

## I am a Cat – Chapter 2b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

After Tōfū's departure, the master went into his study to find that a letter from Meitei had been placed on his desk.

"Allow me to offer my happiest New Year's wishes ..."

An uncharacteristically sober opening, the master mused. Meitei's letters were seldom so sober. The other day he'd written, "No lady thereafter has captured my heart, and no sweet words arrive at my door. Rest assured, though, that my days continue. I bide my time quietly, neither engaged in exploit nor mired in mishap." Compared to that, this New Year's letter seemed most mundane.

"I mean to call, but unlike you, refrained in your ways, I'm out grabbing life by the horns. I've embraced this new year, the best of all years, in a dizzying whirl of activity. I humbly trust that you'll understand ..."

The master could certainly imagine how a fellow like Meitei, flitting about through the holiday making his rounds, must surely be busy.

"Yesterday, stealing a spare moment, I sought to treat Tōfū to *tochimenbō*. Most unfortunately, however, the ingredients for *tochimenbō* are in short supply, and my plan came to naught. A terrible shame. ..."

Recognizing the quintessential Meitei, the master floated a grin.

"Tomorrow we gather for cards with a certain baron, and the following day is the Aesthetics Society banquet. The day after that is Professor Toribe's welcome party, and the day after that ..."

"Enough already!" The master skipped ahead.

"As you can see, I've a gathering for Noh songs, a gathering for haiku, a gathering for tanka, a gathering for modern-form poetry - the list goes on, with no end in sight. Occupied as I am by this succession of gatherings, I humbly and necessarily ask that you accept, in the meantime and with no ill feeling, this congratulatory letter in lieu of my calling. ..."

"Don't go put yourself out, then." the master voiced his reply to the letter.

"On occasion of your next visit, I propose that we dine together, as it's been a while now. My pantry is stark in these winter months, but I'm thinking at least of *tochimenbō*. ..."

"Still going on about tochimēbō. Sheer insolence!" The master is a bit perturbed.

"However, the ingredients for tochimēbō are in short supply these days, and it may well be that I can't procure them. If such is the case, perhaps I can offer peacock tongue instead to suit your palate. ..."

"He's covering all the bases." The master is intrigued now and reads on.

"As I'm sure you're aware, the volume of tongue meat from a single peacock is no greater than half of one's little finger at best. To satisfy that voracious belly of yours will hence require ..."

"Pure rubbish!" The master remarks in passing and continues.

"I'll have to get my hands on twenty or thirty peacocks. That being said, though peacocks can be seen here and there in zoos or at the Asakusa Amusement Park, the typical bird handler doesn't carry them. This is causing me some consternation. ..."

"Consternation of his own making." The master expresses not the least bit of sympathy.

"In ancient Rome, at the height of Roman power, this cuisine of peacock tongue was in great favor. If you would be so kind as to indulge me, please know I've always yearned to sample for myself this ultimate extravagance. ..."

"Indulge you in what? Absurdity?" The master is fully unmoved.

"Down through to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, peacock was standard fare at any European banquet. If memory serves me right, when the Earl of Leicester hosted Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth they dined on peacock. In depictions of feast by the renowned master Rembrandt, peacock tails adorn the tabletop. ..."

"If he has time to write a treatise on peacock cuisine, how busy can he be?" The master expresses some annoyance.

"At any rate, given my current succession of indulgences, it's all but inevitable that I'll soon enough be dyspeptic like yourself. ..."

"He could leave me out of it. Since when am I the poster child for dyspepsia?" The master mutters his objection.

"According to historians, The Romans feasted two to three times daily. Sitting down to gorge oneself, multiple times per day, is bound to take its toll, even on the strongest of stomachs. Accordingly, in due course they would end up like yourself. ..."

"There he goes with 'like yourself' again. Insolent rogue!"

"However, they left no stone unturned in their efforts to reconcile their extravagance with their health. Aware of the need to maintain digestive normalcy while still indulging their great cravings, they hit upon a secret method. ..."

"Well now." The master's interest is suddenly piqued.

"After eating, they made it their habit to bathe. And after bathing, through a certain process, they would purge up all that they'd eaten before, emptying out their stomachs. After thus having cleansed their stomachs, they were ready to feast again. They partook of delicacies to their hearts' content, and after having partaken, again they bathed and purged. Thus repeating, they could indulge their cravings to no end, without ill-treating their digestive organs. If this is not 'two birds with one stone' then I can't think what is. ..."

"It's certainly that. Two birds with one stone." The master's expression betrays a tinge of envy.

"Here in this twentieth century, where endless associations and frequent banquets are the norm, and where we now enter a second year of aggression vis-à-vis Russia and prepare to emerge a victorious nation, we'd do well to learn from the Romans. We're at the juncture, I believe with utmost conviction, where we must learn anew this technique of bathing and purging. If we don't, then I worry greatly that we'll have elevated ourselves only to become, in short order, a nation of dyspeptics like yourself. ..."

"There's his 'like yourself' again. Irksome fellow!" the master muses.

