

## I am a Cat – Chapter 7b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

Turning left down the lane, I see up ahead a tall, thin chimney, made up of stacked segments, with thin smoke wafting from its tip. This is it - the public bath. I steal in quietly through the rear entrance. Some may say that stealing in through the rear is cowardly or uncouth, but those who take issue with it are generally those incapable of like action, and their indignant grumblings are grounded, in part at least, in jealousy. From times of old, clever men have entered through the rear, appearing unannounced. "Bringing up a Gentleman," volume two, chapter one, page five, makes note of this. It goes on to state, on the following page, that unannounced entrances are the key by which a gentleman secures his proper legacy. As a cat of this twentieth century, I'm well versed in such things. Take heed and mark my words. At any rate, on stealing in I see to my left a mountain of pine wood, split and cut to size. Next to it is a heaping pile of coal. Why, some may ask, is the pine wood a mountain and the coal a heaping pile. There's no deep reason, other than that I've varied my words for effect. Men consume rice, raise birds, catch fish, and hunt beasts. Having consumed all of these in excess, even to their own detriment, they've stooped to consuming coal. I can't but pity them. Up ahead, I spy an open door, and through the door lies a cavernous space, empty and still. From far beyond, the din of voices rises. These voices, I decide, must surely lead to the baths. I make my way past the pine kindling and the coal, turn to my left, advance further, and see on my right a series of glassed panes. On the other side of the glass are small round buckets, stacked in triangular fashion, forming pyramids. For round objects, these pyramidal stacks are most incongruous, and I feel for these little buckets. To the south of the buckets is a wooden platform, made to order for yours truly. Its height is roughly a meter, perfect for one good bound. Accepting its call, I spring up lightly, and in front of my nose, before my eyes, I'm face-to-face with the baths. In this whole world, there's no greater delight than to taste what one's never tasted, or see what one's never seen. Some of you may, like my master, frequent these baths multiple times in a week, whiling away thirty to forty minutes at a stint. However, for those like me who've never set sight on these baths, I can't overstate the impact. Miss the final moment at a dying parent's bedside, but don't miss these baths. It may be, as they say, a wide world, but few and far between are marvels such as this.

What marvel, you ask? Such marvel that I hesitate to describe it, as words can do no justice. The men beyond the glass, swarming and chattering and raising a din, are stark naked, each and every last one. Like Taiwanese aboriginals. Like twentieth-century Adams. To trace through the history of human clothing -- This may get lengthy. I'll refrain from tracing it through and defer to dear old Teufelsdröckh. -- Suffice it to say that clothes make the man. So much so that Beau Nash, at the spas of Bath in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, enforced a strict dress code. Both men and women, even as they bathed, were covered from shoulder to toe. Going back sixty years from the present, again in England, a school for design was founded in a certain town. Being a school for design, they procured replicas and castings of nude paintings and forms for display throughout the premises. That was fine, but then it was time to open the school with

a grand ceremony, and that presented the founders and staff with a conundrum. Any grand ceremony, by definition and necessity, had to include the lady folk. In those days, however, in the mind of a proper lady, man was a creature of clothing. He was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a naked ape merely sporting a pelt. Man without clothing was void essence, like an elephant minus its trunk, a school without its pupils, or a soldier sans valor. Robbed of his essence, he was no longer man, but reduced to the level of beastly brute. Even if merely drawings and castings, a noble lady was loathe to compromise her dignity by placing her person among such men-brutes. Citing such reason, the town's ladies, one and all, humbly declined to attend. The staff thought them most unreasonable, but at the same time were acutely aware that ladies, in all lands near and far, serve to adorn an occasion. They may not make good millers, and they may not make good soldiers, but an opening ceremony, without the grace of their presence, was out of the question. With no other recourse, off they went to the fabric shop. They came back toting thirty five and seven eighths lengths of black fabric, and each and every naked brute was duly masked in cloth. Lest a lady be offended, all were fully and carefully clad to the neck. Thus, as the story's told, was disaster averted and the school opened per plan. This incident exemplifies importance of clothing in human affairs. Some scholars these days fixate on the nude, living and breathing its artistic grace. These men are misguided. To one such as myself, who's never in his life been disrobed, the error of their ways is clear. The nude, drawing on traditions of Greece and Rome, and spurred by a Renaissance Period penchant for debauchery, has come to be in vogue. For the Greeks and Romans, though, nudity was second nature and in no way connected, whatsoever, with morality. Not so in Northern Europe, where the climate is cold.

