

I am a Cat – Chapter 2a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

Since the coming of the new year, I've achieved some small degree of fame. Even as a humble cat, I can't say I don't enjoy an extra bit of strut in my step.

On New Year's morning, a picture postcard arrived for the master. It was a New Year's greeting from a certain artist friend. Its upper part was colored red, its lower part deep green, and a crouching animal was drawn in the center with pastel. Seated in his study as always, the master regarded the card from the sides, top, and bottom and remarked on its fine color. Having thus voiced his appreciation, I wondered if he wasn't done with it. He looked again, then, from the sides, top, and bottom. He twisted about and extended his arms, like an elder handling the Book of Divination. He turned toward the window, then drew the card close to his nose. The longer this went on, the more precarious my perch on his rolling lap. At long last the lunging subsided. "What on earth is it?" he muttered to himself in a low voice. While appreciative of the colors, the master seemed hard pressed to identify the form. Wondering if the card was really so abstruse, I tactfully cracked my sleepy lids. I regarded the card with no preconceived notion, and what I saw was clearly my own likeness. Unlike the master, I don't fancy myself any Andrea del Sarto, but the form and the color bore clearly the mark of an artist. No one could argue it wasn't a cat. It was splendidly drawn, and any discerning eye would conclude that of all the cats out there, it was none other than yours truly. I pity any human who would struggle so with something so obvious. Had I been able, I would like to have told him it was me. Or if not that it was me, at least that it was a cat. However, heaven has neglected to bless the human race with an understanding of our cat tongue, so much as it pained me, I let the matter rest.

I'd like to make something clear to the reader. I find the human tendency of referring to me dismissively as simply "a cat" or "the cat" totally unacceptable. Pompous teachers and the like, oblivious to their own ignorance, are wont to believe that cows and horses were formed from the dregs of humanity, and cats arose from the dung of horses and cows. Such notions, objectively speaking, say more about the dignity, or lack thereof, of their holder. We cats are deserving of better. To the casual observer, we may seem of like kind, equal without distinction, and lacking defining traits. The world of cats, however, is duly complex, and the human phrase "to each his own" is wholly applicable. The look in one's eyes, the lines of one's nose, the lay of one's fur, and the rhythm of one's gait are all differentiators. When it comes to the spread of the whiskers, or the orientation of the ears, or the droop of the tail, no two are alike. In terms of looks, in likes and dislikes, in style or lack thereof, it's safe to say our variety knows no bounds. It saddens me that humans, walking around with their heads in the clouds, are ever blind to the plain-as-day traits and features that distinguish us. The old saying that "like minds gather" is spot on. It's the rice cake shop for rice cakes, and it's cats who understand cats. However developed humans may be, the world of cats is beyond them. To make matters worse, humans aren't, if the truth be told, as remarkable as they think they

are. And for fellows like my master, void of compassion and unaware that intimacy begins in mutual understanding, the cause is lost. He retreats to his study like an ill-tempered oyster, and there he clings. Never once has the world seen his work. Oddly at that, he fancies himself a man of great insight. The fact that he now sits there, my likeness before his eyes, and babbles some nonsense about how the war with Russia is in its second year and therefore it must be a bear, is proof to the contrary - he has no insight.

As I rested on the master's lap, thinking these thoughts, the maidservant came in with a second picture postcard. Printed on it were a small assembly of foreign cats, lined up in a row, studying with pen in hand or open book. One cat was out of his seat and up by the corner of the desk, dancing the Western equivalent of "Neko ja, Neko ja." Above the print was penned "I am a Cat" in Japanese black ink. On the right side a haiku had even been added. "Reading a book, or dancing a dance, cats on a New Year's day." The card was from one of the master's former pupils, so anyone at a glance would know to whom it referred, but my inattentive master, twisting his head in a puzzled stupor, wondered to himself if this wasn't the year of the cat. He was still, it seemed, oblivious to my celebrity.

The maidservant arrived with a third card. This one wasn't a picture card. "Happy New Year!" was written on it, and then next to the greeting was, "If I may so impose, I entreat you to pass along my warmest regards to said cat." Even my scatterbrained master, with things now set so plainly before him, appeared to finally catch on. With a "humpf" he turned to regard me. I sensed in his eyes a hint of respect that had heretofore been absent. Suddenly, for the first time, he'd managed to make an impression on the outside world. And given that this was all owing to me, a little respect was certainly warranted.

Just then, a ringing sounded from the latticework door. Most likely a caller, whom it would be the maidservant's task to receive. The only caller I greet is the fish vendor Umekō, so without concerning myself I remained seated on the master's lap. The master, however, turned an anxious gaze toward the entryway, as if a loanshark or some such were poised to intrude. He seemed, at any rate, quite averse to receiving a New Year's guest and sharing a cup of saké. Given his depth of perversity, though, he has no real grounds for objection. He could just as well have been bold and left home before callers arrived. He's only reaffirming his oyster-like essence. Shortly, the maidservant came in to announce the arrival of Kangetsu.

This fellow Kangetsu is said to be one of the master's former students, and they say that after graduating he went on to achieve higher station than the master. For whatever reason, he still calls from time to time. When he does call, he is never short on words. He seems to have the eye of a certain lady, or then again maybe not. Sometimes the world is wonderful, and sometimes it's a bore. Life is dreadful, or all is romance. Why he should seek out a half-withered man like the master as party to such sentiments is beyond me. Odder still is that the master, oyster-like as he is, should eagerly drink in such words.