"At this juncture, those of us endowed with knowledge of the Occident must reach back into its ancient lore in search of lost secrets. The merits of introducing these secrets into Meiji society, I believe, are twofold. Not only will they stave off calamitous ends, but they'll free us in turn to pursue unabated our daily pleasures. ..."

"What on earth ..." The master shakes his head.

"Accordingly, I've immersed myself of late in the writings of authors like Gibbon, Mommsen, and Smith. Much to my chagrin, though, I've yet to unearth any leads. However, as you're well aware, once I set my mind to something I persevere, undeterred, until success is mine. I believe, therefore, that it won't be long before I've discovered and revived the lost art of purging. Please rest assured in the knowledge that when I do you'll be first to know. Such being the case, I propose we defer the aforementioned feast of tochimēbō or peacock tongue until after such discovery. This deferral suits my needs, and I believe it's also to your advantage, as you already suffer so from dyspepsia. Much more to write, but I must stop here for now."

"So it seems I've been taken again. Drawn in by his weighty prose, I read to the end in earnest. The new year's just begun and he's already up to his tricks. Far too much time on his hands," the master remarks with a chuckle.

Four or five days passed without incident. The daffodil withered in its white porcelain, and the plum branch, though set in an earthenware pot, slowly began to blossom. Unsatisfied with just marking the passage of time, I tried on several occasions, unsuccessfully, to call on Mikeko. On the first occasion, I presumed she must be away, but on the second occasion I learned she was unwell and resting. Concealing myself by the wash basin, in the shadows of an aspidistra plant, I overheard, from inside the shōji, the following exchange between the teacher and her maidservant.

"Miké's not eating?" "No, she didn't touch her food this morning. I bundled her warmly and laid her by the kotatsu to rest." Not very cat-like. They attend to her like a fellow human being.

On the one hand, in light of my own circumstances, I was a bit envious. On the other hand, it gladdened my heart to know that this cat, whom I care for deeply, receives such kind care.

"I'm concerned for her. If one doesn't eat, one's stamina only weakens." "That's the truth. Even you or I, after a day without food, would be fully listless."

The maidservant replies as though the cat is a superior being. It may very well be the case that, in this house, the cat is held dearer.

"Did you take her to the doctor?" "I did, but that doctor is odd. I took her into the examination room, and the doctor, asking if I'd caught cold, started to check my pulse. It's not me, I told him, setting out Miké on my knees, it's this fellow. He grinned and said that when it comes to cats he knows nothing more than the next guy. He suggested I just let her be, that she'd recover soon enough. The man has no heart. I was upset and told him fine then, I've no need of your services. This cat is precious to us, I told him. I tucked Miké back into my kimono and took my leave." "Rightly done."

"Rightly done" is not something ever heard at my place. The teacher's whatever-it-was connection to Tenshō-in was evident in her words. I was touched by their elegance.

"She seems to be wheezing ..." "Yes, I'm afraid her throat is hurting her. We all too, when we catch cold, often end up with a cough ..."

Being the maidservant of Tenshō-in's something-or-other's something-or-other, her words were most respectful.

"There's something going round. Consumption, I believe they call it ..." "True. In times like these, with heretofore unknown illness about, be it consumption or pestilence, one can never be too careful." "Heed my words. Since the days of the shogunate, much is new and none of it good." "That very well may be."

The maidservant takes this to heart.

"How do you suppose she caught cold? She doesn't go about much ..."

"On the contrary, I'm afraid. She's fallen in with bad company."

The maidservant is effusive, as though poised to reveal some state secret.

"Bad company?" "Yes ma'am. It's that scruffy tomcat from the teacher's place in the front lane." "By teacher, you mean that man who raises a ruckus each morning?" "That's the one. Each time he washes his face. Like a throttled goose in its death throes."

"Throttled goose" is an apt description. That master of mine, each morning when he gargles in the bathroom, makes it a practice to prod his throat with his toothbrush and voice, without reserve, a most curious sound. When his mood is ill, it's an awful "gaagaa" sound. When his spirits are high it's a hearty "gaagaa" sound. In short, regardless of mood it's "gaagaa" for all he's worth. According to the wife, he didn't used to do it in their old place. He just started it out of the blue one day, and he's never stopped. It's a bothersome practice, and why he insists on continuing is fully beyond us cats. Setting that aside, the term "scruffy tomcat" was, in my mind, entirely unwarranted. I perked my ears and listened further.

"I can't imagine what he hopes to invoke with those sounds. Before the Restoration, even the footman or squire was versed in proper etiquette. No one ever washed their face like that in the residences." "That's the truth indeed."

The maidservant is terribly worked up now and dutifully doling out "indeeds."

"With a master like that, that cat is no doubt a stray. Next time he shows, swat him away." "I'll swat him but good. Miké's illness is his doing entirely. I'm sure of it. He has one coming."

I'd been unjustly accused and condemned. Realizing I was unwelcome, I made my way home without seeing Mikeko.

When I arrived home, the master was in his study, ruminating with brush in hand. Had I told him what I'd heard cross the way, at the koto teacher's place, he would surely have been quite irate. Ignorance is bliss, though, and he held himself like a divine poet, intoning words as he wrote.