To traverse Japan unclothed would be challenge enough, but try this in Germany or England. You'll surely catch your death. People prefer not to catch their deaths, so they clothe themselves accordingly. Once they're all clothed, it becomes the case that humans are clothed creatures. And having become clothed creatures, they now regard any sudden intrusion of nakedness as beast-like rather than human. No wonder then that Europeans, and especially Northern Europeans, should react to nude images and forms as though assailed by beasts. And no wonder that they should rank such beasts even lesser than cats. What of beauty? Beauty is fine, but a beautiful beast is a beast nonetheless. Some will ask, no doubt, if I've never seen a Western lady in evening dress. As a cat, I can't say I ever have. From what I gather, though, in this so-called "evening dress" they expose their bare bosoms, expose their bare shoulders, and expose their bare arms. Utterly scandalous. Up until the fourteenth century, such over-the-top attire was unheard-of. Ladies dressed in normal dress. How these ladies devolved from properly-clad females to today's vulgar parade of jugglers and clowns is a long story that I won't go into. Those who know, know, and the rest need pay no heed. History aside, despite their triumphant evening soirées in outlandish attire, some vestige of humanity seems to remain. In the light of day, the shoulders draw back in, the bosoms are covered, and the arms are duly wrapped. Not only are all of these hidden from view, but a single bare toe is grounds for greatest disgrace. It follows clearly then, that their evening dress is the conflicted consequence of fools consorting with fools. If that seems harsh, then let them expose their shoulders and bosoms and arms in the light of day. The same goes for proponents of nudism. If the naked body is so acceptable, then let them walk their

daughters, and themselves for that matter, unclothed through Ueno Park. That can't be done? Of course it can. It's only, is it not, that Westerners don't do it. At the same time, Japan's socialites are only too happy to swagger off to the Imperial Hotel decked out in costumes most nonsensical. They wear what they wear because Westerners wore it first. Westerners are trend-setters, so nonsense or not one can't but follow suit. By anything long they let themselves be bound, to anything forceful they yield, and by anything heavy they're readily suppressed. Is subjecting oneself to any and all influences not mindless? If mindless submission is all one can manage then fine, but the people of Japan, then, had best not overestimate themselves. The same applies when it comes to scholarship, but the topic at hand is clothing, so I'll not go there.

Thus is the extent to which men value clothing. It can even be said that a man is his clothes, or that clothes make the man. The history of humanity is not a story of flesh, nor a story of bone, nor a story of blood. Simply stated, it's a story of clothing. An unclothed man, one senses, is a man stripped of humanity. He's nothing more than a brute. Were all men, by mutual agreement, to reduce themselves to brutes, then problem solved - the brute becomes the norm. This outcome in itself, however, is highly problematic. Nature, from time immemorial, has cast men into this world equally equipped. No man arrives in any state but stark naked. If it were man's nature to find contentment in equality, then he should thrive in his nakedness. In fact, though, stark naked man begins to question the value of individual enterprise if any and all are forever the same. He longs to assert his individual identity through some form of visual differentiation. He looks for something, a part of his physical person, that will stop his peers in their tracks. He exercises his intellect to its utmost, and ten long years later, undershorts are born. He dons his undershorts, struts about proudly, and basks in his peers' adulation. This is the ancestor of today's rickshaw man. It may seem odd that ten years' effort should be poured into something so mundane as undershorts, but that's modern perspective passing judgment on unenlightened antiquity. At the time in question, the development of undershorts was hailed as a heretofore unparalleled achievement. They say that it took Descartes some ten or more years to arrive at his, "I think, therefore I am," a truth evident to any three-year-old. When one reflects on the difficulty of original thought, one can't but admire the intellect of the rickshaw man who, through ten years of sustained mental effort, brought the world undershorts.