"Sorry it's been so long. I'd thought to call, but the end of the year was just crazy. I was off to other quarters," he opened vaguely while twisting at the ties of his haori. "Which quarters were you off to?" the master asked with an earnest look, tugging at the cuffs of his crested black cotton haori. The cotton material had shrunk, and a flimsy under-lining protruded from both sleeves. "Ho, ho, ho. To quarters other than these," Kangetsu replied with a grin. One of his front teeth, it seemed, had gone missing. "What happened to your tooth?" The master shifted the subject. "Ah, that. I was eating shiitake." "You were eating what?" "Just some shiitake. I went to bite through a mushroom cap, and my tooth broke off." "Loosing your tooth to a mushroom - that's an old man thing. Might be something poetic there, but certainly nothing romantic." The master clapped my head with the flat of his hand. "Is that that cat of yours? Seems you've been feeding him well. Might even match up to Kurumaya no Kuro. Splendid creature." Kangetsu seemed quite taken with me. "He's been growing," the master stated proudly while tapping me repeatedly. I welcomed the praise, but my head was beginning to ache. "The other night, we gathered for chamber music." Kangetsu took the conversation back to where he'd started. "Where was that?" "Never mind where. We had three violins, accompanied by piano. It was grand. Three violinists together, even if not first rate, makes quite a sound. It was me with two lady violinists, and I'd like to say I held my own." "I see. And who were these ladies?" the master asked with a hint of envy.

Despite his persistent air of detachment, the master is, in fact, by no means dispassionate when it comes to ladies. Once, in a certain Western novel the master read, a certain character appeared who fell for ladies left and right. It was sarcastically noted that of the ladies he passed on the street, some seventy percent laid claim to his heart. "Isn't that the truth," the master had concurred. Why a man of such fancy should pass his days shut in like a reclusive oyster is beyond us cats to explain. Some say his heart was broken. Others say it's his weak digestion. Still others say it's a timid nature coupled with lack of means. Whatever the reason, he's a man of no import in this modern era of Meiji, and history will care not the least. What's certain, however, is that he asked with envy after Kangetsu's ladies. Kangetsu took his chopsticks, picked up a piece of kamaboko, and bit with relish with his broken front tooth. I was afraid he might break off the rest, but this time it stayed put. "Just a couple of daughters from certain households, no one you'd know," he answered evasively. "Ahhh ..." the master was thinking thoughts.

Kangetsu sensed it was time to change the subject. "It's a fine day out. If you can spare the time, let's go for a stroll. Ryojun has fallen, and the mood of the town is festive." The master seemed more interested in the identity of Kangetsu's ladies than the fall of Ryojun. He thought a while longer and then, finally seeming to make up his mind, pulled himself to his feet. "Alright, let's go." He went as he was, in his crested black cotton haori and his padded Yūki pongee, a hand-me-down from his brother, perhaps, from twenty years or more back. However rugged Yūki pongee may be, it can't be worn forever. It was frayed in places, and against the light the seams of its back-side patches showed through. When it came to the master's attire, there was no year-end, and there was no New Year's. He dressed the same at home or away. When he went out, it was without ceremony. Whether he had no other clothes, or whether he had them but

couldn't be bothered to don them, I can't say. I can't imagine, however, that all this stemmed from a broken heart.

After the two of them departed, I helped myself to the remainder of Kangetsu's kamaboko. I've gained some notoriety of late. It seems to me those cats of Momokawa Joen, or even Gray's cat who went after the goldfish, have nothing on me. The same goes, of course, for Kurumaya no Kuro. Anyway, no one's going to take me to task over a single kamaboko slice. This tendency to sneak a bite while heads are turned, I can attest, is hardly unique to us cats. Osan, when the lady of the house is away, is always pilfering bean-jam cakes. And it's not just Osan. The children too, on whose fine upbringing their mother loves to expound, are just the same.

Four or five days back, the children roused themselves out early, at some ungodly hour when the master and his wife were still sleeping, and faced off at the table. Their customary breakfast was a slice of the master's bread sprinkled with sugar. On this particular morning the sugar jar was out, and it even had a spoon in it. This time, there was no one there to dole out the sugar, so finally the older one took a spoonful and dropped it on her own plate. The younger one followed her big sister, scooping the same amount in the same manner from the jar to her plate. After looking at each other for a time, the older one took the spoon again and added another spoonful to her plate. The younger one immediately took the spoon and matched her big sister with an equivalent amount. The older one scooped another spoonful. Not to be outdone, the younger one added one too. The older one reached for the jar. The younger one took her turn with the spoon. I watched the sugar piles grow, a spoonful at a time. When both plates were piled high, and the jar had been emptied, the master appeared from the bedroom, rubbing his weary eyes. He took the sugar, scooped so laboriously, and returned it to the jar. When it comes to fairness, the notion developed by humans, with its foundation in egoism, may well surpass that of us cats. In common sense, however, we cats have the upper hand. Rather than piling sugar high, better to lick it up without delay. I'd like to have told them as much. However, as I've noted before, the cat language is beyond them. Regrettably, all I could do was watch in silence from my perch on the rice warmer.

I don't know what the master and Kangetsu got into on their walk, but it was late evening when the master returned. The next morning, it was close to nine when he made it to the table. From my customary perch on the rice warmer, I watched as he downed his zōni in silence. He asked for seconds, then thirds. The rice cakes were small, but he finished off a good six or seven before leaving the last one in his bowl. "No more," he said as he rested his chopsticks. He would never have tolerated such indulgence from others, but when it came to himself, he was happy to exercise his head-of-the-household authority. The sight of that last forlorn rice cake, pocked with scorch-marks and bobbing in the sullied soup, phased him not in the least.