At this point Meitei, who was "terribly busy" and had deliberately set down his New Year's greetings on paper in lieu of a visit, dropped by. "Is that modern poetry you're working at? Let's see it if you've got something good," he remarked. "I came across some excellent prose, so I'm trying my hand at translation," the master paused to reply. "Prose? Whose then?" "I don't know." "Anonymous then? Many great works are anonymous. One mustn't dismiss on grounds of anonymity. Where on earth did you find it?" he asked. "The Second Year Reader," the master calmly replied. "The Second Year Reader? What of the Second Year Reader." "That's where I found it, this prose that I'm translating." "You're pulling my leg! This is payback, I presume, for the peacock tongue." "Unlike your words, mine carry weight." The master twists his mustache, fully composed. "Long ago, it's told, a disciple asked Sanyō if any recent writings were noteworthy. 'For starters, this is recent and noteworthy,' Sanyō replied, pointing to a dunning letter from a packhorse driver. Maybe you do, after all, possess the discerning eye. Give it a read and I'll let you know." Meitei, in his own mind, was the maven of discernment. The master, like a Zen monk reciting the last admonition of Daitō Kokushi, started in in a solemn voice. "Giant Gravitation" "What's that mean, Giant Gravitation?" "Giant Gravitation's the title." "An odd title. I don't know what to make of it." "It's intended to mean a giant whose name is Gravitation." "Intent is hardly effect, but fine, it's just a title. Let's get on to the main text. You read so well - I can't wait." "None of your ribbing, now," the master cautioned Meitei up front and proceeded to read.

Kate saw the boys playing ball. They tossed the ball into the air. Up, up it went. Then down it came. They tossed it up again and again. It came down, down, down. It fell every time. They could not keep it in the air. "What makes the ball come down?" said Kate. "Why doesn't it keep going up?" "I will tell you," said mamma. "A giant lives down in the ground. He is Giant Gravitation. He works all the time. He is very strong. He draws everything toward him. He keeps the house down. If he did not it would fly away. He keeps the children from flying away, too. You have seen the leaves falling. Giant Gravitation is calling them. Sometimes you have dropped your books. Giant Gravitation said, 'Come.' The ball goes up into the air. Giant Gravitation calls. Then it comes down."

"That's it?" "Mm. Quite a work, huh?" "I see I've been had. When I expected it least, I've been served back my own tochimenbō." "I'm not out to serve you back anything. It's really quite a work, so I thought I'd translate it. You don't agree?" The master gazes in through the gold-rimmed glasses. "You've obviously caught me off guard. I underestimated you, was taken for a ride, and am now compelled to submit." Meitei pronounces his own capitulation. The master is not on board. "Your submission was furthest from my mind. I thought it intriguing prose, so I set to translating. That's all there is to it." "Well played, well played. Anything less would have missed the mark. Wonderful. I stand humbled." "It hardly merits your humility. I've given up on watercolors, so I'm trying my hand at composition instead." "Your watercolor painting, with its washed-out hues and mismatched depths, pales in perspective. I couldn't be more in awe." "In light of your praise, I'll redouble my efforts." The master persists in a world of his own fancy.

At this point Kangetsu appears, greeting the master as he enters. Meitei immediately butts in. "Pardon, sir, but I've just been treated to the finest of prose, so fine as to vanquish the ghost of tochimēnbō." His greeting alludes to heretofore nonsense. "Is that right?" Kangetsu's response, in turn, is equally meaningless. The master alone refrains from indulgence. "That fellow Ochi Tōfū called the other day with your introduction." "Ah, he called, did he? That Ochi Kochi's exceedingly sincere, but a little eccentric. I hope he wasn't a nuisance. He insisted so that I introduce you ..." "I wouldn't say he was a nuisance ..." "When he called here, did he go on at all about his name?" "No, I don't recall that he did." "Really? He has this tendency, wherever he goes and whenever he meets someone new, to expound at length on his own name." "What about his name?" Meitei pounces on the chance to interject. "He takes issue with 'Kochi' being read in the Chinese style." "Well I'll be." Meitei takes a pinch of tobacco from an ornate leather pouch. "My name isn't Ochi Tōfū, it's Ochi Kochi," he invariably informs his listener." "Odd." Meitei inhales a great cloud into the depths of his lungs. "It's no doubt his literary zeal. 'Kochi' serves as a homonym for 'here and there,' and he also takes great pride in the rhyming of the two parts of his name. 'When they fail to read it as Kochi then all of my effort's for naught,' he's wont to complain." "Eccentric indeed." Meitei, with due fanfare, contracts his lungs and expels the great cloud through his nostrils. In the process, some of the smoke goes astray and sticks in his throat. He clutches his pipe and chokes out several coughs. "He spoke the other day of a recital group. How his voicing of the boatman and met with laughter by schoolgirls," the master remarks with a chuckle. "Yes, that was it," responds Meitei, tapping his pipe on his knee. Out of caution, I inch myself away from his side.