The invention of undershorts, then, set rickshaw men apart and above. The rest of the brutes burned with envy as these rickshaw men, sporting their undershorts, traversed the land's thoroughfares, hither and yon, as though they owned them. Not to be outdone, other brutes toiled some six long years, and the fruit of their labor was the good-for-nothing haori. Undershorts were suddenly passé, and the new haori was all the rage. Green grocers, druggists, and drapers are all descended from the haori's originator. Undershorts had their heyday, the haori had its heyday, and next came the hakama. This was conceived by still other brutes, fed up with and unimpressed by those who sported haori. The former warrior class, or today's government officials, number among this lot. Thus it was that brute upon brute, in a chain of "me too" one-upmanships, competed for novelty and distinction, even adopting the swallow tail as a design theme.

Taking a step back, however, and examining this history from a fresh perspective, there's nothing about it that's forced, haphazard, coincidental, or purposeless. All of these new styles merely attest to man's dauntless determination to prevail over his peers. Rather than shouting out his individuality as he strolls the byways, he wears it on his person. In which case, the underlying psychology reveals a great revelation. I'll share with you what that is. It's that just as nature abhors a vacuum, man detests mediocrity. From this present state, where his loathe for mediocrity has compelled him to adorn himself in clothing dear as flesh and bone, to strip him now of these articles, reverting back to a former age when all men were equal in their nakedness, is utter insanity. Even if insanity suits one, there's no going back. Those going back, in the eyes of enlightened society, would be nothing but brutes. Suppose even, for sake of argument, that all the millions and millions of men were pulled back into their former simple state. Would all then be equal? All men would be brutes, so none would feel shame. All the same, this wouldn't last. On day one, the rivalry of brutes would reassert itself. If clothing were removed from the picture, the rivalry of brutes would merely take some alternate form. Stark naked man, stark naked though he be, would nevertheless toil after distinction. Looking at it this way, it's plain to see that man once clothed can never be disrobed.

That being said, this group of humans now before my eyes have placed their requisite undershorts, haori, and hakama on the shelves, unreservedly breaking taboo to expose themselves to all the world. They display no angst. On the contrary, they're chatting loquaciously to their hearts' content. Thus I described this earlier as the greatest of marvels. It's my humble honor now to detail the scene for the benefit of my good and cultured readers.

There's so much going on that it's hard to know where to begin. The world of brutes is unstructured chaos, defying any attempt at orderly testimony. I'll start by describing the tub. I'm not sure it even qualifies as a tub, but for now let's let that pass. It's one meter in width by three meters in length, partitioned into two sections, and one of the two sections is milky white. This, as I understand it, is the medicated bath, and it's dissolved quicklime that gives it its cloudy hue. Not only is it cloudy, but its surface is dense and oily. It looks almost rancid, which is no surprise, as I'm told the water is only changed weekly. The other half of the tub is standard bath water, though one would be hard pressed to call it clear or pure. Imagine a rain barrel with standing water, stirred after some time, and you'll grasp its color well enough. Some words now on the brutes. In the rainwater side, standing upright, are two young men. They stand face to face, dousing their bellies with warm water. They're having a ball. Their skin, through exposure to the sun, is darkened to a tee. Both brutes look fit as a fiddle, till one pats his chest with his hand towel and appeals to his companion. "Kin-san, this area aches. What d'you suppose it could be?" "That's your stomach. If your stomach goes you're done for. You'd better take care." Kin-san adds his earnest admonishment. "It's this left side here." The young man pats his left lung. "That's your stomach. The stomach is on the left, and the lungs are on the right." "Is that right? I thought the stomach was round here." This time he pats his midsection. "Pain down there would be intestinal inflammation," Kin-san replies. At this point a fellow of twenty five or so, sporting a thin mustache, plunges into the bath. As he does so, the soap and grime off

his body float to the surface. It sparkles in response, like iron-tinged water exposed to the sun. Next to this newcomer is the bald head of an older man who's locked another fellow, a man with close-cropped hair, in conversation. Only their heads protrude above the water.

