

I am a Cat – Chapter 1

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

I am a cat. I've yet to be given a name.

I've no idea whence I came. All I can remember, vaguely, is mewling in some dim and moist place. And it was in this place that I first encountered a human being. As I would learn later, it was not just any human I met, but a lodging student, the vilest order of the species. They say that these lodging students are known, on occasion, to catch, stew, and eat us. However, at the time I knew nothing of this, and hence felt no particular fear. There was only a sense of softness as I was lifted in the palm of a hand. After adjusting to this palm, I regarded the lodging student's face. This was my first look at a human being. I remember yet the oddity of it. First and foremost, the face, which should have been adorned in fur, was smooth as a kettle. I've since met numerous cats, but not once have I happened across such similar deformity. To make matters worse, in the center of the face was an all too large protrusion, with holes from which smoke, from time to time, would billow forth. I feared this smoke might suffocate me. Only recently have I come to understand it as tobacco, a thing in which humans indulge.

I rested comfortably for a time in this lodging student's palm, but was then subjected to extreme motion. I don't know if it was the student moving or just me. All was a spinning blur. It was all too intense. Just as I thought I could bear no more, a thud resounded and sparks danced in my eyes. I remember this much, but hard as I try can recall nothing further.

When I regained my senses, the lodging student was gone. My siblings, of whom there were many, were nowhere in sight. My all-important mother, too, was gone without a trace. Furthermore, there was now a bright, almost blinding, light. Knowing that all was not right, I began to slowly crawl, only to be met with great discomfort. From a bed of straw, I'd been suddenly flung into bamboo grass.

After working my way out of the bamboo grass with considerable effort, I arrived at a large pond. I sat at the water's edge and thought about what to do next. No great insights emerged. After a while, it occurred to me that perhaps if I mewed then the boarding student would come back for me. I tried mewling, but no one came. In the meantime, a wind had picked up over the water, and the sun had started to set. I was famished. Try as I might, I could mew no more. Having no other recourse, I resolved to seek out food. Warily, I began to round the pond to my left. The going was terribly hard. Persevering, I forced myself to crawl on until, finally, I sensed the presence of humans. Thinking I'd better just give it a go, I breached the grounds through a hole in the bamboo fence. Fate is a curious thing. Had that fence not been broken, I might well have perished from hunger out there on the road. The shade of a common tree, they say, brings strangers together. I use this same hole in the fence, even today, to go and call on the neighboring Miké. At any rate, having stolen onto the grounds, it was unclear what to do next. It was growing darker, my belly was grumbling, cold had descended, and rain was beginning to fall. I could afford no further delay. My

back against the wall, I made my way toward light and warmth. Thinking back on it now, I must have by that time been already under their roof. At this point, the opportunity to engage again with new humans, other than my boarding student, presented itself. The first I encountered was Osan. This one was unrulier still. At the first sight of me, she grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and tossed me out front. Thinking this might be my end, I closed my eyes and entrusted my fate to heaven. The hunger and cold, however, were too much to take. Avoiding Osan, I made my way back to the kitchen. Shortly, I was tossed out again. Crawling back in, I was tossed out, and being tossed out, I crawled back in. This was repeated, as I recall, four or five times. In the process, I came to dislike this Osan intensely. I stole Osan's mackerel pike the other day as payback, soothing somewhat my long-harbored grudge. As I was being tossed out yet again, the master of the house appeared, demanding to know what the all commotion was. The maidservant, dangling me before him, complained how a stray kitten, though tossed out again and again, kept crawling back into the kitchen. The master, twisting the black hair under his nose, took a moment to study my face. If that was the case, he finally told her, then why not just let it stay. With that, he retreated back to the inner rooms. He seemed a man of few words. The maidservant, greatly annoyed, tossed me into the kitchen. Thus it was that I came to abide in this house.