The wife opened a cupboard, took out his Taka-Diastase, and set it on the table before him. "I'm not taking that, it's useless," he told her. "They say it does wonders for starchy foods. You should take some," she

pressed him. "Starch or whatever, the stuff's no good." He dug in his heels. "Always so temperamental," the wife remarked, more to herself. "It's not about temperament. This medicine doesn't do anything." "You used to take it daily. You couldn't say enough about how well it worked." "That was then, and this is now," he answered antithetically. "You can't expect it to work if you take it in fits and starts. Dyspepsia's not like other maladies. If you can't stick to routine, it won't get better. Isn't that right?" she turned to Osan, who was attending the master, tray in hand. "That's the truth. Give your medicine a bit of a go. Maybe it works and maybe it doesn't." Osan readily took up the wife's cause. "Whatever. I said I'm not taking it, and I'm not taking it. What do you women know? Give it a rest." "I guess that's it, I'm just a woman," the wife, determined to win his concession, pushed the Taka-Diastase closer. The master, offering no reply, rose and retreated to his study. The wife and Osan looked at each other with knowing grins.

On occasions like this, I didn't dare follow along and climb on the master's lap. Instead, I quietly cut through the garden, hopped onto the veranda that skirts the study, and peeked in through a gap in the Shōji. The master had opened a book by someone named Epictetus. If he could follow what he was reading, then that was something. Five minutes later, though, he slapped the book shut and tossed it onto his desk. I'd figured as much. I watched further. He pulled out his journal and added the following entry.

Walked with Kangetsu to Nezu, Ueno, Ikenohata, and on toward Kanda. Saw geisha, in decorous New Year's dress, playing battledore in front of the Ikenohata tryst house. Attire was beautiful, but can't say as much for their faces. Reminded me of that cat of mine.

There's no need to drag me into this critique of appearance. I could venture to Kitadoko, have them shave my face, and come out looking more or less human. Conceit will prove humanity's downfall.

Saw another geisha at Hōtan crossing. Exquisitely proportioned, with slender build and gently-sloping shoulders. Wore a light purple kimono with utmost elegance. Flashing white teeth in a grin, called out to someone, "Gen-chan, about last night -- There was just so much going on." Voice was husky, like the caw of a migrating crow, and in my mind nullified all admiration for appearance. Didn't even care who this "Gen-chan" was, and without turning continued out to the high road. Kangetsu, too, seemed taken aback.

The human psyche is a black pit. I had no read on the master's present mood. Was he indignant, or was he reveling? Or then again, was he wanting solace from the testament of sages? It was entirely unclear whether he mocked the world or longed to join it, whether he railed against its follies or held himself aloof. Cats, on the other hand, are simple creatures. When we feel like eating, we eat, and when we feel like sleeping, we sleep. When we're angry, we fight for all we're worth, and when heartache calls, we cry out our eyes. First and foremost, we never keep useless journals. We've no need to. It may well be that a two-faced man like the master must steal off into the darkness, there to pen his true thoughts in private. We cats, though, simply walk, run, stand, sit, and sleep. We relieve ourselves when nature calls. That's our

journal, genuine and unabridged. We go to no pains to foster our "true selves." Time spent keeping a journal is better spent napping on the veranda.

Dined at a place in Kanda. For the first time in a while, had saké with dinner, and stomach was much better this morning. For dyspepsia, nothing beats an evening drink. Taka-Diastase, needless to say, is a non-starter. Despite what folks claim, it's useless. Let them claim what they may. What doesn't work doesn't work.

He can't let up on Taka-Diastase, arguing on for his own sake. His irritation of this morning smolders on. Such venting of grievances, perhaps, is the real reason humans keep journals.

The other day, a certain so-and-so said that skipping breakfast improves digestion. I tried skipping for several days, but all it got me was a grumbling stomach. Another so-and-so advised against pickled vegetables. According to his theory, all digestive disorders stem from pickled vegetables. Remove the cause of the disorder, his reasoning went, and recovery is assured. For a week thereafter I refrained, but to no apparent avail. I've gone back to eating my pickles. Yet another so-and-so says it's all about abdominal massage, but not just any massage. It has to be the old-school Minagawa style. A couple of sessions will suffice to cure most any disorder. Yasui Sokken was a great fan of this massage technique. They say Sakamoto Ryōma numbers among the renowned men known to have received treatment, so I set off for Kaminegishi, without delay, to give it a try. As it turned out though, it's terribly harsh. They insist on massaging to the bone and inverting the entrails. I came home lethargic, my whole body like wadded cotton. I decided that once was enough. Mr. A swears off of solids. I tried living on milk for a day, but my gut sloshed, making sounds like it was flooded, and I couldn't sleep through the night. Mr. B counseled me to exercise my inner organs by breathing with my diaphragm. This, he explained, should restore the stomach to its natural function. I tried for a bit but didn't take to it. It seemed to unsettle my gut. Then too, I would practice devoutly at times, only to later forget and lapse. If I forced myself to stay vigilant, my diaphragm ruled my mind. I couldn't read and I couldn't do my writing. Meitei, the aesthete, made sport of the situation. Unless I wanted to look like a man in labor, he quipped, I'd better stop. I have, of late, stopped. Mr. C suggested eating soba, so I went at it with both hot and cold soba. All this got me, however, was a case of the runs. I've tried every imaginable remedy, but my digestive woes continue unabated. Until those three cups of saké I tipped back with Kangetsu last night. From here on, it's two or three cups each evening.

We'll see for how long. The master's fancies, like these cat eyes of mine, are in constant flux. He's not the type to soldier on. Furthermore, while he confides to his journal such grave concerns for his digestive disorders, to the outside world he sports a brave face. That scholar friend of his, the one who called the other day, postulated that all ailments arise from either one's own sins or the sins of one's forebears. He seemed to have thought it all through, and he argued eloquently, with clear logic and orderly reasoning. Regrettably, the master lacks both the intellect and the scholarship to refute him. However, given his own

digestive ailments, he felt compelled, it seemed, to push back in his own defense. "Your theory intrigues me, but I would remind you that Carlyle, too, suffered from poor digestion." He seemed to infer, on the basis of nothing, that Carlyle's digestive suffering somehow elevated his own. "Carlyle may have numbered among those with dyspepsia, but I don't see that that necessarily puts dyspepsia sufferers in the company of Carlyle." His friend laid the matter to rest, and the master fell silent. Much as the master's dyspepsia feeds his vanity, truth be told he'd rather see it go. I can't but laugh a bit to imagine him drinking each night. On second thought, though, this morning's feat of zōni consumption may well be due to those glasses he emptied with Kangetsu last night. And speaking of zōni, I wouldn't mind trying some myself.