"It's no good getting old. Just like overworked metal, an overworn man is prone to fatigue. Still to this day, though, nothing beats a piping hot bath." "I envy you your health. We should all be so lucky." "I wouldn't say I'm healthy. I'm only just fending off illness. A human being, if he lives his life right, should last to a hundred and twenty." "Really? That long?" "That long. I can assure you. Before the Restoration there was a shogunate vassal in Ushigome named Magaribuchi. Magaribuchi's manservant was a hundred and thirty." "Now that's a long life." "That it is. He lived so long he lost track of his own age. Up to one hundred was fine, but from there he stopped counting. He was a hundred and thirty when I met him, and he was still going strong. I can't say what became of him, but could be he's still kicking." Thus saying, he rose and left the tub. The man with the mustache was lost in his own world, grinning as he seeded the waters around him with isinglass-like droplets. The brute who plunged in next was not your typical brute. His back was a living canvas. The design, it seemed, was Iwami Jūtarō wielding his long sword, preparing to vanquish a serpent. Regrettably, the design work was still in process, and the serpent was nowhere to be seen. One sensed, as a consequence, that master Jūtarō's enthusiasm was overblown and premature. "Far too tepid," the brute exclaimed as he plunged in. Another one plunged in after. "Agreed ... could stand to be hotter." Despite these words, his face makes a grimace, as though it's plenty hot and then some. "Afternoon, boss." He greets the Jūtarō man as their eyes meet. "Hey there," is Jūtarō's curt response, followed after some pause by a question. "What's with Tami?" "What's with him? You know how he loves the bells and lights." "I don't mean just the bells and lights ..." "Quite right. There's something with that guy -- for whatever reason, folks don't like him -- hard to say why -- they just don't trust him. A tradesman can't get by like that." "Exactly. Where he should be humble, he's pompous. That's why no one trusts him." "That's the truth. He may be skilled in his trade -- in the end, though, he's only hindering himself." "The old Shirokane-chō guard is fading away. There's the cooper Moto still, the master brickmaker, and there's you. I was born and raised here too, but does anyone know where Tami's from?" "That's the point. It's a wonder he's come as far as he has." "It sure is. For whatever reason, folks don't like him. A man adrift - no one has his back." The censure of Tami goes on and on.

That's the rain barrel side. On the milky white side, it's a packed house. Rather than men in a tub full of bath water, it's better described as a tub full of men with bath water added. To make matters worse, they're quite the leisurely lot. A new man enters from time to time, but no man leaves. If each man, once he's in, stays and soaks for a week, then I shudder to imagine the state of the water. With this in mind, I survey the scene further, and what do I see but master Kushami, wedged into the far left corner and red like a lobster. Someone should make way, I'm thinking, and let the poor man out, but there's no sign of movement. The master himself shows no inclination of wishing to exit. He simply stays and steeps, turning a deeper red. I laud his perseverance. I suppose that having forked out his two sen and five rin, he intends to get his

money's worth. All the same, I can't help but worry, as I watch through the window from my perch on the shelf, if the vapors won't overcome him. At this point, two spots removed from the master, another bather knits his brows in consternation. "This is too much. My back's on fire." He appeals to his fellow brutes for sympathy. "I'd say it's just right. Medicated water, unless it's this hot, can't work its effect. Where I'm from, the baths are twice as hot," another counters proudly. "What exactly is it this stuff does?" A fellow ask all round as he folds his washcloth and sets it over the top of his lumpy head. "It does most anything. Good for what ails you, as they say. Wonderful stuff." This is from the owner of a face that resembles, in both color and form, a shrunken cucumber. If the bath is really so wonderful, can it not do something for his looks? "Rather than freshly mixed, it's at its best three or four days in. Today should be just about right," an authoritative voice adds. Taking a look, the voice is from a portly fellow. On second thought, perhaps he's not portly but just caked in layers of grime. "How 'bout drinking it?" a shrill voice pipes up from the pack. "It's a curious thing. Drink a cupful on cold evenings, before turning in, and you'll sleep all night. You won't have to wake and pee. Give it a try." Another voice from who knows which face.