The master rarely finds time for me. They say he works as a teacher. When he comes home from the school, he shuts himself in his study for the remainder of the day and seldom re-emerges. The other members of the household regard him as studious, and he perpetuates this image with scholarly airs. However, he's not really so hardworking as they think he is. I sometimes creep in on quiet paws to observe him, and I often catch him napping. At times he'll drool on the open book he was reading. He's dyspeptic, and it shows in his skin, which is tinged a pale yellow and seems to lack resiliency. Nevertheless, he eats like a horse. After eating his fill, he downs a dose of Taka-Diastase. Then he opens a book. A few pages in, and he's drowsy. His head droops, and he drools onto the open page. This is his standard evening routine. Even as a cat, I sometimes ponder things. The life of a teacher is a comfortable one. If I were born human, there's nothing I'd rather be. If one's duty is merely to doze, then even a cat could fulfill it. Even so, the master would claim that the teacher's lot is a hard one. When friends call, he never fails to bemoan his dismal plight.

When I first took up residence in the house, I was terribly unpopular with all but the master. Wherever I went, my company was spurned. To the present day I still have no name, and this bears testimony to how little they value me. Having no other recourse, I keep myself as close as possible to the one who took me in. Mornings, when the master reads his paper, I curl on his lap. When he dozes off, I come and sleep on his back. It isn't that I'm necessarily fond of the master, but rather I'm left with no choice. By and by, as I've learned my way around, I pass my mornings on the warm rice vessel, evenings on the kotatsu, and warm days sunning on the veranda. Best of all, though, is slipping in to sleep with the children as night falls. The children are five and three, and they sleep together in a shared room. I can always find a gap between them, and I manage somehow to nestle in, but woe to me should one of them awake. The children

-- especially the little one who's ill-tempered -- will cry out, "The cat's in our bed! The cat's in our bed!" at any and all hours of the night. Then the master, with his frayed nerves and weak stomach, is readily roused and comes rushing in from the next room. The other day, in fact, I caught it hard cross the backside with a ruler.

Having lived with humans and observed their ways, I have to say they're a selfish lot. All the more so when it comes to those children with whom I sometimes share a bed. On a whim, they'll turn one upside down, stick a bag over one's head, toss one about, or stuff one into the hearth. To make matters worse, any false step on my part and I'm chased down by the entire household and persecuted severely. The other day I used the tatami, just a bit, to sharpen my claws. The wife grew irate and banished me from the parlor. She cared not the least that I shivered on the cold kitchen floor.

Shiro, the cat across the way whom I admire greatly, always tells me there's nothing so heartless as humans. The other day, four kittens, each a small bundle of fur, were born to him. Then on the third day, as he relates it, the boarding student took all four out back to the pond and returned alone. After telling this tale with tears in his eyes, he added that we felines, for the sake of our children and the integrity of our families, must rise up and strike down the human race. I can't say I disagree. Miké too, who lives next door, takes great exception to human disregard for property rights.

Among us cats, the right to eat a sardine head or mullet belly has always belonged to the first finder. Failure to respect this convention can be fairly countered with physical force. Humans, it seems, are oblivious to this concept. They routinely rob us of duly discovered delicacies. Resorting to superior strength, they snatch away food which is rightfully ours. Shiro lives in a soldier's home, and Miké's master is an attorney. As a teacher's cat, I'm easier going than my fellows. I take life a day at a time. The days of humans must surely be numbered. I'll bide my time, patiently, and wait for the age of the cat.

Speaking of egoism brings to mind a story of my master and the perils of vanity. This master of mine is quick to try his hand at things, but when all's said and done he excels at nothing. He writes haiku and submits them to Hototogisu. He writes new-form poetry and sends it to Myōjō. He churns out error-riddled English. At times he'll immerse himself in the practice of archery, then take up noh recital, then wring some sounds from a violin. Regrettably, all comes to nought. Nevertheless, once he sets his mind to something, weak digestion or not, his enthusiasm knows no bounds. He recites noh in the privy, and it fazes him not in the least that the neighbors have nicknamed him "privy virtuoso." He carries on, refraining, "I am he, Taira no Munemori." Folks spot him and exclaim, "Look! It's Munemori!" and double over with laughter.

