

I am a Cat – Chapter 5b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"If you insist."

"At any rate, it's not bacteria. Tell me, though, what's the English word for bald?"

"Bald in English is 'bald.'"

"No, that's not it. Isn't there some longer expression?"

"I'm sure the master would know."

"He won't tell me. That's why I'm asking you."

"The only word I know is 'bald.' What's this longer expression?"

"It's 'Otanchin Palaeologus.' 'Otanchin' must mean bald, and 'Palaeologus' must mean head."

"That could be. The master has Webster's in his study. I can check it for you. Speaking of the master, he's quite the eccentric, cooped up inside on a fine day like today -- He's not doing his digestive system any favors. See if you can get him out to Ueno. The trees are all in blossom."

"See if you can draw him out. He's not inclined to take advice from a woman."

"Is he still getting into the jam?"

"Much as ever."

"He was letting loose the other day. Said you were giving him grief over his jam habit, even though he didn't think he was eating that much. He's convinced you're overestimating his consumption. No doubt you and the girls are sampling it too --"

"Come now, Tataru-san. You can't really think that."

"I don't know. You look like the jam-eating type."

"And what does 'the jam-eating type' look like?"

"It's hard to say exactly -- but tell me, have you had not even a little?"

"Well, maybe a little. What's the harm in that? It's our jam after all."

"Ha ha ha ha. I thought so -- On a serious note, though, it's a shame you've fallen victim to theft. Did the burglar make off with only the yams?"

"I wish it were only the yams, but he took our garments too."

"That's tough. Will you have to borrow again to replace them? If only this cat were a dog -- it's really unfortunate. Get yourself a big dog. -- cats are useless. All they do is eat -- has he ever even caught a mouse?"

"Never even a one. Brazenly indulges himself, that's all he does."

"What good is he then? Put him out - the sooner the better. If you want, I'll take him home and stew him."

"Oh my! You would eat a cat?"

"I have before. They're downright tasty."

"I never would have imagined."

As I've already related, rumor has it that among boarding students are a vulgar and savage lot who stoop to eating cats. However, to this day I'd never dreamed that Tataru, who'd always treated me with due civility, numbered himself one among this lot. For one thing, the man's no longer a boarding student. He may not be long out of school, but he's a full-fledged lawyer and an official of the Mutsui Trading Company, which only makes it all the more shocking. There's an old adage to "never trust a stranger," and the acts of Kangetsu the Second bear witness to its truth. Now, thank to Tataru, I can add "never trust a stranger not to stew and eat you" to my own set of truths. The more one lives, the more one learns, and to learn is wonderful, but it also opens one's eyes, day by day, to myriad dangers, setting one ever on guard. One grows crafty, one perpetrates villainous acts, one sews protective linings into one's clothes, all due to lessons learned. Knowing is the price we pay for growing old. That's why, among the elderly, you'll not find a single decent soul. Curled up in the corner, I wonder if I shouldn't perhaps just jump into Tataru's pot, along with an onion or two, and pass quietly from this world. As I'm thinking thus, the master, who retreated into his study after quarreling with the wife, is drawn reluctantly back out to the living room by the sound of Tataru's voice.

"What's this I hear? You've let yourself in for a burglary? Utter foolishness." Tataru reprimands the master at first sight.

"The guy who broke in here's the fool." The master, even now, is loathe to acknowledge any deficiency in his own intellect.

"The guy who broke in may be a fool, but losing your things to such a fool is also none too clever."

"It must be folks like Tatara-san, then, who've nothing worth the taking, who are cleverest of all." This time the wife backs her husband.

"The biggest fool of all, I tell you, is that cat. Who does he think he is? Catches no mice, then turns a blind eye to your burglar. -- Give him to me. He's doing you no good here."

"I might just do that. What do you want him for?"

"To stew and eat."

The master's response to this horrid remark is simply an unsavory and dyspeptic laugh. At the same time, he offers no direct reply, and Tatara presses him no further on letting him eat me. I seem to have dodged a bullet. Finally, the master changes the subject.

"Leaving the cat lie, I'm cold without my garments," he remarks despondently. It's no surprise he's cold. Until the day prior he'd double layered his padded coats, and now he sports only a lined kimono and undershirt. Added to that, he hasn't moved a muscle all morning. His entire blood supply, scarce to begin with, is working to service his stomach. There's nothing left to warm his hands and feet.