Having witnessed enough of the tubs, I turn my attention next to the wood-planked floor. Myriad Adams, none of whom you'd ever choose to sketch, are lined up in various postures and poses, washing away to their hearts' content. Two Adams in particular stand out. One is on his back, gazing up at the light of the lofty dormer. The other is belly-down, peering into the drain. Both of these Adams, it would seem, have nothing to do but while away the day. A priest is crouched on the floor, his face to the stone wall, as a junior apprentice kneads his shoulders. The apprentice, as hierarchy demands, is serving as attendant. There's also, in fact, a genuine attendant. Seemingly under the weather, he's wrapped in a padded vest in spite of the warmth. Hefting oval-shaped buckets, he douses the patrons' shoulders with warm water. Tucked in next to the big toe of his right foot is a silk-gauze exfoliator cloth. Closer to me is a fellow who covets buckets. He's using three at once, all the while offering soap to his neighbor, whom he's engaged in a long-winded discourse. Wondering what it's about, I listen in. "Firearms are a Western invention. In days past it was sword against sword. Westerners are cowards. Why else would they devise such things? It wasn't the Chinese. No, sir, it was Westerners. In Watōnai's time there were no firearms. Watōnai was a Minamoto, descended from Emperor Seiwa. Yoshitsune left Ezo and made his way to Manchuria, taking with him a savvy advisor. Yoshitsune's son then assailed the Ming regime. The Ming, finding themselves in dire straights, sent an envoy to the Third Shōgun, requesting a force of three thousand men. The Third detained the envoy, barring his return. -- That was ... -- Such or someone envoy ... -- At any rate, the envoy was held for two years and set up with a courtesan in Nagasaki. That courtesan then gave birth to Watōnai. When the envoy finally reached home, the Ming regime was in ruins, overrun by rebellion. ..." I give up - there's no coherent thread here. Behind this speaker sits a glum fellow in his mid-twenties, working medicated water over his groin area. He suffers, it seems, from some sort of swelling. Next over, a couple of impertinent lads, in their late teens, are prattling on about you this and me that. Local boarding students, no doubt. In the next spot again is an odd-looking backside. All up the spine, each vertebra juts out conspicuously, as though a length of marbled bamboo were inserted up from the haunches. Left and right

of the spine are four patterned forms, lined up neatly like game boards. The boards are red and inflamed, with pustules dotting their peripheries.

As I continue to describe things, piece by piece, I realize it's well beyond my abilities to sum the scene into one coherent picture. I may have bitten off, I'm afraid, more than I can chew. In this moment, an older gentleman, of seventy or so years, with shaved head and outfitted in pale yellow cotton, suddenly makes his entrance. Surveying the sea of naked brutes, he lowers his bald head deferentially by way of greeting. "My thanks to all for your continued patronage. There's a chill in the air today, so take your time -- Let the medicated bath work its magic. Soak till you're warmed through and through -- Where's my attendant? You - watch that water and keep it hot." All of this rolls off his tongue in one continuous stream. "On it!" the attendant calls back in response. "Charming fellow. There's a true proprietor for ya." Mr. Watōnai is very much taken with the old man. So intrigued am I by the sudden appearance of this eccentric old man that I abandon my heretofore narrative and focus my attention on his doings. The old man spots a boy of four or so, newly emerged from the bath. "Hey there young lad," he calls while extending a hand. The child, regarding the old man's withered face, akin to a trampled-on bean-jam cake, responds with a terrified shriek. "Don't cry now. What's wrong? Frightened by this old face? Dear me." Taken aback by the child's reaction, the old man quickly changes tact and addresses the father instead. "Hey there Gen-san. A chilly day, is it not? Some dolt burglar broke in at Ōmiya last night. Cut his way in though the side door, and you know what he took? Not a thing. A patrolman or watchman must have scared him off." Grinning with glee at the burglar's empty haul, he engages another patron. "It really is cold. You don't feel it? You're all so young still, that's why." It's the old man alone, it seems, who feels the chill.

My attention was riveted to this old man, and the multitude of brutes, including my master, whom I'd last left crouching in the bath, in a state of overheated distress, had entirely vanished from my mind, when a loud protestation erupted from the edge of the wash area. I turned to look, and the source, unmistakably, was master Kushami. The master's booming voice, gruff and offensive to the ear, was nothing new to me, but the place being what it was, I was more than a little taken aback. My immediate thought was that he'd steeped too long in the hot bath and finally lost his wits. If this were the case, and it was simply physical distress, then there was no point in reproving him. However, as will become clear from the particulars of the situation, heated though his head may have been, he was in full control of his senses. He'd engaged the two boarding students, impertinent fellows to be sure, yet hardly worth troubling over, in a petty quarrel. "Back off there! I'll not have your rinse in my bucket!" This outburst, of course, is from the master. Depending on one's perspective, there are multiple ways of assessing a situation. The master's outburst, consequently, need not be consigned to simple heated delirium. The rare observer, perhaps, might fancy the master some modern-day Takayama Hikokurō, rebuking bandits cross the mountain pass. The master, in fact, may very well see himself in this role, but the other party, of course, has no intent of playing the bandit and does not react as the master might have hoped. The lad under fire turns his head. "I was here first," he responds in measured tone. His reply is nothing out of the ordinary. He's merely holding his

