must rise up in our indignation and demand that the parties responsible be held to account. We trust that the authorities in charge will act on our behalf to administer the appropriate sanctions and ensure that these rogues are barred for perpetuity from positions in academia." As if to indicate censure, an emphatic black dot had been placed above each character in the text. I cursed them from my bed and then jumped to my feet. As I did so, I noted with wonder that the intense aches in my body eased immediately, as though faded to mere memory.

I crumpled the newspaper into a ball and hurled it into the garden. Not satisfied, I retrieved it and marched out to the pit toilet to throw it down the hole. Newspapers are vessels for flagrant lies. Nothing in this world blows and rants harder. I should be censuring these editors, not of vice-versa. And what's this about a "brazen newcomer from Tōkyō?" Who in this world goes by "brazen newcomer?" Let's think about this. I have a respectable family name and a given name. If they checked my pedigree, they'd stand in awe of every noble ancestor.

As I washed my face, I felt a stinging in my cheek. I asked the old woman to lend me the mirror, and she asked if I'd read the morning's paper. I told her I'd read it and thrown it down the toilet. I added that if she wanted it she could go fetch it, and she withdrew in surprise. I examined my face in the mirror. The wound was unchanged from the day before. It was bad enough having my dear and precious face disfigured, but now they'd added insult to injury by labeling me a "brazen newcomer."

To cower at home on account of a country newspaper would mean nothing less than lifelong disgrace, so I ate breakfast and set out early. As the others arrived, each and every one looked at my face with a smirk. What did they find amusing? This face was of my own making and shouldn't concern them. Noda arrived and congratulated me on my great exploits of the prior day, noting how I was bearing a wound of honor. He was looking to rub it in as payback for the beating he'd taken at the party. I told him to shut up and go suck a paint brush. He backed off, but then started in on how much it must hurt. I yelled in return that hurt or not, it was my face and none of his business. After taking his own seat across the room, he continued to gaze at my face. Then he whispered something to the history teacher and snickered.

Soon after, Yama Arashi arrived. His nose was purple and swollen, looking like it ought to be lanced and drained. It may have just been vanity, but it seemed to me that his face was considerably more damaged than my own. We were close colleagues with desks side by side. And unfortunately our desks faced directly toward the entrance. Two odd faces were lined up together, and any fellow with idle time was certain to look our way. The others expressed their sympathy at our misfortune, but no doubt they thought us a couple of saps. Otherwise, why all the whispers and smirks? I was greeted with applause in the classroom, and several students even cried “Banzai!” I don’t know if this was sincere enthusiasm or ridicule. In the middle of all this attention, Red Shirt approached nonchalantly to console us on our terrible misfortune. He felt very sorry about our situation. He had discussed the newspaper article with the principal, and they were taking steps to request a retraction, so we needn’t be worried. “My brother exhorted you to attend, and now look what’s happened. Words can’t express my regret.” He continued, half apologetically, to ensure us that he would make every effort to manage the fallout. The principal appeared from his office after third hour with a worried look, remarking how the paper had stirred up a hornet’s nest. For my part, I wasn’t worried in the least. If I were to be dismissed, then I would simply resign before they dismissed me. However, since I’d done nothing wrong, my resignation would only embolden the newspaper in its impertinence. I felt an obligation to stand my ground and demand a retraction. I was inclined to stop by the paper on my way home to press the matter, but the school was taking steps to resolve the situation, so I decided to hold off.

Yama Arashi and I sat down with the principal and head teacher as soon as our schedules permitted, and we gave them an honest account of events. They concluded that the paper had deliberately colored its write-up to settle a grudge against the school. Red Shirt paced the room while arguing in defense of our actions. He bemoaned his younger brother’s exhortation to Yama Arashi as though it were his own personal failure. The newspaper was clearly in the wrong. It was scandalous. The two of us were victims of a travesty.

On our way home, Yama Arashi cautioned me that Red Shirt’s behavior was fishy. I replied that Red Shirt had always reeked of fish, and his behavior today was nothing new. “Don’t you realize? Red Shirt schemed all along to call us out and involve us in yesterday’s brawl.” That much I hadn’t realized. Yama Arashi has a ruff exterior, but he’s by far my superior when it comes to insight.

“He triggered the brawl and then worked the paper to publish that article. The man’s a first-rate villain.”