"You ought to get out of teaching. One small theft and you're back again on your heels -- Are you sure you won't give business a try? It's never too late for a change."

"He despises the business world. You're only wasting your breath." The wife interjects in response to Tatara. In fact, she would love for the master to try his hand in business.

"How many years is it since you graduated?"

"This must be his ninth year out of school." The wife looks to her husband, who neither confirms nor refutes her reckoning.

"Nine years in, and no advancement. Hard as you study, the world takes no notice. 'The young lord, forsaken and alone ...'" Tatara recites to the wife a verse of poetry from his middle school days. The wife, unfamiliar with the referenced work, offers up no response.

"I despise teaching, but I despise the business world even more so." The master, it seems, is struggling to think what it is he takes liking in.

"He despises most everything ..."

"The only thing not despised, I take it, is the dear wife." Tatara, uncharacteristically, attempts to inject some levity.

"Most despised of all." The master's reply is terse and unequivocal.

The wife diverts her gaze, pretending not to care. Then she looks back at the master. "Despises life itself." She rebuffs him to her own satisfaction.

"Certainly can't say I love it," the master disarms her with surprisingly easy candor.

"For the sake of your health and your spirit, you need to take brisk walks. -- And try your hand in business. Making money's easy as pie."

"This from a man who's yet to make any."

"Keep in mind, I only just started last year. Even so, I've more saved up than you have."

"How much have you saved?" the wife asks with keen interest.

"Fifty yen already."

"Really? How much do you earn in a month?" the wife inquires further.

"Thirty yen. Of that, the company holds back five yen each month and saves it on my behalf. In time of need, I can draw on it. -- Take my advice, put your pocket money into the Sotobori Line. Whatever you invest now, you'll double in three or four months. All it takes is a little to start, and in no time at all it's doubled or even tripled."

"That would be nice. Even if burglarized, we'd soon enough be back on our feet."

"That's what I'm telling you. Business is where it's at. If the master had studied law and joined a company or a bank, he'd be pulling in hundreds of yen per month by now. It's a shame, really. -- Which reminds me, I assume you're acquainted with one Suzuki Tōjūrō?"

"I am. He was here yesterday."

"Is that so? We were together at a banquet the other day, and I mentioned my time with you as a boarding student. He told me in his younger days he'd lodged with you in Koishikawa, in a temple dormitory with shared cooking duty. He asked that I give you my regards, and also mentioned he'd be calling on you soon himself."

"It seems he's just back in Tōkyō."

"Yes, he was down at a coal operation in Kyūshū, but got himself re-assigned to Tōkyō. He's an accomplished man, but also approachable. Talked to me like a friend. -- Tell me, how much do you reckon he earns?"

"I've no idea."

"His monthly pay is two hundred and fifty yen, but he also gets a hefty bonus twice a year, so he must average four to five hundred. He gets his fair share, while one such as yourself, specializing in English Readers for ten years on now, just barely scrapes by. It's absurd."

"Absurd indeed!" It seems the master, while purporting to shun convention, is no different than any other man when it comes to financial concerns. In fact, given his dire straits, his pining for wealth is likely more acute.

Tatara, having sufficiently touted the benefits of the business world, has nothing further to say on that matter and moves on to his next subject. Addressing the wife, he asks if one Mizushima Kangetsu ever calls.

"Yes, he's by here often."

"What kind of person is he?"

"They say he's quite the accomplished scholar."

"Is he a dashing man?"

"Ho ho ho ho. I should say he's as dashing as you are."

"Is that right? The same as me?" Tatara speaks in all earnestness.

"How do you know of Kangetsu?" the master asks.

"The other day, a certain person inquired. I wondered if he was even worth digging into." Tatara, before even asking, has already dismissed Kangetsu as a lesser man than himself.

"He's much more talented than you are."

"Is that so? More talented than I am?" In keeping with his character, Tatara's response is devoid of emotion.

"Is he close to earning his doctorate?"

"We hear he's working on his thesis."

"The man's a fool, just as I thought. I imagined he'd have more sense than to slave away at a doctoral thesis."

"Your judgment, as always, is spot on," the wife replies with a grin.