ground. The master, even with his heated head from the hot bath, and even though the reply may not be to his liking, must surely acknowledge that there's nothing in the lad's words or manner to invite a violent rebuke. However, there's more to the master's discontent than the lad's mere proximity. For some time now, both lads have been talking big, with hubris and pretension unbecoming of youth, and the master, it would appear, has had quite enough. Despite the lad's measured response, he's not about to let things lie and beat a retreat. "You're a blasted idiot! Splashing your own filthy water at another fellow's bucket!" With this parting roar he proceeds to relocate himself. I share the master's disdain for these lads, and I couldn't help but cheer silently as he dressed them down. At the same time, though, his words and actions were a bit over the top for an academic instructor. By nature he's too headstrong. His head is harder than a charred lump of coal.

In times of old, when Hannibal led his army through the Alps, he came across a large boulder that lay in the middle of the road and blocked his path. He softened it up, as the story's told, with vinegar and fire, then sawed it into slices like a fishcake. His army proceeded on its way with minimal delay. For one like my master, who boils himself beet red in the medicated bath to no apparent effect, is there any option left but vinegar and fire? Barring such measures, confrontation with however many hundreds of boarding students, over however many tens of years, will never dent his rock-hard head. Floating in these tubs, and scattered about this wash area, are a party of brutes who've shed off their clothing, and in doing so cut themselves loose from the world of civilized men. They can hardly be held to everyday standards and norms. Within these reaches, anything goes. A stomach can lie where a lung belongs, Watōnai is a Minamoto, descended from Emperor Seiwa, and Tami-san is no end of dodgy. However, on leaving the wash area and stepping across the wood-planked floor, the brutes become brutes no more. They don their clothes, as civilized society requires, and re-emerge into the living world of men. It should follow then, that their conduct there is the conduct of men. The master now treads on this threshold. He's halfway in the wash area, and halfway onto the wood-planked floor, marking his return to a world of civility and discretion. On the verge of such return, his obstinacy persists. This obstinacy, it would seem, is his trademark flaw, inextricably fused to the core of his being. An ingrained flaw is never easy to root out or rectify. Only one approach, in my opinion, can root it out. That approach is this - have the principal of the school call the master in and relieve him of his post. Once relieved of his post, the master, unable to adapt, will be thoroughly out in the cold. Out in the cold, he'll perish by the wayside. In other words, to lose his post means to lose his very life. The master revels in embracing his trademark flaw, but he's terrified of death. He seeks to indulge his flaw, but not to the point of cutting short his existence. He's a coward at heart, so the threat of his own demise is sure to set him trembling with fear. Set him trembling with fear, and his trademark flaw, I believe, will cleanly depart. If that doesn't do it, then nothing will.

However idiotic or flawed he may be, my master is still my master. The poet reminds us to never forget our benefactors, and even a cat cannot, in good conscience, look on his master's plight with indifference. I was overcome with empathy, in fact, to the exclusion of all else. I'd completely abandoned my



observations of the bathing area when suddenly, from the direction of the medicated bath, rose a loud chorus of cries. Thinking another quarrel must have erupted, I turn to look. Through the constricted opening of the steam gate, in a solid mass of interwoven limbs, spills brute upon brute. There are hairy shins, and hairless thighs, all jumbled as one. The time is late afternoon, and the autumn sun is setting fire to a solid wall of steam ascending to the rafters. Through breaks in this rush of steam, the jostling brutes come and go from view. "Too hot! Too hot!" Their shrieks assail my mind, seeming to pierce one ear and exit the other. All manner of voices, plied thick and in rapid succession, fill the bathhouse, building into a single cacophonous crescendo. Chaos and confusion are the only common threads. All else is lost in the din. I watch in blank amazement as the scene unfolds, frozen in place. Finally, when it seems the cries have reached their chaotic peak, a looming figure emerges from the jostling throng. In stature, he's a good half head larger than any fellow patron. His red face sports a beard, or perhaps it's best said that his beard hosts a reddened face. At any rate, he throws back his bright red face and his voice booms out like the mid-day cannon. "Water it down 'fore ya cook us alive!" This voice and face transcend the jumbled horde. In this moment, all else fades away, and the attention of the entire bathhouse coalesces onto this single soul. He's an Übermensch. Nietzsche's Übermensch in the flesh. Lord of the demons. Boss of the brutes. "On it!" comes a responding call from behind the bath, suddenly breaking the spell. Again I divert my gaze. There in the darkness, just discernible, is the attendant in his padded vest, hefting a large chunk of coal into the furnace. Just clearing the furnace lid, the coal chunk rings out with a pop and a sizzle as it falls into the fire. The attendant's face, in profile, is lit by an orange glow. At the same time, the bricks of the wall behind him also flicker with firelight. This is all a bit much, so tarrying further I descend from my perch at the window and make my way home. Thoughts occur as I walk. Even among this mass of naked humanity, where haori, hakama, and undershorts have been shed and set aside, equality hardly reigns. The greatest of men still rises up over his peers. Nakedness is by no means an equalizer.