“Red Shirt was behind the article? That’s hard to fathom. Is the paper really so easily influenced?”

“It is if he has a friend there.”

“Do you think he has such a friend?”

“Even if he doesn’t, it would still be easy. Just feed them a bunch of lies, and they’ll run with the story.”

“What a bind. If this is really Red Shirt’s scheme then we’re sure to lose our jobs.”

“It may well be that we’re finished.”

“If that’s the case, then I’ll tender my resignation tomorrow and head back to Tōkyō. I wouldn’t stay in this wretched hole if they begged me.”

“Your resignation won’t upset Red Shirt in the least.”

“That’s the truth. What would upset him?”

“The scoundrel always contrives to cover his tracks. It’s hard to get the upper hand on him.”

“What a bother. So we take the rap for all this? It’s a rotten situation. Is divine justice our only hope?”

“Let’s give it a few more days and see what happens. If worse comes to worst then we’ll have to catch him at the hot springs.”

“And just let this incident run its course?”

“Exactly. We attack instead at his exposed underbelly.”

“Agreed. I’m not much of a planner, so I’ll entrust the details to you. When the time comes to act, I’m in.”

With this, Yama Arashi and I parted. If Red Shirt was behind this all, as Yama Arashi surmised, then he truly was a low-life. We had little chance of outsmarting him. Our only recourse was brute force. It occurred to me that there can be no end in this world to warfare. Even on an individual basis, the final mediator was brute force.

The next day I awaited the newspaper, but on opening it I found neither correction nor retraction. At the school, I pressed Tanuki, who replied that it would likely appear the following day. The following day a retraction appeared in tiny size six typeface. Of course there was no acknowledgement of the paper’s errors. I went again to the principal, who responded that we couldn’t expect anything further. This principal, with his raccoon-like face and his frock coat posturing, was surprisingly powerless. He couldn’t even make a country newspaper take back a sham article. I was so angry that I offered to go alone and have it out with the editor. He implored me not to, for fear they would publish additional defamations. He was basically telling me that the paper can write what it pleases, whether truths or lies, and there’s nothing we can do about it. He added further exhortations, like a monk evangelizing silent acquiescence. If this is how newspapers operate, then they should all be done away with, for the sake of the common good. What I gleaned from Tanuki that day was that being written up in the newspaper and falling victim to the bite of a snapping turtle were more or less one and the same thing.

Three days later, in the afternoon, Yama Arashi came to me in a flustered state and announced that the moment had arrived. He said he was ready to put our plan into action, so I immediately offered my services as a co-conspirator. However, he told me with a tilt of his head that I should hold off. I asked why, and he asked me in response if the principal had called for my resignation. I said no and asked in turn about his situation. That day, in the principal’s office he’d been told that, while it was truly unfortunate, circumstances were such that the matter must be brought to closure.

“What kind of justice is that? Tanuki must have drummed his belly so long that he’s inverted his stomach. The two of us went to the victory celebration together, watched the Kōchi blade dancers together, and ran over together to quell the brawl. If he needs resignations, then let him act fairly and demand two. Why do rural schools struggle so with rational thought? It’s aggravating to no end.”

“Red Shirt is pulling the strings. He and I have already butted heads, and there isn’t room for both of us here. On the other hand, he thinks he can handle you.”

“And Red Shirt and I are to co-exist here? He flatters himself if he thinks he can handle me.”

“He believes you’re naïve, and he thinks he can manipulate you.”

“That’s worse yet. I’ll not even give him the chance.”

“Koga has already departed, and it seems the arrival of his successor was delayed due to mishap. If they do away with both of us at once, they’ll be severely shorthanded and unable to fill out the class schedule.”

“So my role is to serve as their joining peg. Damn them! Who do they think they’re fooling?”

The next day I arrived at the school and went straight to the principal’s office.

“Why wasn’t I asked to tender my resignation?”

“Huh?” Tanuki seemed caught off guard.

“How is it that Hotta is forced to resign and I’m not?”

“Circumstances at the school dictate that ...”

“Those circumstances are in error. If my resignation’s not required, then neither is Hotta’s.”

“I don’t know that I can explain it -- it’s necessary that Hotta should leave, but I see no need, in your case, to ask for a resignation.”

It was just like Tanuki to maintain his composure and dish out convoluted logic. He left me with no alternative.