"What kind of idiot courts a young lady by earning his doctorate? If that's what he's up to, then better to marry the young lady off to someone like me. That's what I told them."

"Told who?"

"The party who asked me to inquire into Mizushima."

"It wasn't Suzuki?"

"No. I wouldn't talk like that to a bigwig like Suzuki."

"You're a lion at home and a lamb abroad. You talk up a good game here, but in front of Suzuki you bow and kowtow."

"Exactly. That's how it works."

"Come, Tataru, let's go for a walk," the master suddenly offers. He's been freezing in his single-layer lined kimono, and the idea of warming up through physical activity has spurred him to unprecedented initiative. Tataru, of course, with nothing better to do, has no reason not to oblige.

"Let's go then. How about Ueno? We can swing round Imozaka for dumplings. Have you had their dumplings? I tell you, you have to try them. They're soft and tender, and priced right too. They even serve saké there." While Tataru prattles in his usual manner, the master has already donned his hat and is slipping on his shoes.

I'm again in need of some rest. What the master and Tataru did in Ueno Park, or how many platefuls of dumplings they downed at Imozaka, hardly warrants investigation, and even if it did, I'm not so bold as to tail them. Accordingly, I'll leave off my narrative and catch some much-needed rest in their absence. The right to a rest is something which all creatures can duly demand of Heaven. We're compelled to eke out an existence in this world, but we must have rest in order to do so. The gods may well pronounce that we're born into this world for toil, not for slumber. Rightly so, I would tell them, but let me rest in order that I may toil. Does not even my master, a crank who propagates aggravation through extreme obstinance, forego a portion of his salary on occasion to miss a day of work? It naturally follows then that a highly sentient creature such as myself, who's mind is working day and night, requires rest all the more. The

same precepts apply to cats and humans alike. It concerns me that Tatara would speak ill of me, calling me out as a good-for-nothing creature of leisure. It's a sorry state of affairs, but the common man interfaces solely with the material world, with things he can see, feel, and touch, and these tangible forms alone are the basis for his judgment of others. In his eyes, work means tucking up one's skirts and breaking a sweat. They say that the monk Bodhidharma sat at length in meditation, caring not when his legs atrophied. Whether the great teacher was enduring the loss of his legs, or whether vines emerged from cracks in the wall to grow over his mouth and eyes, in either case, he was neither asleep nor dead. His mind was at work, evolving singular thoughts, comprehending, for example, the oneness of enlightened and unenlightened. The Confucianists, too, pursue their paths through quiet contemplation. They may not go so far as to shut themselves in a room and come out crippled, but they hone their minds to heightened awareness. On the outside, though, all is still and solemn. The layman is wont to censure such towering intellectuals, viewing them as common dullards and berating them as useless deadwood or good-for-nothing idlers. The layman's eye, oblivious to its own deficiency, sees form but knows not spirit -- Tatara Sanpei is a prime example of such superficial reckoning. Little wonder, then, that he regards me as nothing better than dry dung. It's most regrettable, on the other hand, that my master, who reads widely and seeks to comprehend the ways of this world, should voice no objection to his superficial companion's proposal to stew and eat me.

On the other hand, when I step back and look at the big picture, it's little wonder they disdain me. As the old sayings go, "Noble words are lost on the masses," and "Few can match rhythm to verses of springtime and white snows." How can one exhort this lot, who only see what's plain to the eye, to treasure the splendor of the soul? One might just as well ask a shaven monk to tie up his hair, or call on a tuna to address an assembly, or urge the electric trains to jump their tracks, or counsel the master to resign his post, or challenge Sanpei to take his mind off money. At the end of the day, all are impossible asks. That being said, even cats are social creatures at heart. And being social creatures, however self-satisfied in our pride, we're compelled to conform, in some degree, to societal norms. While disappointed that the master, the wife, Osan, and Sanpei and company don't appreciate me as they should, my greater concern is that their ignorance not precipitate reckless actions and bad ends. I'd rather not be flayed and sold off to the shamisen maker, or minced and served up on Sanpei's dinner tray. I'm a highly exceptional cat, endowed with great intellect and unleashed into this world to wield it, and as such must comport myself with due care. It's said that fortune's child sits back from the edge. Similarly, to flaunt my talents through vain and reckless adventure would be an affront to Heaven and only invite calamity. The fierce tiger, if placed in a zoo, lives side by side with the filthy pig. The grand goose, once captured, shares the poulterer's cutting board with the scrawny chicken. To reside with the common man, it behooves me to act the common cat. To act the common cat, I have to catch a mouse. -- It's settled at last. I'm going to catch a mouse.