This master of mine, for heaven knows what reason, came rushing home one day with a large bundle in his arms. It was his payday, about a month after I'd taken up residence. Wondering what he had bought, I watched him produce a watercolor paint set, brush, and Whatman paper. He was done with noh and haiku,

and now determined to paint. From the next day, and continuing for some time, he dispensed with his naps and painted each day in his study. There were none, however, who could make heads or tails of his finished works. He too seemed dissatisfied with the results of his efforts, and one day confided in his friend, an authority in aesthetics. Their conversation was roughly as follows.

"My painting is not as I'd hoped. Others make it look simple, but when I take up the brush myself, I see firsthand how hard it is." The master expressed his candid sentiment. His friend peered at him over gold-rimmed spectacles. "You can't expect success so soon. First of all, you won't paint well until you see beyond these walls. Consider the words of the great Italian master Andrea del Sarto. 'If you wish to paint, let nature guide your brush. Stars fill the heavens, and glistening dew blankets the earth. Birds fly and beasts bound. In the pond are goldfish, in the bare tree sit winter crows. Nature's a scroll that teems with life.' Do you see his point? If you would paint a worthy painting, look to the natural world."

"Andrea del Sarto said that? That's new to me. Yes, of course. He's quite right." My master seemed duly impressed. Behind those gold rims, a wry smile emerged.

The following day, I was napping comfortably on the veranda as usual when my master, uncharacteristically, emerged from his study. He stopped behind me, working at something. Perking up and wondering what he was up to, I cracked my eyes just enough to look. He seemed to be channeling, with due intensity, his inner Andrea del Sarto. I couldn't but snicker at the sight. Egged on by his comrade, his first move was to come out here and sketch me. I'd had my fill of napping. What I wanted now was to yawn. My master, however, was fervently working his brush, and it would be a shame if I moved, so I held still. He'd finished his outline and was coloring the face. I'll admit it - when it comes to cats, I'm not the finest specimen. Whether stature, coat, or facial features, I don't deem myself a standout. However ungainly I may be, though, I couldn't help sensing injustice in my master's peculiar sketch. For starters, the color was off. Typical of a Persian, my hide is a mix of yellow in light gray with black splashes. No one who's seen me would refute this. Nevertheless, the color my master wielded was neither yellow, nor black, nor gray, nor even brown. Nor was it any combination of these colors. It was some sort of color defying description. Oddly too, there were no eyes. Given that I'd been sketched while sleeping, this wasn't entirely unreasonable. On the other hand, there was no indication whatsoever that I even had eyes. I looked as much a sightless cat as a sleeping one. This, I thought to myself, however in fitting with Andrea del Sarto, was unacceptable. At the same time, I had to admire the passion of the effort. I thought to stay still for as long as I could, but for some time now nature had been calling. My whole body tingled. I dared not delay any further. Having no other recourse, I broke rank, indulgently stretching my front feet forward. My head followed my feet, grazing the floor and then rising into a full-fledged yawn. From this point, I made no further pretense of holding my pose. Having already upset the master's plan, I softly crept away, heading out back to do my business. "Worthless scoundrel!" A yell erupted from the parlor, in a voice that rang with both anger and disappointment. Worthless scoundrel was my master's go-to term when it came

to cursing. I can accept that he knows of no other way to curse, but to call one out so rashly, and with disregard for one's efforts, is in my mind poor form. If he were even the least bit accommodating at other times, welcoming me, for example, when I napped on his back, I could suffer such denigration. But to never show me favor, and to curse me then for answering nature's call, was downright atrocious. Human beings, fundamentally, are arrogant things, intoxicated by their own power. It will require some greater entity, taking them to task and but good, to finally check their arrogance.

If this were the extent human selfishness, then one might suffer them. However, when it comes to humans and moral corruption, it pains me to say I've heard much, much worse.