“In that case, I’ll bring you my letter as well. You mustn’t imagine I’m going to sit by and see Hotta alone dismissed. I’m not so coldhearted.”

“I can’t allow that. If Hotta leaves and you leave, we’ll have no mathematics instructor at the school.”

“Then have no mathematics. See if I care.”

“Don’t be so selfish now. Give some thought to the school’s situation. And consider your own future. How will it look on your resumé if you resign after only a month?”

“What do I care how it looks? I won’t shirk obligation in favor of my resumé.”

“You’re fully in the right -- each of your points in itself is correct, but try to understand my position too. If you’re intent on resigning, then I can’t stand in your way, but I ask that you at least stay on until a replacement arrives. Please go home and think things over once more.”

My reasons were clear as day, and there was nothing to reconsider. However, Tanuki cut a pitiful figure as he alternately turned pale then flushed red. I agreed to give it further thought and took my leave. I did not speak with Red Shirt. Best to let him have it full force when the time was right.

I told Yama Arashi of my discussion with Tanuki, and he indicated that the situation was as he had thought. He pointed out that I could tender my resignation at any time and suggested I should hold off for now. I decided to accept his counsel. Yama Arashi was wiser about the world than I was, so I thought it best to adhere to his guidance from there on.

Yama Arashi tendered his resignation and bid his formal farewells to the staff. Then he headed down toward Yamashiroya on the beach, but he doubled back to secretly take up residence at Masuya in the hot springs district. His room was on the second floor facing the street, and he opened a hole in the shōji to begin his surveillance. I was the only one who knew what he was up to. If Red Shirt came sneaking around, it would surely be at night. In the early evening there were students and others about, so he probably wouldn’t show until after nine. For the first two nights I joined in the watch till eleven, but there was no sign of Red Shirt. On the third night I watched from nine to ten thirty, but again to no avail. I felt a bit foolish, slipping home late after a futile watch. Going on four or five nights, the old woman began to voice concern. She cautioned me that, as a married man, I should refrain from excessive nighttime escapades. My escapades were not the kind of escapades she had in mind. I was on a noble mission to deliver divine retribution on behalf of Heaven. Even so, after a full week and nothing to show for it, I was wearing down. I’m impatient by nature. I’ll work through the night if I’m passionately engaged in a task, but I’ve never persevered at anything in the absence of tangible results. Though fighting for divine justice, I grew restless nonetheless. The sixth day was tough, and on the seventh day I was ready to quit. Yama Arashi was stubbornly determined. From early evening till after midnight, he kept his eye to the peephole, staring intently at the Kadoya gas lamp and its lit surroundings. When I arrived, he would tell me how many patrons had entered that evening, how many were staying the night, how many were women, and all other manner of detail. I was impressed with his keen observations, but I suggested at length that it might be a lost cause. Yama Arashi occasionally folded his arms and sighed, but he was still convinced that Red Shirt would show. It would be tragic now if Red Shirt never appeared and Yama Arashi lost the chance to hit him with divine justice.

On the eighth day I left my lodgings at seven thirty. After a leisurely bath, I bought eight eggs at the market. These were to supplement the potato-centric diet the old woman fed me. I put four eggs into each of my sleeve pockets, placed my signature red towel over my shoulder, and walked with hands in pockets to the Masuya inn. I climbed the stairs and opened the shōji of Yama Arashi’s room, and I was greeted with an excited look on his Idaten-like face. “It’s looking good! It’s looking good!” The previous evening I had sensed that despair and melancholy were getting the better of him. When I saw the color back in his face, I answered, “Wonderful!” without yet knowing why.

“Around seven thirty, that geisha Kosuzu went in.”

“With Red Shirt?”

“Nope.”

“It’s no good then.”

“Two geisha went in together. That’s a good sign.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because the guy’s crafty. I’m guessing he sends the geisha first and then slips in later himself.”

“That could be. It’s already nine, isn’t it?”

“Twelve past.” Yama Arashi pulled a nickel-cased watch from his obi belt and glanced at the time. “Say, dim that lamp so they don’t see our shadows. Two close-cropped heads at the shōji will spook the old fox and scare him away.”

I blew out the lamp on the lacquer-enameled desk. The shōji was illuminated only dimly by starlight. The moon had not yet risen. Yama Arashi and I fixed ourselves to our spy holes with bated breath. The wall clock chimed nine thirty.