"About that recital group. The other day, when I treated Tōfū to tochimēnbō, he mentioned it. Their second gathering, he said, will be grander. They're inviting renowned literary scholars, and he beseeched me to attend. I asked if they'd be doing another of Chikamatsu's domestic period dramas, and he told me that, no, this time they've gone full modern, deciding on Konjiki Yasha. I asked him what his role was, and he said he'd be doing Omiya. Tōfū as Omiya should be good. I intend, by all means, to be there and cheer him on." "Should be good," Kangetsu concurred with a curious laugh. "I do admire, though, the fellow's sincerity. He's not at all flippant like Meitei." The master, in one fell swoop, sought payback for Andrea del Sarto, peacock tongues, and tochimēnbō. Meitei paid little heed. "You know me well. I'm the quintessential Gyōtoku cutting board," he replied with a smile. "You're right on that count," the master shot back. Truth be told, the master was not familiar with the term "Gyōtoku cutting board." However, during long years as a teacher he'd faked his way through this and that, and he was practiced enough to apply his classroom savvy to social settings. "What do you mean by Gyōtoku cutting board?" Kangetsu asked with candor. The master shifted his gaze to the alcove. "I bought that daffodil late last year, on my way home from the baths. It's held up well, don't you think?" He's out to quash the Gyōtoku cutting board. "Speaking of year's end, I experienced something most curious at the close of this past year." Meitei, like a street performer, is spinning his pipe on his fingertips. "What was that? Let's hear it." The master, sensing that the Gyōtoku cutting board has been left by the wayside, breathes a sigh of relief. Meitei's curious experience is as follows.

"It was late last year, I believe on the 27th. That fellow Tōfū, interested in my opinion on literary matters, proposed to visit me at my home and asked that I be present to receive him. I waited from morning, anticipating his call, but the good man took his time in showing. I ate lunch and was sitting in front of the stove, reading a humorous piece by Barry Pain, when a letter arrived from my mother in Shizuoka. As elders are wont to do, she sees me still as a child. Her letter offered various admonishments. During these cold months, I should avoid being out late. A cold bath is fine, but fire up the stove and warm the room to avoid catching cold. Even I, heedless man that I am, was greatly moved in this moment. Who else but a parent ever offers such words. She got me to thinking I mustn't just idle my time. I must, for the sake of family honor, produce a work of utmost import. While my mother was alive to see it, I would establish a name for myself. In Meiji literary circles, Professor Meitei would be known to all. Reading further, she wrote of how truly blessed I was. How the young folk were sacrificing so greatly for our country in the war with Russia, while I was at leisure, year's end as well as New Year's. -- Let it be known that I'm not so much at leisure as she thinks. -- Further on, she lists up by name all my schoolmates who are dead or wounded in the war. In reading those names, one by one, the world struck me as weary, and human existence as tedium. Finally in closing, she wondered if this next New Year's zōni, given her age, might not be her last ... All of this was disheartening, and I felt my spirits sink lower. I wished Tōfū would call, but the good man had yet to show. Dinnertime came, and I thought to write my mother in return, so I penned out some lines, twelve or thirteen in all. My mother's letter was some pages long, but I'm not the prolific writer she is, so I always beg off at ten or so lines. At this point, having spent the full day sitting indoors, my stomach was out of sorts. Deciding that Tōfū could wait if he showed, I went out. I wanted to stroll, and I wanted too to post my letter. Uncharacteristically, I didn't head toward Fujimi-chō but set out instead, without knowing why, toward Dote Sanban-chō. It was a frigid night, a bit overcast and with a raw wind that carried across the moat. Below the embankment, a steam train rolled in from Kagurazaka and let loose a whistle as it passed on. I felt terribly doleful. Another year past, casualties of war, infirmity of old age, the fleetingness of life - all these thoughts raced round in my mind. Word often comes of a man having hanged himself, and I began to think that it must be moments like these that entice him to do it. I lifted my gaze, and there on the embankment, directly above me, stood the pine."

"What do you mean 'the pine'?" The master interjected with a question.

"The hanging pine." Meitei drew in his neck as he spoke.

"Isn't the hanging pine on Kōnodai?" Kangetsu's voice joined the flow.

"The pine on Kōnodai is for the hanging of bells. The pine on Dote Sanban-chō is for the hanging of heads. The reason this pine is for the hanging of heads, legend has it, is that from days of old, anyone passing beneath is seized with the urge to hang himself. There are numerous pines on the embankment, but when word comes of a hanging it's always this same pine. No other tree so invites men's demise. You can see it extend an opportune branch toward the lane. Its form is ideal. It's all too forlorn. Somehow it

cries for adornment, in the form of a hanging man. Wondering if someone might come to it, I looked around, regrettably to no avail. Having no other recourse, I thought I might hang there myself. But no, if I hang there that's it. The danger's too great. Then again, they say that the ancient Greeks, for the amusement of banquet guests, acted out a game of hangman. One would mount a pedestal and slip his head through the knot. The moment he did, another would kick the pedestal away. The one with the rope about his neck would loosen it, quick as a flash, and drop to the ground. Such was the scheme. If this is in fact what they did, then the risk is overblown. I could give it a go. I placed my hands on the branch. It yielded in a manner most satisfying. It was a work of art in its compliance. I imagined hanging there, floating gently, and rapture swept over my mind. I decided I had to do it, but then my thoughts turned to Tōfū, who would arrive and wait in vain. Thinking it best to first engage him as promised, and then set out anew, I returned home."