Behind my house lies a small grove of tea plants. While modest in size, it's tidy and receives good sun, making it altogether pleasant. When the noise of the children precludes a comfortable nap, or when they're bored and ill-tempered, I escape to this place to nurture gentler thoughts. One warm autumn day, having eaten my lunch and napped, I ventured out in the early afternoon to stroll the grounds. Moving plant to plant, relishing the scents of the roots, I made my way to the red cedar hedge that borders the grove to the west. There, on a bed of withered chrysanthemums matted down for the purpose, dozed a large cat, oblivious to the world around him. Either unaware of my approach, or aware yet unconcerned, he snored loudly, stretched to full length. I couldn't but be impressed at the audacity - stealing onto another's grounds and dozing unconcerned. He was quintessential black. The clear rays of the early afternoon sun struck his coat full on, setting it aglow in vibrant waves of invisible flame. So large was his stature, he could well be titled king among cats. He was easily twice my size. Struck with awe and curious with wonder, I forgot myself, stopped in my tracks, and locked him in my gaze. As I stared, the gentle autumn breeze enticed the branches of a phoenix tree into motion. From these branches, which extended over the red cedar hedge, two or three leaves rustled loose and floated down to rest in the chrysanthemum thicket. The king among cats opened his large round eyes. I can picture it still. The eyes were like amber, which humans so dearly prize, yet sparkled ever more keenly. He didn't stir. From the depths of those eyes, his piercing gleam focused itself on my diminutive brow. "Who are ya?" For a king among cats, his words seemed a bit crass. The power in his voice, though, could knock back even a dog. Trepidation seized me. I thought I'd best reply. "I am a cat. I've yet to be given a name," I answered with feigned composure. All the while, though, my heart was pounding wildly. "What? A cat? As a cat myself I'm sorry to hear that. Where's your home?" Most insolent, this fellow. "My home is here, with the teacher." "I figured as much. Awfully scrawny, aren't ya?" His arrogance was regal, but judging from his words, his home was rock-bottom lower class. Then again, his fatted, corpulent figure suggested daily treats and rich living. "And who might you be?" I had to ask in return. "I'm Kuro, Kurumaya no Kuro," he declared with pride. Kurumaya no Kuro was known to all as a bad actor. Befitting of his master, he was long on brawn and short on brains. Other cats avoided him, doing their all to shun without offending. On learning his name, I feared him. At the same time, I also felt a welling of contempt. To see for myself if he was dumb as they say, I engaged him in conversation.

"Which do you think better, a cartman or a teacher?"

"The cartman is certainly stronger. Look at that master of yours, nothing but skin and bones."

"Being a cartman's cat, you look pretty strong yourself. You also seem well fed."

"Well-fed is my own doing. I could live anywhere and never want for food. Come out of your tea grove and see. Stick with me, and within the month I'll fatten you into a new cat."

"I may take you up on that. On the other hand, it seems the teacher's place is grander than the cartman's."

"Nonsense. What good's a large house when you can't even fill your belly?"

I must have touched a sore spot. He twitched his chiseled ears for a moment then gruffly walked away. Thus it was that I came to know Kurumaya no Kuro.

From then on, I often happened across Kuro. Whenever we met, he would always have some cartman's bluster at the ready. The moral corruption I alluded to earlier, in fact, is an affair he related.

One day, Kuro and I were chatting idly while lazing in the warm tea grove. After repeating his standard boasts, as if they were something new, he turned and asked me the following. "Tell me, how many rats have you caught?" While I believe myself much better learned than Kuro, I don't presume to match him in strength or valor. Nevertheless, this question made me uncomfortable. Then again, there was no use hiding the truth, so I answered. "Actually, I was thinking to catch some but haven't yet." Kuro laughed so hard that his nose whiskers shook. The purpose of Kuro's bravado though, when all's said and done, is to obscure his own deficiencies. If one listens attentively to his aggrandizements and purrs along appreciatively, then he's easily placated. I learned this trick as soon as I'd made his acquaintance. In this instance, it would be folly to make matters worse with defense of my own shortcomings. Much better, I decided, to stand down and let him brag on himself.