“You really think he’ll show? If he doesn’t show tonight I’m calling it quits.”

“I’m staying till my money runs out.”

“How much do you have?”

“So far, for eight days I’ve spent five yen and sixty sen. I settle my bill every evening so I can clear out at any time.”

“That’s a good arrangement, but the inn folks must think it odd.”

“Never mind the inn folks, it’s this constant vigilance that’s taxing my limits.”

“You nap during the day, don’t you?”

“I nap, but I can’t go out. The confinement’s the worst of it.”

“Divine justice is no easy endeavor. After all this, the slow hand of Heaven’s vengeance had better not let us down.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure he’ll show tonight. -- Hey! Look!” His voice dropped to a whisper, startling me to attention. A man in a black hat looked up at the Kadoya gas lamp from below and passed on into the darkness.

No luck. It wasn't him. The clock at the front desk mercilessly chimed off ten hours. It looked to be another fruitless night.

The street had fallen silent. Drum beats carried from the red light district, sounding close enough to touch. The moon appeared from behind the hills, illuminating the street. Then, from below, the sound of voices. We couldn't look out to see who it was, but they seemed to be drawing nearer. There was a shuffling sound of clog shoes. Peering out at an angle, two shadow figures slowly came into view.

"Everything's fine now. That troublemaker is long gone." It was unmistakably Noda. "All toughness and no tact is a recipe for failure." This one was Red Shirt. "He's a lot like the Tōkyō kid. And speaking of the Tōkyō kid, such a chivalrous young master, is he not?" "Turning down a raise and offering his resignation? Surely a disturbed individual." I wanted to open the window, jump from the second floor, and pummel the both of them then and there. It was all I could do to restrain myself. Chuckling, they passed under the gas lamp and made their way inside.

"Hey."

"Yeah."

"He's here."

"He finally showed."

"Now we can finally relax."

"Damn that Noda! The gall to call me a chivalrous young master."

"And I'm the troublemaker. That insolent rat!"

Our next move was to ambush the two of them on their way home. However, we had no way of knowing when that would be. Yama Arashi went below and told the inn folks he might have to depart during the night on business. They agreed to leave the door unbolted. Looking back on it, I'm surprised they acquiesced. In most such circumstances they'd suspect one was up to no good.

Lying in wait for Red Shirt had been tough, but waiting for him to emerge from the inn proved even harder. We couldn't sleep, and we had to keep constant watch through the small shōji openings. Our excitement made it unbearable to wait and wait. I suggested we should rush the inn and catch them in the act, but Yama Arashi rejected this outright. If we rushed over at this hour, the staff would take us for ruffians and block our access. If we announced ourselves and stated our business, we'd be told Red Shirt and company weren't there, or else we'd be diverted to the wrong room. Even if we caught the staff off guard and made it past the desk, there was no way to know which of the many rooms they were in. However tedious, we had no choice but to wait until they emerged. We continued our vigil till five in the morning.

Two figures emerged from Kadoya, and Yama Arashi and I immediately followed after. The first trains of the day were not yet running, so they'd have to walk back to the main town. On the outskirts of the hot

springs town the road cut between rice paddies and was lined with cedar trees for the first hundred meters. After that was a straight embankment leading through the fields, with thatch-roofed houses scattered on either side. Anywhere outside of town would do, but our preference was to catch them in the isolated stretch among the cedar trees. We followed discreetly to the edge of town and then accelerated to a sprint, approaching them from behind like a swift breeze. As they turned to see what was upon them, we ordered them to halt and laid our hands on their shoulders. Noda looked ready to flee in a panic, so I circled round front to block his path.

“Now why would a respectable head teacher be spending the night at Kadoya?” Yama Arashi started in immediately with his reproof.

“Is there some rule that a head teacher can’t stay at Kadoya?” Red Shirt’s speech was as civil as ever, but his face was a little pale.