They say that Japan and Russia are engaged in all-out war. As a Japanese cat I'm partial, of course, to Japan. So much so that, if I could, I'd gladly assemble a cat brigade and claw those Russian soldiers. To a

cat brimming so with vitality, what's a mouse or two? I could catch one in my sleep, without effort, if I made up my mind to. Long ago, a certain man turned to his Zen master and asked how best to attain enlightenment. Be like the cat, the master is said to have told him, who's set its sights on a mouse. What he meant was that the cat, once focused on its prey, doesn't come up short. There's an old proverb about a woman outsmarting herself and failing to sell the cow, but there's no comparable maxim about a cat outsmarting itself and failing to catch the mouse. Which leads me to reason that even I, clever as I am, should have no trouble catching a mouse. Not only should I have no trouble catching one, I should expect success on each and every endeavor. If I haven't yet caught one, it's simply because I've never tried.

The spring evening falls as on the day prior, with a flurry of blossoms set adrift by a chance breeze, some drifting in through the crack in the shōji and landing in the bucket, where they float white in the dim light of the kitchen lamp. Tonight's the night I'll shine, when all the household will marvel at my feat. In preparation, I scout out the battleground, taking in the lay of the land. The front lines, of course, are hardly vast. In terms of tatami, four or so mats, one of which is divided between the sink and the patch of bare floor where the saké vendor and greengrocer call. The cooking stove, far too grand for the kitchen it's in, sports a bright copper kettle. Between the back of the stove and the wainscoting is the strip of floor where my food bowl rests. Along the wall nearest the living room is a long cupboard with serving trays, bowls, cups, and saucers, making the cramped kitchen tighter still. On the adjacent wall are open shelves, the highest just brushing the top of the cupboard. On a lower shelf sits an earthenware mortar, face up, and in the mortar rests a small bucket whose undersurface is angled my way. A daikon grater and wooden pestle are hung side by side, and off by itself sits a charcoal pot. From the point where the blackened rafters intersect, there hangs a pothook, supporting a large, flat basket. The basket, catching the occasional breeze, sways with a gentle motion. When I first arrived in this house, the purpose of this basket eluded me. Later on, when I learned that its purpose was to keep foodstuff out of my reach, the fiendish nature of man hit home most keenly.

Time for strategic planning. As to where to engage these mice, it has to be where the mice appear. No point in choosing my favored terrain, only to wait in vain, alone, and forgo doing battle. Investigation is called for. I need to know their access points. I stand in the center of the kitchen and survey all around, wondering whence they'll arrive. I feel somehow like Admiral Tōgō. The maidservant has left for the baths and is not yet back. The children have gone to bed. The master, returned from gorging on dumplings at Imozaka, has holed himself up in his study as usual. The wife -- I've no idea what the wife's up to. She's probably nodded off and dreaming of yams. The occasional cartman passes out front, dropping the house into deeper silence as he passes on. My steeled resolve, my heightened senses, the scene in the kitchen before me, and the solitude all around set the stage for noble heroics. I am, indeed, the Admiral Tōgō of cats. In such a state, I can't but feel, as anyone would, a welling of exhilaration from within. Yet just beneath this exhilaration, there also lurks a great concern. I'm undaunted in my resolve to do battle, be it one mouse or many, but I've no idea whence the fight comes. Through meticulous observation, I've

narrowed the pilferers' means of intrusion to three possibilities. If they're run-of-the-mill rodents, they'll no doubt follow the drain pipe, appear in the sink, and circle round behind the stove. In such case, I'll hide behind the charcoal pot and cut off their path of escape. Then again, there's an outlet in the bathing room where bath water flows to the outside gutter. If that's their entry point, they may rush the kitchen by way of the bath. In that case, I'll camp on the kettle lid, leap down on them from above, and take them out in one fell swoop. Finally, there's a gnawed-off crescent in the bottom right corner of the cupboard door, smacking of a rodent hole. Drawing my nose near to it, I'm sure I smell a rat. If they rush me from there, I'll duck behind the pillar claw them as they pass.