I politely encouraged him. "With your years of experience, you must have caught a great many." As expected, he saw the opening and rushed in. "Not so many. Maybe, I suppose, some thirty or forty," he replied with evident satisfaction. He then continued. "When it comes to rats, I can handle a hundred. I can handle two hundred. Weasels, though, are another story. I nearly met my end with a weasel." "You don't say!" I affirmed my interest. Kuro blinked his large eyes and went on. "It was last year's spring cleaning. The master crawls under the veranda with a bag of quicklime and, wouldn't you know it, he flushes out a weasel. A big fellow." "I see." I show him I'm eager for more. "A weasel, anyway, is not much larger than a rat. Thinking to run the rascal down, I'm off in pursuit and finally corner him in a gutter." "Well done!" I applaud his effort. "Listen to this, though. Just when I think I've got him, he turns tail and sprays. To this day, I smell a weasel on sight. It's enough to turn my stomach." Just telling the tale, it seems, evoked a

phantom stench, and he rubbed his front paw cross his nose. I felt a bit bad for him and tried to brighten his mood. "But it's curtains for any rat that crosses your path. You're a master at taking them down. It's that diet of rats that's fattened you up and shined your coat, isn't it?" Oddly enough this question of mine, intended to lighten his mood, seemed to produce the opposite effect. With a dejected air, he sighed deeply and explained. "I pains me even to think of it. Hard as I work to catch those rats -- there's nothing so low-down as humans. They confiscate one's catch, and off they go to the police box. At the police box, they don't care whose work it is. They pay out five sen per rat. I've earned my master a good yen and a half, yet not once has he fed me decently. 'Human being' is a euphemism for thief." Despite his lack of learning, Kuro knew how things were. He was viscerally upset, setting the hairs of his back on end. For my part, I was feeling a bit uneasy. I tactfully begged my leave and headed home. From that day on, I resolved to never chase rats. Nor did I accompany Kuro on his various scavenging raids. To sleep is easier than to feast. A teacher's cat, it seems, takes after a teacher. If I'm not careful, I may end up dyspeptic.

Speaking of teachers, my master seems to have finally accepted that he's no painter. Here's what he penned in his journal on the 1st of December.

At today's gathering, I met Mr. So-and-So for the first time. They say he indulges in debauchery, and he certainly presents himself as a man of the world. Men of his kind have a knack for attracting women, so while he may indulge in debauchery, it's by necessity more than by choice. I hear, with due envy, that his wife is a geisha. Fundamentally, those who bad-mouth a ladies' man are those who fare poorly with women. Even among self-professed ladies' men are many of these incapables. Facing no such necessity for debauchery, much less the required talents, they pursue it nonetheless. As with my foray into watercolors, there's scant prospect of mastery. Be that as it may, they delude themselves, masquerading as men of the world. If drinks over dinner or trysting calls could make one a man of the world, then I'd declare myself, by the same logic, a competent painter. Paintings like mine are better left unpainted. In the same vein, a bumpkin fresh from the hills is preferable, by far, to an asinine "man of the world" pretender.

This discourse on men of the world is a little hard to swallow. Then too, envy of another man's geisha wife strikes me as both idiotic and unbecoming of a teacher. In turning a critical eye to his own painting, though, the master was spot on. However, in spite of his newfound self-awareness, he remained in the grips of conceit. After two days' pause, on the 4th of December, he penned the following.

Last night I dreamt that one of my paintings, which I'd set aside as hopeless, had been taken by someone, mounted in a handsome frame, and hung above the door. Seeing it framed thus, it was suddenly sublime, if I dare say so myself. I was elated. For some while I gazed at it, there by myself, in admiration. Then dawn broke and I awoke. My painting, in the light of day, was lousy as ever.

Even in his dreams, it appears, the master is a frustrated artist. And a frustrated artist, it goes without saying, has no prospect of numbering among "men of the world."