When I arrive home, all is quiet and calm. The master, his face still sporting an afterglow from the baths, is eating his dinner. Seeing me emerge from the veranda, he comments on my leisurely ways and wonders aloud where I've been. I see that his dinner tray, despite his meager means, hosts an assortment of side dishes. In their center lies a grilled fish. What kind of fish it is, I can't say, but as recently as the day prior it was no doubt swimming off Odaiba or thereabouts. Fish are a hardy bunch, as I've said before, but not so hardy as to stand up to grilling or stewing. Better by far to live out one's days, even as health wanes. Thinking thus, I seat myself by the master's tray, looking on while feigning indifference, hoping a bite might come my way. This is how the game is played, and those who know it not know not the taste of choice fish. The master pokes and prods at his fish then lays down his chopsticks, seemingly dissatisfied. The wife, who's attending on him from the opposite side of the tray, watches in silence, carefully gaging the rise and fall of his chopsticks, the working of his jaws.

"Say, give that cat there a rap on the head." The master, out of the blue, enjoins the wife.

"A rap? Whatever for?"

"Never mind what for, just give 'im a little rap."

The wife raps me on the head with the flat of her hand and looks to the master. There's no particular discomfort in this.

"He didn't mew."

"True."

"Do it once more."

"However many times, what's the difference?" The wife acquiesces and raps me again with the flat of her hand. Thinking nothing of it, I don't bother to react. At the same time, however, well-learned as I am, I can't fathom the master's intent. Could I fathom his intentions, I might manage to tailor a reaction, but with nothing to go by but "try giving a rap," both the wife who's rapping, and me, the recipient of her raps, are equally lost. The master too, having failed to solicit his intended response after two tries, shows a touch of irritation. "Rap him so he mews," he orders.

"Why do you want him to mew?" The wife asks in response, with a look of exasperation, before rapping my head yet again. Having understood the other party's objective, the resolution is simple enough. All I have to do is mew, and the master will be happy. The master's a dolt, as this episode demonstrates, and that makes things difficult. If it's a mew he's after, he could have just said so. No need for the wife to go to lengths, two times then three times, and no need to subject yours truly to multiple provocations. Unless the desired outcome is a rap on the cat's head, ordering another to rap the cat on the head is misguided. The directed party can rap at will, but the mew is mine to yield. If the whole point is to elicit a mew, which is mine to yield or withhold at my own discretion, then scheming to do so through a roundabout rap on the head is the height of presumption. It exhibits utter disregard for individuality and freedom of choice. It's trifling with this cat. From a fellow like Kaneda, whom the master detests with a passion, such would be par for the course. From the master, however, who proudly cavorts with the naked masses, it's most disappointing. The master, in fact, is not so petty. His directions were not crafted from any abundance of wiliness. They were hatched rather, as I see it, from lack of insight. When one eats a meal, one's belly swells. When one is cut, one bleeds. When one is killed, one dies. In like manner, rap a cat's head, and it mews. Or so it seems the master has rashly concluded. Sad to say, though, his thinking is flawed. Applying the same logic, to fall into a river means death by drowning. To eat tempura means a loose stool. To receive one's pay means one necessarily performs one's duties. And to read books means enlightenment. Assignment of such foregone consequences is not without hazard. In particular, the master's idea, that a rap on the cat's head means a mew, does not sit well with yours truly. I was born a cat, not a clock. To be

viewed in the same vein as the hourly bell at Mejiro is a slight to my felinity. Satisfied that I'd sufficiently defied the master and repudiated his flawed logic, only then did I acquiesce and produce a belated mew.