“How does a man of integrity, who finds even soba and dumpling shops objectionable from a disciplinary perspective, spend the night at an inn with geisha?” Noda still looked like a flight risk, so I stepped closer to block him. “And what was that about the young master from Tōkyō?” I roared in his face. “I wasn’t referring to you. Absolutely not.” He had the gall to come back at me with a shameless denial. I realized at this moment that both of my hands were grasping my sleeve pockets. During our pursuit I’d grasped these pockets to keep my eggs from bumping together and breaking. I thrust my hands into the pockets, grabbed two eggs, and gave a shout as I smashed them over Noda’s face. Both eggs shattered, and a yellow ooze dripped off the tip of his nose. He gasped in horror and fell onto his rear, crying out for someone to save him. I’d bought these eggs for eating, not for breaking or throwing, but in a fit of passion I’d acted on instinct. Now, seeing the outcome with Noda on the ground, I cried, “Take this!” and, “Take that!” and blindly smashed the remaining eggs over his head. His face was lost in a torrent of yellow goo.

While I was smashing eggs over Noda, Yama Arashi and Red Shirt were still engaged in debate.

“Can you prove that I spent my night at the inn with a geisha?”

“I saw your pet geisha enter Kadoya earlier in the evening. Are you trying to deny it?”

“I’ve no need to deny anything. Yoshikawa and I spend the night there. The fact that a geisha did or didn’t enter earlier that evening doesn’t concern me.”

“Doesn’t it?” Yama Arashi delivered a knuckle sandwich. Red Shirt staggered. “This is appalling. It’s an outrage. Brute force, without due process, is gross injustice.”

“Then injustice it is.” Yama Arashi whacked him again. “For a scoundrel of your caliber, nothing short of a sound thrashing will do.” The beating continued. At the same time, I went to work on Noda and drubbed him good. When we finished, the two of them were cowering motionless at the base of a cedar tree. They either couldn’t move or were too disoriented to try.

“Had enough? If not, then here’s some more.” The two of us continued with more blows. “Enough. Enough.” I asked Noda if he’d had enough too. “Yes, yes. Of course.”

“Consider this divine retribution for a couple of first-rate scoundrels. You’d best take a lesson and change your ways. Righteousness always triumphs, in the end, over cunning deceit.” The two of them remained silent as Yama Arashi lectured. They may have been incapable of speech by this point.

“I’m not going to run or hide. I’ll be at Minatoya by the beach until five o’clock this evening. If you have business to settle, come with police officers or whomever you like.” I followed with, “I’m not going to run or hide either. I’ll be waiting with Hotta. If you want to file a complaint with the police, then go ahead.” With that, Yama Arashi and I set off walking at a brisk pace.

It was just before seven when I arrived back at my lodgings. I went to my room and immediately began packing. The old woman was surprised and asked what I was doing. I replied that I was leaving for Tōkyō to fetch my wife, and I proceeded to settle my account with her. I caught the train to Minatoya by the beach, where Yama Arashi was already upstairs sleeping. I thought I should draft a letter of resignation without delay, but I didn’t know what to say, so I just wrote, “Personal circumstances compel me to resign my post and return to Tōkyō. Please be so kind as to favor me with your understanding. Yours Truly.” I addressed this to the principal and dropped it into the post.

The steamboat departure time was six in the evening. Yama Arashi and I were both exhausted and slept soundly until two in the afternoon. On waking, we asked the maid if she’d seen any sign of the police, and she replied that she hadn’t. “Red Shirt and Noda didn’t file a complaint.” The two of us laughed heartily.

That evening, Yama Arashi and I put that ungodly place behind us. The further the shoreline receded, the better I felt. We had direct passage after Kōbe, and when we arrived in Shinbashi it was like re-emerging into the civilized world. I parted with Yama Arashi and have not had occasion to see him since.

I’ve neglected to mention Kiyō -- After arriving in Tōkyō I rushed straight to her, suitcase in hand. “Kiyō! I’ve returned.” “Botchan! You’ve come back to me so soon!” She greeted me with tears in her eyes. I was so happy to see her that I promised never to leave her again. We’d own a house together in Tōkyō.

Afterward, through the introduction of an acquaintance, I took a position as assistant engineer with the tram office. My monthly pay was twenty five yen, and I paid six yen for rent. Though there was no grand entry hall, Kiyō was quite satisfied with our house. Unfortunately, she passed away in February of this year after falling ill with pneumonia. The day before she died, she called me to her side and said, “Botchan, be so good as to bury me in your family plot. When I’m resting in my grave I can happily await your visits.” So Kiyō’s grave is in the Yōgenji temple in Kobinata.