What if they come from above? I look up at the soot-blackened ceiling. It glistens in the lamplight, like some netherworld turned on its head. I can neither climb up to it nor descend down from it. I decide they can't possibly drop down from such lofty heights, and I dismiss it from consideration. Even still, there remain three avenues of potential attack. I can thwart a single-point incursion with one eye shut. If they assail me via two paths, I'm confident I'll somehow prevail. However, when it comes to a three-pronged attack, even instinctive mousing skills, which I presume to possess in good measure, will not suffice. That being said, to run to the likes of Kurumaya no Kuro for backup would compromise my dignity. What can I do? When wondering what to do, and when no insight arises, the simplest course of action is to simply rule out the situation of concern. What can't be dealt with, one is happy enough to believe, won't happen. Look at the world around us. Yesterday's bride may perish today, yet the bridegroom, showing no signs of concern, happily lauds eternal love. It's not that there's no reason to worry. It's rather the case that worry is waste. I've no proper grounds for ruling out a three-pronged attack, but I chose to do so for the sake of quietude. In preparation for any and all endeavors, quietude is essential. It's something I require. Hence I decide that there won't be a three-front attack.

Even at that, I'm still feeling ill at ease, and it takes some thinking to understand why. I've outlined three courses of action, but what's troubling me is the problem of which one to choose. I rack my brain, but to no avail. If they come from the cupboard, I know what to do. If they emerge from the bathing room, I'm ready with a plan. If they crawl from the sink, I'm ready for them. But how is one to know whence they come? They say that Admiral Tōgō agonized over the potential approaches of Russia's Baltic Fleet. Would they come through the Tsushima Strait, the Tsugaru Strait, or the distant Sōya Strait? Given my present situation, I appreciate in full the gravity of his dilemma. Not only do I face a similar predicament as His Excellency, I agonize over it in a like manner.

As I'm thus absorbed in thought, taxing my creative faculties, the torn shōji slides open and Osan's face looms in the gap. That's not to say that she lacked her arms and legs. The rest of her was lost in the dark, and only her face, intensely bright by contrast, registered vividly in my eyes. Osan, who's ruddy face was even redder than usual on account of the baths, proceeded immediately, perhaps taking a lesson from the prior evening, to secure the kitchen. The master called out from the study for his walking stick to be

placed by his pillow. Why he should choose to adorn his bedside with his walking stick was beyond me. Does he somehow fancy himself the Ekisui man-of-arms, ready to crack the air with lightning swings of his battle staff? Yesterday it was yams, today it's the stick. Tomorrow is anyone's guess.

The night is still young. There's no sign yet of mice. In advance of my epic battle, a bit of rest is in order.

The master's kitchen has no louvered skylight. Instead, there's a width of cut-out, which in any other room would pass for a transom, that is open year-round and serves as ventilation. A breath of wind suddenly stirs, enticing the higen cherry tree to yield its blossoms, and startling me awake. A hazy moon has taken the sky, its light casting an oblique shadow line from the edge of the stove onto the loose floorboards. Concerned I've slept too long, I twitch my ears several times and survey my surroundings. Just like the night prior, all is still, with the only sound being that of the wall clock. It's time for the mice to show. I'm wondering whence they'll come.

A scratching sound arises from the cupboard. They seem to be running its length, grasping the edges of small plates as they pass. Knowing now whence they'll come, I crouch down by the hole and wait. They don't seem inclined to emerge. The scratching of plates dissipates, only to be replaced by the occasional heavier rumbling of bowls or some larger dishes. Just the cupboard door separates us. They can't be but a short distance from the tip of my nose. At times, a scampering of feet approaches the opening, only to retreat. Not one of them shows its face. While my foes frolic and cavort to their hearts' content, I'm obliged to lie low and patiently bide my time guarding the outlet. The mice, lost in revelry, are dancing about in their Ryojun bowl. If only Osan, that clueless bumpkin, had had the sense to crack the door for me.