I am a cat, but I can eat most anything. Unlike Kurumaya no Kuro, I lack the will to wander alleyways as far as the fishmonger's. And unlike Miké from across the lane, whose mistress teaches the two-string koto, I'm in no position to entertain indulgence. As it is then, my dislikes are surprisingly few. I eat the children's left-over bread, and I lap at rice-cake filling. Pickled vegetables are atrocious, but for the sake of experience I downed a couple of takuan slices. Oddly enough, I like most anything I try. To pick and choose is the ultimate self-indulgence, and as a teacher's cat it's out of the question. The master talks of a French novelist named Balzac. This Balzac was a man of great extravagance -- not extravagance of the palette, of course, but extreme extravagance, as a writer, with respect to his own prose. One day, Balzac was trying out various names for a character in his novel, but with none to his liking. Just then, a friend called, so they set out together to walk. While the friend, of course, knew nothing of it, Balzac was hoping to settle on a name for his character. As they walked the streets, he surveyed every sign on every shopfront. The right name, however, eluded him. With friend in tow, he continued on and on. His friend, oblivious to his objective, followed along. In the end, they scoured Paris from morning to night. On their way back home, a sign on a tailor shop caught Balzac's eye. The name "Marcus" was written on the sign. Balzac clapped his hands together. "That's it, that's it! It has to be Marcus. A splendid name! I'll put an initial 'Z.' in front, and then it's perfect. Z. Marcus it is. I love it! The names I invent, no matter how cleverly crafted, always fall flat as contrived. Finally, a name that I like." Forgetting his friend, he delighted in his discovery. Thus it's told how he went to great pains, scouring Paris for a full day, to name a single character in his novel. Such extravagance is fine for those who can afford it, but I find myself, with my oyster-like master, in no such position. I'll take what I get, as long as it's edible. Such is my resolution, born of my circumstance. My inkling for zōni, then, sprang not from indulgence, but rather the thought to eat while the eating's there. The master's leftovers, it occurred to me, might still be out. ... I made my way around to the kitchen.

There I found that same rice cake from the morning, exactly as I'd seen it, stuck to the bottom of the bowl. I'll confess right now that I'd never tasted a rice cake. It looked good in a way, but at the same time, in another sense, was somewhat uninviting. With a front paw, I cleared the greens from its surface. Its outer skin stuck in my claws, leaving a tacky feel. Sniffing at it, its scent was like that of the scorched rice from the bottom of the kettle when they transfer it to the warmer. I surveyed my surroundings, wondering

whether to try it. For better or worse, there was no one about. Osan, as she did every year-end and New Year's, was out playing battledore. The children were back in the parlor, singing "What's that you say, Mr. Rabbit?" Now was my chance. If I let this opportunity slip, it would mean another year without having tasted a rice cake. Even as a cat, I seek out truths, and in this moment one formed in my mind. "All living creatures, in the face of rare opportunity, are wont to leap, even to their own detriment." In all honesty, I wasn't that interested zōni. On the contrary, the harder I scrutinized this form at the bottom of the bowl, the more unsettling and less appealing it looked. Had Osan opened the kitchen door, or had I sensed the children's footsteps approaching, I'd have ungrudgingly abandoned the bowl. Subsequently, I expect, I'd have thought no further of zōni till the following year. However, no one came. I hesitated and wavered, but no one came. It would be nice, I thought, peering into the bowl, if someone did come. My wish went unanswered. No one came. There was no choice but to try it. Without further ado, I dropped the weight of my body into the bottom of the bowl and sank my teeth into a corner of the rice cake. Given the power of my bite, most anything would have yielded. Not so in this case! Satisfied with my ingress, I went to withdraw my teeth. To no avail. I bit in further, but in vain. These rice cakes, I perceived too late, are diabolical. Just as a man in the mire sinks deeper with each effort to free his feet, so my mouth stuck faster with each clamping of my teeth. Firm though my bite was, its firmness offered me no way out.

Meitei, the scholar of aesthetics, once remarked to the master that he never knew what to make of him. Meitei's point was apropos. And this rice cake was just like the master, nebulous and defying description. Bite as I might, the situation, as when ten is divided in thirds, went on and on with no sign of finding an end. In the midst of my agony, I unwittingly stumbled on a second truth. "All living creatures instinctively know a good thing from a bad thing." I now had two truths but was firmly, still, in the grips of the rice cake. My discoveries brought me no cheer. My teeth ached, as though the rice cake were wrenching them loose. I had to bite through and flee before Osan came. The children had stopped singing. No doubt they'd come running to the kitchen. At the height of agony, I shook my tail for all I was worth. It did me no good. I raised and lowered my ears. Again no good. On further thought, what did my ears and tail have to do with the rice cake? Long story short, it dawned on me that my tail shaking and ear perking were all for nought, so I stopped. The only way out, I decided, was to draw on my front paws to brush the rice cake aside. I started with the right paw, rubbing it round my mouth. This rubbing proved woefully inadequate. Next, I extended my left paw and moved it round my mouth in a sharp circle. Against these incantations, the demon yielded not. Placing my faith in persistence, I went at it with alternate paws, left then right, left then right. My teeth remained as they were, suspended in the rice cake. In a fine fix, I went with both paws at once. Curiously, for the first time, I stood on two feet. I could do it. I felt like I wasn't a cat. Cat or not, though, was hardly the issue at hand. Determined to loose the demon, I pulled at my face with fierce abandon. This intense motion of my front paws was enough to upset my balance. Each time I wavered, my hind feet moved to compensate. It was impossible to stay in one place, and around the kitchen I pranced. My dexterity in keeping my feet was something, if I do say so myself.