"Then all ended well?" asks the master.

"Intriguing indeed," Kangetsu adds with a grin.

"I did return home, but there was no sign of Tōfū. Instead, a card had arrived. Due to unavoidable circumstances, he was unable to call that day but looked forward to taking up our conversation in the springtime days to follow. There was nothing now to stop me. I was free to go and hang. The thought of this delighted me. I immediately slipped on my geta and hurried back to the spot. When I looked ..." Meitei pauses for dramatic effect, locking a serious gaze on the master and Kangetsu.

"What was it?" The master is a little on edge.

"Finally, the crux of the tale." Kangetsu twists the ties of his haori.

"I looked, and someone was already dangling there. By the slimmest of margins, the chance had eluded me. Thinking back on it now, Death had had me firmly in his clutches. As James would describe it, the shadowy realm of the subconscious and my waking mind had somehow, through some sort of causal connection, become entwined. This world is a curious place, wouldn't you say?" Meitei is utterly sincere.

The master, certain he's been had again, says nothing, but stuffs his mouth with a mochi and begins working his jaws.

Kangetsu, with downcast gaze and floating a slight grin, carefully rakes the ashes in the brazier. After a moment, he speaks. His tone is most subdued.

"On the one hand, I'm disinclined to believe such things. At the same time, having recently experienced something quite similar, I find myself reluctant to doubt."

"You felt it too then, the urge to hang yourself?"

"Not hanging, in my case. It was also at year's end, occurring on that same day and at nearly the same hour, which makes it that more uncanny."

"Let's hear what happened." Meitei too stuffs a mochi in his mouth.

"On the day in question, at the home of an acquaintance in Mukōjima, there was a year's end party which also called for chamber music, so I set out with my violin. Fifteen or so young ladies and wives were present, the entire evening was masterfully orchestrated, and all had a wonderful time. We ate dinner, played music, and conversed on various subjects. The hour grew late, and I prepared to take my leave. As I did so, the wife of a certain scholar approached and asked, in a low voice, if I knew that a certain young lady had fallen ill. I'd seen this young lady just two or three days prior, and she'd seemed her usual self. I was quite surprised and asked after her in detail. On the evening of that day I'd seen her, she'd come down with a sudden fever. She'd been talking deliriously, which was concern enough, but from time to time, it seems, she would mention my name."

The master, of course, and even Meitei, listened attentively, refraining from the usual jests they might voice when it came to Kangetsu and a young lady.

"The doctor was called, but he couldn't say what was wrong, only that the intensity of the fever was affecting her mind. If sleeping tablets didn't ease her condition, then the situation would be perilous. My spirits sank on hearing this prognosis. As if in a bad dream, all became bleak, and the air around me grew heavy, closing in repressively from all sides. On the way home, tortuous thoughts ravaged my mind. This certain young lady, so fair, so buoyant, so full of life ..."

"One moment please. That's twice now you've used the term 'certain young lady.' If I may be so bold, we'd like to know to whom you're referring." Meitei turned to the master for concurrence. "Hmm," was all that the master could manage by way of endorsement.

"Out of deference to the young lady in question, I'd prefer to leave her unnamed."

"It's your intent then, I take it, to lead us in darkness through mist-shrouded lands."

"You mustn't needle me. What I'm relating is most serious ... At any rate, I thought of said lady suddenly so ill and was at once overwhelmed by emotion. Flowers blossom, they say, only to scatter on the wind. Energy drained from my body, vitality deserted me, and I staggered on, reduced to a tottering shell, until I reached Azumabashi. Whether the tide was in or out, I cannot say. Resting against the railing, the dark water below was a single moving mass. A lone rickshaw, on the road from Hanakawado, raced across the bridge. I watched the light of its lantern recede and then disappear behind the Sapporo brewery. I looked

again at the water. As I did so, I heard a voice, from far upstream, calling my name. Who at this hour, I thought, could possibly be calling me. I gazed across the surface of the water, but all was dark and nothing could be seen. Concluding it was all in my head, I thought it best to return straight home, and I resumed my pace. Just then, a faint and distant voice again called my name. I stopped in my tracks and perked my ears. When I was called for the third time, I was gripping the railing, but nevertheless my knees trembled beneath me. The voice carried from afar, or perhaps from the water's depths, but it was unmistakably the voice of that certain young lady. Unconsciously, I called back in response. I was surprised at my own voiced and how it resounded over the water's surface. I surveyed my surroundings. There was nothing to see. Not a soul. Not even a dog nor the light of the moon. I was seized in that moment with a sudden longing to yield to the night and follow that voice to its source. The same voice, distressed, appealing, crying for help, again pierced my ears. This time I called back, "I'm coming!" I leaned over the railing and fixed my gaze on the black water. This voice that called me, it seemed, was forcing its way from beneath the ripples. Focusing my attention on the water's depths, I climbed onto the railing. Resolved to leap if called again, I studied the moving current. Once more, a thin, pitiful voice wafted upward. That was my cue. With full abandon, I leapt into the air and then felt myself drop like a stone."