Next comes a ringing sound from my clamshell dish behind the stove. Realizing the enemy is back there too, I approach on stealthy feet, only to catch the glimpse of a tail before it retreats round the bucket and disappears under the sink. A moment later, from the bathing room comes the sound of the gargle cup clinking against the metal basin. As I turn to look behind me, a big fellow nimbly scurries beneath the floor boards, upsetting a bag of tooth brushing powder in the process. Not about to let him get away, I jump down in pursuit, only to find that I'm too late. Catching mice is harder than I thought. Perhaps I'm not a born mouser.

As I make my way to the bathing room, the enemy emerges from the cupboard. If I stake out the cupboard, they come up from the sink. When I stand my ground in the middle of the kitchen, activity erupts, sporadically, on three fronts. Call it cheekiness, or call it cowardice, they're no worthy foe for a gentleman. After fifteen or so attempts, running myself here and there to exhaustion, I've nothing to show for it. Sad though it is to admit, even the great Admiral Tōgō, pitted against such base creatures, would find himself stymied. I'd started out the courageous conqueror, noble in my stoic resolve. Now, however, the whole undertaking seems bothersome and foolish. On top of that, fatigue has rendered me drowsy. I

plant myself in the middle of the kitchen and don't move. I don't move, but I keep watch on all sides, and this suffices to keep the enemy, base creatures that they are, largely in check. When one's foes turn out to be no better than shabby rogues, warfare loses its honor, and all that's left is repugnance. Then, the repugnance having subsided, one's left in a dazed stupor. After the stupor, finally, comes indifference. Let them do as they please, it can never amount to much. Such is my great disdain, which brings on a great fatigue. And thus it is that fatigue rules the day. I'm going to sleep. The beckoning call of slumber, even in the midst of one's foes, is not to be denied.

A strong gust sends another volley of blossoms through the kitchen vent. Just as I'm feeling its swirl, something shoots from the cupboard like a bullet. Before I can react, it's cut through the air and clamped its teeth onto my left ear. Immediately after, a dark shadow circles behind me and fastens itself to my tail. All this happens in the wink of an eye. Reflexively, I spring to my feet. Mustering all the strength in my bones, I work to shake these monsters loose. The one that's bitten into my ear loses its balance and dangles off the side of my face. Its tail, soft like a rubber tube, finds its way into my mouth. Seizing the moment, I bite down and thrash my head from side to side. The tail stays put, locked in my front teeth, while the torso goes airborne, striking the paper-patched wall and bouncing over the floor boards. I bear down immediately, lest it regain its footing. As I do so, it zips past me like a kicked ball, grazing my muzzle, and landing itself on an upper shelf, where it crouches on tucked legs. It peers down at me from its perch on the shelf, and I gaze up at it from my spot on the wooden floor. The distance between us is a meter and a half. The light of the moon, shining in at an angle, brightens a broad path through the intervening space. Leaping for all I'm worth, I just manage to land my front paws on the shelf. My front paws firmly grip the edge of the shelf, but my hind paws are loose in the air. The aforementioned dark shadow has anchored its teeth in my tail and is hanging on for dear life. I find myself in a bind. I try to reposition my front paws for a better grip, but each time I do so I'm thwarted by the weight on my tail. A few more slips and I'm gone. The situation is dire. My claws dig into the wood of the shelf with a loud scraping sound. In desperation, I extract my left paw for re-engagement, only to have its claws miss their mark. I'm hanging now by a single claw on my right paw, with the weight of my body, plus the weight of the my tail anchor, slowly turning in space. In this instant the monster perched on the shelf, having watched and waited its chance, hurls itself like a stone, taking aim at my forehead. My last clawhold fails me. The three of us, as one unified mass, plunge down through the moonlight. We're joined by the earthenware mortar, the small bucket, and an empty jam tin from the lower shelf, which in turn upset the charcoal pot. Half of the lot splashes into the water basin, and the other half goes tumbling over the wood floor. The stillness of the wee hours is ruptured by the awful crash. Even as I struggle in the midst of it all, the sound sends a chill down my spine.

"Burglar!" the master bellows as he rushes out from the bedroom. In one hand he's holding a lamp, in the other his stick. His eyes, though still half asleep, are doing their utmost to shine with a fierce light. I crouch quietly by my clamshell dish. The two monsters have disappeared into the cupboard. "Who's here?"

What's going on?" The master, finding no other course of action, calls out in irritation to no one in particular. The moon is setting toward the west. Its light is reduced now to half what it was.