A third truth was on me in a flash. "In the face of danger, the impossible becomes possible. This is divine aid." With the grace of divine aid, I struggled on against this diabolical rice cake, giving it all I was worth. As I did so, I caught the sound of footsteps. Someone was coming. They mustn't see me this way. Panic set in, and I flew about the kitchen. The footsteps drew nearer. Unfortunately, divine aid was not quite up to the task. The children arrived. "Look, the cat's eating zōni and dancing a dance!" they called in a loud voice. The first to hear them was Osan. Dropping her battledore bits, she arrived at the kitchen door. "Goodness!" she cried as she rushed in. "What an awful cat!" The wife was there in her crested crepe dress. Even the master emerged from his study. "Blasted idiot!" he added. The children, at least, thought it all great fun. Then, as if on cue, they all burst out laughing. I was indignant, and at the same time embarrassed, and all the while unable to stay still. What could I do? Finally, the laughter subsided. "Mother, that's some cat!" the five-year-old daughter exclaimed. Like the force of a wave that dies to swell anew, another round of laughter filled the room. I'd witnessed, time and again, this dearth of compassion in humans, but never with such dismay as I witnessed it now. In the meantime, divine aid abandoned me altogether, and I found myself back on all fours. Dumbfounded and bewildered, I must've cut a shameful sight. Watching my demise, it seemed, was too much for them. "Enough now. Remove the rice cake," the master instructed Osan. Osan, preferring another dance, gave an appealing look to the wife. The wife, who was all for a dance but not at the cost of my life, stayed silent. "Remove it before the poor thing dies! Hurry!" the master turned and ordered Osan. Osan, as though crudely awakened from some beautiful dream, unenthusiastically grabbed the rice cake and pulled. I thought of Kangetsu and wondered if my front teeth would hold. My teeth were lodged firmly in the rice cake, and painful though it might be, she tugged without mercy. It was excruciating. I experienced a fourth truth. "After great hardship comes great relief." As I looked around to regain my bearing, the members of the household had already disappeared back into the interior rooms.

At times like this, having blundered so, the last thing I wanted was to stick around and lock eyes with Osan or such. Thinking to call on Mikeko for a change of pace, I slipped out of the kitchen and into the backyard. Mikeko, whose mistress teaches the two-stringed koto, lives just across the lane and is renowned in these parts as the local beauty. I may be only a cat, but when it comes to feelings I'm aptly astute. When the master throws me a sour look, or when Osan levels me with a scolding and I'm feeling down, I always seek out this female companion for solace. Before I know it, my spirit is refreshed, my trials and travails are forgotten, and I'm feeling like a new cat. The feminine touch is truly wondrous. I looked out through a gap in the red cedar hedge, wondering if she was out. She was seated properly on the veranda, sporting a new collar for the New Year. The rounded slope of her back was beauty incarnate. Never has a curve carried itself so grandly. The wrap of her tail, the fold of her feet, the ears that shifted dreamily from time to time, all left me speechless. Basking in the warm sun, she was elegance at rest, a fluid motion restrained. At the same time her smooth fur, which could easily pass for velvet, caught the rays of the New Year's sun and quivered in response, as though stirred by some phantom breeze. I watched her spellbound for a moment and then, finally coming back to myself, called her name in a low voice and

beckoned with my front paw. "Ah, Sensei." She dropped off the veranda. The bell on her red collar tinkled. They'd attached a bell for New Year's. As I admired its fine sound, she approached. "Sensei, Happy New Year!" she greeted me with a leftward sweep of her tail. When we cats greet each other, we straighten our tails, raise them high, and sweep them around to the left. Mikeko was the only cat in the neighborhood to address me as Sensei. As I've mentioned before, I've yet to be given a name. Respecting the fact that I live in a teacher's house, though, Mikeko is kind enough to always call me Sensei. One could certainly be called worse, so I happily to answer to Sensei. "Happy New Year! You're adorned to a tee." "The mistress bought this for me late last year. Nice, isn't it." She shook the bell to hear it tinkle. "It's a lovely sound. I've never in my life seen anything so fine." "Oh stop now! Everybody has one." She shook it again. "It is a nice sound. I'm ever so pleased with it." She shook it again and again. "Your mistress must really adore you." I was thinking of my own situation, and betrayed a tinge of jealousy with my words. Mikeko was an innocent thing. "She really does. As if I were her own child," she answered with an unaffected laugh. It shouldn't be presumed that cats don't laugh. Humans think they're the only creatures who laugh, but they're mistaken. When I laugh, I form my nostrils into triangles and vibrate my Adam's apple. It's no wonder humans miss it. "Tell me, who is this mistress of yours?" "Mistress sounds odd. She's an instructor. She teaches the two-string koto." "I know that, but what's her story? Going back, she must be of noble birth." "That she is."