"You finally went and jumped?" The master asks with bewildered eyes.

"I didn't think it would come to that." Meitei tugs at the tip of his own nose.

"After I jumped, all went blank. The moment became a dream. When I regained my senses, I was cold but not at all wet, and I didn't seem to have swallowed any water. This was odd, as I knew for a fact that I'd jumped. With a sense of wonder, I looked around and was taken by surprise. Though intending for the water, I'd in fact jumped backward and landed in the middle of the bridge. I was greatly disappointed. By mistaking backward for forward, I'd lost my chance to unite with that voice." Floating a grin, Kangetsu tugs characteristically at his haori ties.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho. Intriguing indeed. Uncannily similar to my own experience. Professor James could take this up. As a sketch of the subconscious mind, it would not go unnoticed in literary circles. ... By the way, what of that certain young lady's illness?" Meitei follows up with a query.

"Several days ago, when I stopped to pay my New Year's respects, she was out in the yard playing battledore with the maidservant. She'd recovered fully and was back to her usual self."

At this point the master, who's been reticent all along, finally asserts himself. "I have one too," he says.

"What's that? One what?" It hasn't occurred to Meitei that the master might contribute.

"Mine too was at year's end."

"Quite a coincidence, all at year's end," laughs Kangetsu. A piece of mochi clinging to his broken front tooth.

"Let me guess now, the same day and the same time?" Meitei ribs the master.

"No, a different day. Around the 20th, as I recall. My wife asked that, in lieu of a year-end gift, I take her to hear Settsu Daijō. 'I don't see why not,' I responded, and asked what work he was performing that day. She consulted the paper and found it was Unagidani. I'm not fond of Unagidani, so we took a pass on that particular day. The following day, she came in with the paper and announced that that day's work was Horikawa, which she thought would be fine. Horikawa, with its shamisen accompaniment, is lively enough but lacks substance, so I suggested another pass. She withdrew, but not without a look of dissatisfaction. The following day, she came in and informed me it was Sanjūsangendō. She was intent on seeing Settsu perform this work. I may not like it, she told me, but it was her treat, and what would it hurt me to take her. This time she was adamant. 'Very well then,' I told her, 'but they say it's his final tour, and the crowds are overwhelming. One can't just show up unannounced and expect to be seated. There's a tea house associated with the venue, and the proper process is to work through the folks in the tea house to secure suitable spots in advance. It's not right to circumvent established protocol, so let's go at some later date.' She glared back at me. As a housewife, she replied, she was not privy to such intricacies, but Ōhara's mother and Kimiyo from the Suzuki's had both been, with no such proper arrangement, and enjoyed themselves splendidly. 'Teacher or not, must every outing with you be painstakingly orchestrated? It's just too much,' she said, close to tears. 'In that case then,' I said, 'let's give it a shot.' By way of capitulation, I suggested we take the train over after dinner. 'If we're going to go,' she told me, 'we need to be there by four.' 'One mustn't dally,' she added, suddenly revitalized. I asked in return why we needed to be there by four. She'd heard from Kimiyo that unless one arrived early, by four at the latest, one couldn't secure a spot. I questioned again for good measure, and she assured me that after four was too late. Oddly enough, at that very moment, the chills took hold."

"Your wife came down with the chills?" Kangetsu asks.

"My wife was racing about. It was me. I felt myself wither like a punctured balloon. Before I knew it, my head was swimming, and I was flat on my back."

"A flash illness," Meitei comments.

"The situation was dire. Here was my wife with a once-in-a-year request, and I wanted so very much to accommodate her. All I ever did was scold her, disregard her counsel, and burden her with household chores and care of the children. Never did I reward her for the work she did to clean and cook. On this day, I was lucky enough to have time on my hands and money in my purse. If I could, I would take her out. She was wanting to go, and I was wanting to treat her. I wanted so much to treat her, but here I lay,

with the chills and a swimming head. I couldn't even manage to put my shoes on, much less board a train. The more I lamented her plight, the worse my chills and the lighter my head. The best course of action, we agreed, was to call for the doctor without delay. A timely dose of medicine, and I'd be right as rain by four. We sent for Doctor Amaki, but unfortunately he'd been on duty at the university the evening prior and was not yet back home. He'd be back around two, and they promised to dispatch him as soon as he returned. What a bind. A little *kyōninsui* now, and I'd surely be better by four. But misfortune breeds misfortune, and my plans for a splendid time, my wife smiling at my side, were going off the rails. She asked me, with a reproachful look, if I couldn't find some way to manage. 'I'm going,' I told her, 'I'm absolutely going. I'll be better by four. You'll see. Don't worry about me. Wash your face and get yourself changed.' These were the words that I formed with my lips, but deep down I was highly distraught. The chills intensified, and the room began to spin. If I didn't recover by four and deliver on my promise, there was no telling how this small-minded woman might react. The situation was desperate. What should I do? I began to think it my duty, as a husband to his wife, to prepare her for the worst and ease the shock should it come to pass. I would explain to her that all existence is fleeting, and how all things living are destined to die."