The master turns and questions the wife. "That mew - Would you say it was an interjection, or would you say it was an adverb?"

The wife, caught off guard by this query out of left field, refrains from answering. Truth be told, I wonder myself if the master's head isn't still swooning from the heat of the baths. Even forgetting the baths, the master is known for his eccentricity, so much so that a certain neighbor asserts that his nerves are frayed. The master, however, has full confidence in his own faculties. "My nerves are fine. It's these other schmucks who are off the rails," he maintains. If the neighbors call the master a "doggity dog," then in the name of fair play the master refers to the neighbors as "piggity pigs." For the sake of fair play, there's no end to which the master won't go. He only wades in deeper. Being such a fellow, the master thinks little of lobbing a quirky question at the wife. The wife, though, on the receiving end, can't but feel his nerves really are on the edge. Caught off guard, she holds her tongue, a bewildered look on her face. I too, of course, am in no position to answer. In the next moment, the master breaks the silence.

"Hey!" he calls out.

"Yes?" the wife replies in surprise.

"That 'yes' of yours - an exclamation or an adverb? Which was it?"

"What's it matter what it was? Who really cares?"

"Everyone cares. Japan's linguistic scholars are grappling mightily with this very issue."

"Well I'll be. Including the mew of a cat? After all, it's not even part of the language."

"There's the rub. That's what makes it so hard. It's comparative research."

"I see." The wife is savvy enough to steer clear of the master's nonsense. "And what have said scholars concluded?"

"A problem of this order is not so readily resolved." The master works a mouthful of the aforementioned fish. Without missing a beat, he takes on a pork and potato side dish as well. "Pork, I take it?" "Yes, that's pork." "Huh." Seemingly unimpressed, he swallows it down. "More saké." He holds out his cup.

"You're really putting it down tonight. You're already looking red."

"It's a night for drink. -- Say, do you know what the world's longest word is?"

"Sure, it's that Grand State Councilor Kampaku such-and-such, is it not?"

"That's a title. Do you know the longest word?"

"I take it that includes alphabetized languages?"

"Exactly."

"I wouldn't know. -- That's enough saké, isn't it? Let me serve you some rice."

"One more drink first. Shall I tell you the longest word?"

"If you like. Then on to your rice."

"It's Archaioemelesidonophrunicherata."

"You made that up."

"I did not make it up. It's Greek."

"What does it mean? In Japanese."

"I'm not sure what it means, but I know how to spell it. Written out, it fills the page from margin to margin."

It's curious to hear such remarks, which any other man would reserve for drunken company, come rolling off the master's sober tongue. Granted, he's imbibed a bit extra on this particular evening. Where his usual fare is two cupfuls, and no more, he's already downed four. Two is enough to redden his face. After four he glows like a red hot poker. His distress is showing, yet still he soldiers on. "One more." He holds out his cup. The wife pushes back.

"That's enough, is it not? You're overdoing it." Her look is disapproving.

"It may be a bit much, but from here on I'm in training. Ōmachi Keigetsu says we should drink."

"And Keigetsu is?" The name Keigetsu carries no weight with the wife.

"Keigetsu is our foremost modern critic. If Keigetsu says we should drink, then drink we should."

"That's rubbish. I don't care if it's Keigetsu or Baigetsu, one needn't drink to one's own detriment."

"It's not just drink. He also says to socialize, pursue amusements, and see the world."

"That's worse yet, even. And this is our preeminent critic? Please. Men with wives and children chasing off after amusements ..."

"Where's the harm in amusements? Keigetsu aside, if I had the funds I'd be well inclined to partake."

"Then blessed be poverty. Pursuit of amusements, at your age, would only be the death of you."

"I suppose in that case I'd best hold off. In return, you can pamper me at home. Indulge me with a grand meal each evening."

"I do the best with what we've got."

"I wonder. I'll save amusements for later, when wealth comes my way. Enough then for tonight." He hands her his rice bowl.

The master proceeded to put down, if my reckoning is correct, three helpings of chazuke that night. As for me, I scored for myself three pieces of pork and the head off his grilled fish.