The white pine, while I wait for you

From within, the mistress struck up her two-string koto, and the sound carried out through the shōji. "Isn't her voice lovely?" Mikeko asked with pride. "It is lovely, but I can't follow the story. What's it about?" "That? It's about ... you know. It's one of her favorites. Can you believe she's sixty two? She's still in the best of health." The fact that she's sixty two and still living bears testament to her health. "Uh-huh," I answered back. Not the smoothest of replies, but I could think of nothing more apt, so I let it go at that. "Furthermore, she comes from a family of highest standing. She tells me so herself." "Really? What's her background then?" "Well, as it turns out, she's Tenshō-in's private secretary's younger sister's marriage family's mother's nephew's daughter." "I'm sorry?" "Tenshō-in's private secretary's younger sister's marriage ..." "I see. Just a moment now. Tenshō-in's younger sister's private secretary's ..." "No, that's not it. Tenshō-in's private secretary's younger sister's ..." "Okay, I've got it. Tenshō-in's, right?" "Right." "Private secretary's, right?" "That's right." "Marriage family." "Younger sister's marriage family." "Yes, yes. Sorry. Younger sister's marriage family's." "Mother's nephew's daughter." "Mother's nephew's daughter?" "Exactly. Got it?" "Not really. It's all a bit convoluted still. In short, that makes her Tenshō-in's what?" "You don't get it, do you? That makes her Tenshō-in's private secretary's younger sister's marriage family's mother's nephew's daughter. Didn't I say as much to begin with?" "I follow you now." "Good, then. That's what you need to know." "I see." It was time to capitulate. We're faced, on occasion, with situations where expediency trumps honesty.

From inside the shōji, the two-string koto went silent. "Miké, come Miké, time to eat," called the mistress. Mikeko turned to me beaming. "The mistress is calling, so I'd better go. Do you mind?" I saw no point in objecting. "Come visit again soon." She raced off to the garden, her bell tinkling as she ran, then suddenly returned. "You're not looking so well. Is something wrong?" she asked with a look of concern. I wasn't about to tell her of clamping my teeth on the zōni and dancing a dance. "Oh that, it's nothing in particular. I was thinking too hard, and my head started to hurt. I figured talking with you would make it better. That's really why I came." "I see. Well take care then. I'll see you later." She seemed a little reluctant to part. At that the zōni was forgotten and my spirits restored. I was feeling fine. I decided to cut through the tea grove on my way back. I stepped over lingering needles of frost and poked my face through the old and broken fence. There on the withered chrysanthemums, arching his back and yawning, was Kurumaya no Kuro. Kuro no longer intimidates me like he used to. Nevertheless, I'd just as soon avoid him, so I sought to pass him by. Kuro, however, has never been one to let a perceived snub go unchallenged. "Hey there, nameless Gonbei! What's with the attitude? Awfully haughty, aren't we, for a cat on teacher's fare? I'll not be played for your fool." Kuro, it seemed, was unaware of my new-found fame. I would have liked to tell him, but he wasn't one to fancy such things. The best course, I decided, was a cursory greeting and quick exit. "Hey there, Kuro. Happy New Year! You're looking well." I raised my tail and swept it round to the left. Kuro, too, raised his tail, but with no reciprocal sweep.

"A happy New Year? If the New Year's happy for ya then I suppose you're happy year-round. Watch yourself, ya fat-faced bellows blower." The term "fat-faced bellows blower" was no doubt some form of put-down, but what it meant I couldn't say. "If I might ask, what exactly do you mean by fat-faced bellows blower?" "Huh? I curse you out and you ask for an explanation? You're pathetic, mister New Year's rogue." Mister New Year's rogue rang poetic, but its meaning was no clearer than fat-faced whatever. For my own reference, I was tempted to ask. But then again, I knew I'd not get any satisfactory answer, so I stood there holding my tongue. An awkward silence followed. Suddenly, then, the proprietress from Kuro's place raised up a racket. "Hey, the salmon's gone from the shelf! I can't believe it! That rascal Kuro swiped it. Damn that blasted cat! Just wait till he gets home," she yelled out. The tranquil air of New Year's was brashly set astir, the peace of the day, the calm contentment, bashed and shattered. If she wants to yell, let her yell all she wants. Kuro's sly expression said as much as he thrust his square jaw forward and rolled his eyes in response. Up to now I hadn't noticed, occupied as I was in dealing with Kuro, but in the dirt at his feet lay salmon bones, the kind one finds in the cheaper cuts. "Still at it, aren't you?" Forgetting our heretofore exchange, I offered up my admiration. Kuro, however, was not so easily placated. "Still at what, scuzzball? What's a piece of salmon or two? Don't you patronize me. Allow me to remind you, I'm Kurumaya no Kuro." He didn't have a sleeve to roll up, but he swept his right front paw up to shoulder height, claws forward. "I know full well who you are." "If you know full well, then what's with this 'still at it' bit? What are you on to?" His hot breath hit me in waves. In human terms, this is the equivalent of being grabbed by the collar and roughed.

I realized I'd landed myself in a bind. As I wondered what was next, the voice of Kuro's proprietress rang out loudly again. "Hey there, Nishikawa. It this Nishikawa? I need something from ya. Bring me a cut of beef. Not too tough, a tender cut." Her voice, as she ordered her cut of beef, rang out across the neighborhood. "Looky there. A once-a-year order for beef, and she broadcasts it far and wide. Incurable she-devil, lording it up over nothing." While heaping on his scorn, Kuro rose to all fours. Having nothing to say in response, I watched him in silence. "Just one measly cut. I guess it'll have to do. Put up that cut then. I'll have it soon enough." He spoke as though the beef were already his. "Sounds like a real treat. Wonderful!" I hoped to encourage him on his way. "What would you know? I've had enough of you - shut your trap!" With that, his hind legs sent a shower of broken frost needles raining down on my head. Caught off guard, I reflexively shook myself clean. Before I knew it, he'd ducked through the fence and disappeared, no doubt off after beef from Nishikawa's.

When I returned home, the mood was uncharacteristically festive, with the master's laughter echoing from the parlor. Wondering what was up, I slipped in by way of the veranda and made my way to the master's side. An unfamiliar guest had arrived. His hair was neatly parted, and he sported a crested cotton haori and hakama of Kokura weave. He looked to be a boarding student, and an industrious one at that. At the corner of the master's hand brazier, next to his lacquered cigarette case, was a calling card with "Allow me to introduce Ochi Tōfū - Mizushima Kangetsu." From this I learned both the name of the guest and the fact that he was here through Kangetsu's introduction. I caught the conversation between host and guest from the middle, so the context eluded me, but it seemed they were talking of Meitei, the aesthete, of whom I've spoken before.