"I called my wife to the study at once. 'There's a Western saying many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. Even you, though a woman, must surely know this one.' 'How would anyone know what that means? This English you dole out on unsuspecting listeners, knowing full well that they don't understand, is nothing more than an instrument of mockery. Fine then, I don't know what it means. If you love English so much, why didn't you marry a mission school girl? Your heart is colder than cold!' Her menacing glare disarmed me. Let me explain here that I had not surfaced this English with any ill intent. My only motivation was sincere concern for my wife, and when she misconstrued my purpose, it left me dangling. The chills and the vertigo, and my haste to expound on the fleeting nature of existence, on the truth that all things must die, had conspired to confuse me, and I'd drawn on my English, forgetting entirely that the wife could not understand. After this misstep, my chills intensified, and the room started to spin. The wife did as I'd directed her. She retired to the bathroom and cleansed and powdered her shoulders and neckline. Then she donned her kimono. She was prepared to depart and only waiting on me. I felt myself on tenterhooks. Hoping Amaki would arrive soon, I glanced at the clock and saw it was three. Only one more hour till four. 'Shall we go soon?' My wife opened the study door and looked in. I know I shouldn't praise my own wife, but I've never thought her more beautiful than I did in that moment. The sheen of her freshly-washed skin reflected against the black crepe of her haori. Her countenance sparkled, both from without and within, from the dual effects of the soap and her expectation of Settsu Daijō's performance. I couldn't disappoint her. I was determined to go. I smoked a smoke and prepared to make the effort. Just then, Doctor Amaki appeared."

"He'd arrived as if on cue. After I described my situation, he looked at my tongue, took my pulse, tapped my chest, rubbed my back, turned up my eyelids, patted my scalp, and thought for a moment. 'I'm afraid it may be serious,' I told him. 'No,' he replied calmly, 'I doubt it's anything much.' 'Would it be too much to

go out for a bit?' the wife asked him. 'It's fine,' he replied, then thought for another moment. 'As long as he's feeling well enough ...' 'But I don't feel well,' I reminded him. 'In that case, I'll give you a one-time dose and some syrup.' 'Will that be enough? I'm concerned it may turn dire.' 'No, there's absolutely no need to worry. Relax, and keep your mind at ease.' And with that he was gone. It was after three thirty. The maidservant was sent for the medicine. Under strict orders from the wife, she raced out and hurried back. It was now quarter till four. We had fifteen minutes left. Then, around four fifty, for the first time and all of a sudden, nausea overtook me. The wife had dispensed my syrup into a cup and set it before me. As I took it and tried to drink, my stomach responded with a rush of resistance. I had to set the cup back down. 'You'd best drink it quick,' the wife urged me. Duty called. I had to drink it quick and we had to be off. Resolved to get it down, I brought the cup back to my lips but was thwarted again by unabated revulsion. I tried to drink then set it down, tried again and again set it down. The clock in the parlor chimed out four beats. It was four o'clock. No time to waste, I thought, and again took up the cup. The most curious of things occurred. With the sounding of four, my nausea was gone. I readily downed the syrup. By ten past four, I counted myself among Doctor Amaki's admirers. The chill in my spine and the swimming in my head were gone, banished like a bad dream. I was overjoyed to find myself fully recovered. This affliction, which had knocked me off my feet and threatened to keep me down, was gone without a trace."

"Then the two of you headed off for Kabuki-za?" asked Meitei, an uncomprehending expression on his face.

"We wanted to, but it was already past four and too late, in my wife's opinion, to gain admittance. So we stayed home. If only the doctor'd come fifteen minutes sooner. I could have fulfilled my obligation, and my wife would have been so pleased. A mere fifteen minutes. Such a shame. Even now, it pains me to think how close we came."

The master, having concluded his tale, looked like a man who'd just unloaded a burden. He likely felt he'd held his own in his present company.

"That certainly was a shame," Kangetsu remarked with his signature grin, his missing tooth front and center.

Meitei's face was a blank. "Your wife must count herself fortunate, blessed with such a devoted husband," he remarked half to himself. The wife, from the other side of the shōji, conspicuously cleared her throat.

I'd listened patiently as the three of them, in turn, had related their tales. I'd been neither amused nor moved. Human beings, when they've time to kill, seem compelled to exercise their mouths. Their sole talent, as I saw it, was invoking laughter in the absence of amusement and invoking delight in the absence of intrigue. I'd come to know my master as self-indulgent and narrow-minded, but his reticence had always left me thinking that there must be some side to him that I hadn't seen. I'd always worried that I

must be missing something, but now, having heard him tell this tale, I was fully inclined to despise him. Why couldn't he simply listen quietly to the others' tales? What did he think to gain by heaping his own nonsensical chatter onto the pile? Perhaps Epictetus advocated such conduct in his writings. At the end of the day, the master and Kangetsu and Meitei, though they fancied themselves men of quiet leisure aloof from the fray, like dried gourds swaying with the breeze, were in fact ambitious and yearning. Through cracks in their conversation shone flickers of rivalry and one-upmanship. They themselves were but a small step removed from the common man they so loved to denigrate. As a cat, I couldn't help but pity them. Their only redemption was a linguistic proficiency that set them apart from the usual dilettante and his hackneyed rub.