On the day after the master dreamt of watercolors, the aesthete with the gold-rimmed glasses dropped by again for the first time in a while. "How's the painting going?" he asked first off on seating himself. The master replied with air of detachment. "I've taken your advice and worked at sketching. You were right, it's opened my eyes to shapes, to subtle variations in color, to so much I'd never noticed. I suppose it's this long history of sketching that's brought Western art so far. Andrea del Sarto was quite correct." Making no mention of his journal entries, the master reverted to praise of Andrea del Sarto. The aesthete chuckled. "Actually, that was all a bunch of rubbish." He scratched his head. "What was?" The master was yet unaware he'd been duped. "What was rubbish is this Andrea del Sarto you've been admiring. I concocted the whole story. I never imagined you'd fall for it so. Ha ha ha ha." He was overjoyed. As I listened to this exchange from the veranda, I couldn't help but anticipate the master's next journal entry. This aesthete was a fellow whose sole pleasure derived from trickery and nonsensical stories. With no concern in the least for the mischief his Andrea del Sarto affair had worked on the master's sentiments, he triumphantly prattled on. "On occasion my jests are swallowed whole, and moments of great comical beauty arise. I love it when that happens. The other day I told a student how Nicholas Nickleby had advised Gibbon to publish his great life's work, *The History of the French Revolution*, in English rather than French. This student's retention is insane, and he repeated my story verbatim at the Japan Literary Society forum. It was hilarious. There must have been a hundred listeners in the audience, and all were enthralled. Here's another good one."

"The other day, at a certain gathering of literary folk, talk turned to Harrison's historical novel *Theophano*, so I lauded it as a standout example of historical fiction. The horrific death of the female protagonist, I noted, had moved me most deeply. The man of letters opposite me, a notorious know-it-all, was quick to second my sentiment, adding his own praise for the quality of the writing. He had, I thus confirmed, no more read it than I had." My master, he of weak nerves and poor digestion, was wide-eyed with amazement. "How can you venture such shenanigans? What if he'd read it and called you out?" The master's concern, it seemed, lay not in deceit of others, but rather the risk of being exposed. The aesthete was thoroughly unperturbed. "In that case, I just make up an excuse, like I must have confused it with a different work," he replied with a shrill laugh. This aesthete may sport gold-rimmed spectacles, but when it comes down to it, he and Kurumaya no Kuro are two of a kind. The master held his silence, blew out a ring of smoke, and watched it rise. His expression all but acknowledged he could never have such nerve. The aesthete, in turn, had a look in his eyes all but countering, "that's why you can't paint." "Jokes are one thing, but painting is another. It's really not easy. They say Leonardo da Vinci once instructed his disciples to sketch the stains on cathedral walls. If you go into the lavatory, or some such place, and study the walls where the rain's leaked in, you'll find some impressive motifs, and within them nature's hand. Give it a try. Observe and sketch. The results may surprise you." "You're pulling my leg again." "I mean it this time. At

least it's original, don't you think? Rings through and through of da Vinci." "Original it is, I'll grant you that." The master half acquiesced. Then again, he's yet to go sketch in the John.

Kurumaya no Kuro has gone lame. His coat, once so glossy, has faded and thinned. Those eyes of his, which I'd described as finer than amber, are now tainted by discharge. What strikes me most of all is his loss of vigor and lessened physique. When last I met him in the tea grove, I asked how he was. "Stinking weasels. The fishmonger's pole. Enough is enough," he lamented.

The autumn leaves, their patchwork of crimsons stitched among the pines, have fallen away and are now but yesterday's dream. The sasanqua flowers have shed their petals by the basin, reds and whites, one by one, till none remain. Along the length of the south-facing veranda, the winter sun sets early. The cold winter wind rarely subsides, and my naps, of necessity, grow shorter.

The master heads to school each day. On returning, he shuts himself up in his study. When visitors call, he bemoans the lot of the teacher. Only rarely does he paint. Taka-Diastase, he says, is worthless, and he's stopped taking it. The children, to their credit, go faithfully off to kindergarten. Back home, they sing songs, bounce balls, and once in a while swing me up by the tail.

I don't eat lavishly and haven't gained weight. At the same time, I pass my days in good enough health, and I haven't gone lame. I never chase rats. Osan is still my nemesis. They've yet to give me a name, but one mustn't hope for too much. I intend to live out my days, here in this teacher's house, ever the nameless cat.