"So he tells me he has this amusing idea, and that I must come with him," the guest settles into a story. "What idea is that? Something to do with lunch at a Western-style restaurant?" The master tops up their tea and slides a full cup back to his guest. "I wasn't yet privy to the idea, but given whom we're dealing with here, I figured it ought to be good ..." "So you went along. I see." "But I wasn't prepared for what followed." I was sitting on the master's lap, and he clapped his hand on my head, as if to say, "I could have told you." My head rang a bit. "Another silly charade, no doubt. He's notorious for those." The Andrea del Sarto affair came back to mind. "He laughs and asks me if I'm up for unusual fare." "What did you have?" "First he peruses the menu and expounds on various items." "Before ordering?" "Yes." "And then?" "Then he turns to the waiter and says he sees nothing of interest. The waiter, somewhat defensively, suggests perhaps the roast duck or a veal chop. The doctor fires back that he hasn't come all this way for something so trite. The waiter, who seems unsure of what 'trite' means, just stands there looking perplexed." "No doubt." "Then he turns to me, and with great fanfare explains how in France or England they go all out with Tenmei style or Manyō style, but all one finds in Japan's Western eateries is cookie cutter fare that's hardly worth the venture -- I wonder, has he ever been abroad?" "Has Meitei been abroad? Well, he has the means and he has the time, so he certainly could go if he wanted. Maybe that's his game, treating his planned travels as *fait accompli*." Pleased by his own wit, the master instigates a round of laughter.

The guest seemed not so amused. "Is that it, then? I figured he'd been abroad at some point and was taking it all in earnest. He talked so of snail soup, and his description of frog stew was superb. I was sure he'd seen them firsthand." "Probably heard it from someone else. He's notorious for pulling people's legs." "So it would seem." The guest gazed at the daffodil in the vase, a bit dispirited. "So that was his game?" the master sought to confirm. "Not at all. He was just getting started. There's more." "Oh?" The master's interest was piqued anew. "Then he suggests that since we can't hope for snails or frogs, we settle for *tochimenbō*. He asks for my concurrence, and without much thought I follow along." "Tochimenbō? Isn't that rather odd?" "It certainly was odd, but the doctor said it with such sincerity that it didn't phase me." The guest, acknowledging his lapse in prudence, was almost apologetic. "What happened next?" The master, oblivious to his guest's contrition, was eager for more. "Next he turns to the waiter and orders two servings of *tochimenbō*. The waiter asks in return if he doesn't mean *menchibō*. The doctor, more earnestly than ever, states in no uncertain terms that he doesn't want *menchibō*, but *tochimenbō*." "I see. Is there really such a dish as *tochimenbō*?" "I was wondering that myself, but the doctor held firm. He's known as an expert on all things Western, and I believed he had traveled abroad, so I backed him up. 'Tochimenbō. It's *tochimenbō*,' I repeated to the waiter." "What did the waiter do?" "It's all rather comical now, but the waiter thought for a moment and then announced that, most regrettably, they were all out of *tochimenbō* that day. Expressing his apologies, he offered to bring us two servings of *menchibō*. The doctor, looking terribly crestfallen, was loathe to acquiesce."

"Asking the waiter if there isn't some way for us to have *tochimenbō*, he slips him a 20-sen coin. The waiter says he'll talk to the chef, and he disappears into the back." "Seems he was dead set on *tochimenbō*." "After a bit, the waiter reappears and explains, apologetically, that if we want *tochimenbō* they can make it, but it will take some time. Professor Meitei, fully at ease, replies that it's New Year's, and there's no rush, so we're happy to wait. Then he pulls a cigar from his pocket and starts in smoking. To kill time, I take out the Japan News from my sleeve pocket and begin to read. The waiter goes back to talk with the chef." "What an awful lot of trouble." The master, with the same enthusiasm he displays when reading up on the war, pushes the conversation forward. "The waiter appears again, saying this time that the ingredients for *tochimenbō* are in short supply. They can't be had at Kameya, or even at Number 15 in Yokohama, so most regrettably and unfortunately, for the time being, *tochimenbō* can't be served. The doctor, looking my way, repeatedly voices his dismay at having come all this way for nought. I can't very well stay silent, so I follow suit and echo his regret, stressing how disappointed I am." "Naturally," the master concurs. Just what's "natural" about all this eludes me. "Then the waiter, with due sympathy, implores us to come back again at such time as the ingredients are available. The doctor asks just what ingredients they use, and the waiter evades him with a laugh. The doctor presses again, asking if there isn't, among the ingredients, a certain Japan-school poet. The waiter answers back that indeed that's the case, and hence they can't be had of late, even in Yokohama. He apologizes one final time." "Oh ho ho! So that's the punch line! Amusing indeed!" The master laughs louder than ever. His lap is asway, and I'm just hanging on. Heedless of my plight, he laughs some more. He's greatly relieved, it seems, to know he's not

the only one taken in by "Andrea del Sarto" and the like. "Once we're outside he asks me, beaming with pride, what I thought. Wasn't it amusing, he asks, to work that all off Tochimenbō? I express my admiration, and we part company, but to tell the truth I was famished, and I was also put out at having squandered the lunch hour." "I feel for you," the master offers, for the first time showing sympathy. I certainly felt for him too. The conversation subsided for a moment, with master and guest attuned to the sound of my purring.