Looking at it this way, I decided I'd had enough of these three and their shallow words. Thinking to check in on Mikeko, I made my way round to the koto teacher's garden gate. It was already the tenth of the month, and the New Year's adornments were gone, but a fine spring sun shone down from a deep and cloudless sky, casting the world in a clear light. The surface of the small garden glowed fresh and vibrant, more so than it had in the early light of the new year. There was a single cushion on the veranda, but no sign of human presence. The shōji were shut tight. Perhaps the teacher was off at the baths. It was fine if she was. Mikeko's condition was what concerned me. I hoped she was feeling better. The place was deserted with no sign of life, so I jumped onto the veranda, dirty feet notwithstanding, and sprawled myself out on the cushion. It was heavenly. I relaxed and dozed a bit, forgetting Mikeko for the moment, until voices suddenly sounded from behind the shōji.

"Thank you so much. Was it ready then?" The teacher was home after all.

"Yes, sorry to keep you waiting. When I arrived, the master told me he was just finishing." "Let's have a look. Ah, it's beautifully done. Mikeko's rest will be one of peace. The gold won't peel, will it?" "I asked about that, and he assured me it's top quality. No human, he said, has ever had a finer tablet. ...One more thing. He said the character for 'Blessed' would look better stylized, so he altered the strokes a bit." "I see. Yes. Let's set it on the altar and offer up incense."

Something was amiss with Mikeko. Thinking this all too strange, I rose to my feet on the cushion. Ding went the altar bell, and the teacher recited a prayer.

You too. Send her off with a prayer.

The bell dinged again, and this time the maidservant recited a prayer. My heart suddenly raced. I stood transfixed on the cushion, like a cat carved of wood. Even my gaze was frozen.

"Unfortunate it's come to this. It seemed at first to be nothing more than a cold." "If only Doctor Amaki had given her medicine." "That doctor's clearly at fault. He dismissed our Miké too lightly." "Let's not speak ill of others, now. A cat's days too are numbered."

Mikeko, it seemed, had also been seen by Doctor Amaki.

"In the end, I think, it was that stray from the teacher's place in the front lane, enticing her out too often." "Agreed. That scoundrel was Miké's downfall."

I was inclined to defend myself, but the situation demanded restraint, so I swallowed hard and listened on.

"This world doesn't bend to our wishes. A beauty like Miké is gone too soon, while that ugly stray lives on and thrives, doing what he does ..." "Right you are. One could beat the bushes with bell and drum and never find another gal like Miké."

She used the word gal rather than cat. This maidservant knows no distinction between cats and humans. Come to think of it, that face of hers all but marks her one of us.

"If instead of Miké it could have been ..." "It would have been fitting had that teacher's stray been the one to die."

Not fitting for me. Having never experienced death, I can't say what it's like or how I would take it. However, the other day I crawled into the coals jar to keep warm, and the maidservant, not realizing I was in there, trapped me with the lid. I cringe even now to recall the distress. According to Shiro, death entails similar distress, just lasting a little bit longer. There's nothing I wouldn't do for Mikeko, but if death demands such distress, then I'd rather not die for another.

"I've no regrets that we haven't done right by our cat. We called in a priest to recite a sutra, and she's been assigned a posthumous name." "Indeed. She's been greatly favored in our care. I only wish that that Gekkei-ji priest's sutra could have been more substantial." "It seemed to end quite soon, so I asked him if he hadn't been awfully brief. He assured me it was a potent sutra, adequate to carry a cat to the Pure Land." "Well then ... That stray on the other hand ..."

As I've stated often enough, I don't have a name. In spite of that, this maidservant insists on calling me "stray." Insolent thing.

"Grave are his transgressions. No sutra, however potent, will deliver that stray to salvation."

How many myriad times she called me stray thereafter, I cannot say. Having had enough of their endless claptrap, I slipped off the cushion, jumped down from the veranda, stood every hair of my body on end,

and gave myself a hearty shake. Since then, I've kept my distance from the koto teacher. It may be nigh time that the Gekkei-ji priest send her off herself with a modest prayer.

Of late, I'm not so bold as to venture out. The world seems, somehow, a weary and listless place. I'm a do-nothing cat, no less reclusive than my master. They say it was a broken heart that led the master to shut himself up in his study, and I can understand now how this may well be.

I've yet to catch a mouse still, and Osan has argued for putting me out, but the master sees things differently. He knows I'm not the typical cat, and he allows me to idle my days in his home. I appreciate greatly the master's benevolence, and I eagerly express my respect, whenever the occasion presents itself, for his well-discerning eye. Osan, oblivious to my merits, continues to mistreat me, but I take no offense. In due time, another Hidari Jingorō will emerge to carve my likeness into pillars of tower gates. Or a Japanese Steinlen will appear to set my image to canvas. Then, finally and for the first time, will such dimwits look back with shame on their own ignorance.