Downing the remainder of his tea, which had grown cold, Tōfū broached a new subject. "The real reason I called today was to present a modest proposal." "I see. What can I do for you?" the master responded with due gravity. "As you know, arts and literature mean the world to me, so ..." "Splendid," the master encouraged him. "Those of us of like mind have banded together to form a recital group. We gather once each month to further our pursuits. We held the first of our gatherings late last year." "If I may ask, when you say 'recital group,' I imagine poetry and such, read out with dramatic intonation. How exactly do you conduct yourselves?" "Well, we're starting with works of the old masters, and bit by bit we'll work our way to the present." "Would that be classical works, like Hakurakuten's Biwa Sojourn?" "Not that one." "Buson's spring wind and such?" "Nor that." "What did you choose, then?" "The other day we did one of Chikamatsu's lovers' suicide works." "Chikamatsu? Chikamatsu of the jōruri?" There's only one Chikamatsu, and I was thinking the master a numbskull for having to ask. Unaware of the critique in my mind, he most kindly caressed my head. Who hasn't, in this world of confusion, mistaken a stray glance for infatuation. With that in mind, the master's oblivion was nothing noteworthy, and rather than disabuse him, I let him caress away. "Yes," Tōfū replied, at the same time probing the master's countenance. "In that case, did you choose a single reader, or did you assign roles?" "We did it with roles, as a dialogue."

"Our aim is to empathize with the work's characters and do all we can to bring them to life. To that end, gesture and movement are part and parcel. In reading our lines, we work to portray the voice of the characters' era. Be it a young lady or a shop boy, we seek to draw them out." "So it's much like a play, then." "Yes, absent the costumes and backdrop." "If you don't mind my asking, how did it go?" "For a first try, I'd say it went well." "And it was a lovers' suicide story?" "That? Yes. A boatman takes on a passenger en route to Yoshiwara." "An awfully challenging scene." The master inclines his head in wonder, as teachers are wont to do. A ball of smoke emanates from his nostrils and ascends in swirls past the sides of his face, brushing his ears as it rises. "Really, it wasn't so bad. The only characters are the passenger, the boatman, a courtesan, a parlormaid, a madam, and a call-office." Tōfū responds nonchalantly. The master winces a bit at the mention of a courtesan, but he seems unsure exactly what to make of the parlormaid, madam, and call-office. He starts in with his questions. "When you say 'parlormaid,' is that a servant girl in a brothel?" "I haven't researched it yet, but I believe the parlormaid is a tea house maidservant. The madam, it seems, assists in running a ladies' quarters." Though Tōfū had spoken of bringing his characters to life through voice acting, in the case of the madam and parlormaid he seemed unsure just who his characters were. "I see. So the parlormaid is in servitude to a tea house, and the madam is a brothel's

administrator-in-residence. What of the call-office, then? Is that a person, or is it referring just to some place? If it's a person, is it a man or a woman?" "It's a man, I believe." "Do you know what his duties are?" "Hmm. That I don't. We'll have to look into it." Imagining what a cockamamie farce their "dialogue" must have been, I look up at the master to read his reaction. Contrary to expectation, he's earnest and all ears.

"Aside from yourself, who were the readers?" "Various folk. K-kun, who hold a law degree, played the courtesan. He sports a mustache, so it was a little odd when he read the feminine lines. There's also a part where the courtesan is seized with convulsions ..." "Does the reader have to act out convulsions?" the master asked with an air of concern. "Yes. Expression is paramount." Tōfū, at heart, was a true artist. "Did he carry off his convulsing?" The master inquired wryly. "It's not so easy to convulse on one's first try." Tōfū supplied a wry response. "What role did you play, then?" the master asked. "I was the boatman." "Oh you were?" The master's tone, expressing too much surprise, all but stated that if Tōfū were the boatman then he himself could as well play the call-office clerk. "How did you manage as the boatman?" he then asked rather bluntly. Tōfū showed no signs of offense and answered in a composed manner. "The whole event, which we'd worked so to orchestrate, and which had started so well, went out with a whimper on the boatman's watch. There were four or five schoolgirls, you see, who board in the building next door. I don't know how, but they caught wind of what we were doing. On the day of our gathering, they were eavesdropping outside the window. I was voicing the boatman, finally feeling in form and thinking I had it down ... perhaps I went too far with my gestures. In any case the girls, who had held themselves in stealthy check, suddenly lost it and burst out laughing. I was caught off guard, became self-conscious, and couldn't resume, so we had to leave it there and adjourn." So this was his idea of a successful first outing. I tried to imagine, then, what might constitute a failure, and couldn't suppress a smirk. Unconsciously, my throat set to rumbling. The master continued caressing my head. To bask in affection while inwardly scoffing at others, though a touch incongruous, is not at all bad.

"That's most unfortunate." This early into the new year, and the master was already doling out condolences. "We're working hard to ensure a much more successful second outing. To that end, I've come here today to ask you to join in and support us." "I could never pull off convulsions." The master, always the faint of heart, moved immediately to decline. "No need for convulsions, but we're signing up supporters." So saying, he unwrapped his purple furoshiki and carefully produced an account book. Its cover was imprinted with small chrysanthemum marks. "I'd like to request your signature and seal." He opened the account book and set it before the master. Neatly entered on the page was an imposing list of well-known literary scholars and men of letters. "I see. As a supporter, what would my obligations be?" The oyster teacher shows his concern. "There's no particular obligation involved. Just the entry of your name as an expression of support is sufficient." "In that case I'm in." On learning there were no obligations, the master was immediately at ease. From the look on his face, in absence of responsibility he'd happily add his name to a full-fledged insurrection. Moreover, he was presented here with the rare honor of adding his name to an esteemed list of scholars, a chance he was only too eager to grab. "Just one

moment." He was off to the study for his seal. I was dumped off onto the tatami. Tōfū reached for the cake bowl and stuffed his mouth with a piece of castella. At first he could hardly chew. I recalled my own zōni mishap of the morning. By the time the master returned from the study with his seal, the castella had found its way to Tōfū's stomach. The master took no notice of the missing piece. Had he noticed, his suspicion would have landed most surely on me.