

## Kokoro – Sensei and I – Parts 10 to 18

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

10

On the way home, we walked in silence for several blocks. Then Sensei suddenly spoke. “I’ve done a bad thing. I left in anger, and my wife must be worried. A woman’s lot, when I think of it, cannot be easy. My wife has no one in this world but me.”

Sensei stopped speaking, but he seemed to expect no response. Shortly, he continued on. “Not to imply that a husband is entirely self-reliant. That would be a bit presumptuous. Tell me, how do I appear to you? Do you see me as self-possessed, or do I strike you as insecure?”

“Somewhere in between,” I replied. This answer caught Sensei a little off guard. He said no more, and we walked on in silence.

The way back toward Sensei’s house led us past my lodgings. We came to my corner, but I felt it improper to part from him there. “Let me accompany you on your way,” I offered.

With an immediate wave of his hand, he declined. “It’s already late, go on home. I need to get home too, for my wife’s sake.”

With those final words from Sensei, “for my wife’s sake,” a warm glow rose in my heart. Because of those words, I was able to return home and rest easy. For a long while thereafter, “for my wife’s sake,” remained in my mind.

The discord between Sensei and his wife, I knew, was of no real consequence. My continued visits to their home only served to confirm my supposition that such instances were, indeed, rare. In fact, Sensei once divulged to me the following.

“There’s really only one woman in my world. Aside from my wife, the charms of no others entice me. My wife, for her part, treats me like I’m the only man in existence. We should be, by all accounts, the happiest of couples.”

I’ve forgotten the circumstances that brought out this affirmation. I can’t say clearly what transpired before or after. However, I do still remember that Sensei spoke in an earnest and somber tone. What struck me as odd at the time were Sensei’s final words. “We should be, by all accounts, the happiest of couples.” Why was Sensei unable to profess his happiness? Why did he qualify it with “should be?” This raised some doubt in my mind, especially with the emphasis he’d placed on these words. I wondered if Sensei was indeed happy, or if he meant that he should be happy but in fact was not. His words left me puzzled, but before long I had set the problem aside and moved on.

I called once in Sensei’s absence and had occasion to talk with his wife. Sensei had left for Shinbashi to see off a friend who was sailing from Yokohama that day on a steamer bound for foreign lands. It was customary

at the time for anyone sailing from Yokohama to take the eight thirty train from Shinbashi station. I was in need of Sensei's help with a certain passage, and I arrived at nine as we'd arranged. Sensei's outing to Shinbashi had been decided the day before on short notice as courtesy to his friend, who had called on him to bid farewell. Saying that he would return soon, Sensei had left instructions to have me wait in his absence. I was led to the parlor, and while I waited I conversed with Sensei's wife.

11

By that time, I was a graduate student. Compared to the days of my early visits with Sensei, I felt myself much more an adult. I had come to know Sensei's wife quite well, and I was fully at ease in her presence. When I saw her, we talked on various subjects. However, our talk was always casual in nature, and I can't recall now what was said. Only one thing remains in my mind. Before relating it, though, there's another matter I should touch upon first.

Sensei was a university graduate. I knew this from the start. What I didn't know was that he had pursued no occupation. I learned this only after returning to Tōkyō. I wondered how he was able to do this, and why he should choose to.

Sensei was completely unknown to the world. I was, I expect, on account of the bond formed between us, the only one to appreciate his scholarship and hold his ideas in esteem. On numerous occasions I lamented this state of affairs. Sensei would merely dismiss my concerns with, "A man like myself has no business preaching to others." I found this reply excessively modest, so much so that it might, I thought, mask some form of contempt. In fact, Sensei would sometimes bring up a former classmate, who was now celebrated in his field, and level a scathing critique. I once took occasion to comment frankly on the contradiction I saw in this. I did it not to provoke him, but rather from frustration that the world should be indifferent toward him. Sensei replied in a subdued voice, "You must understand, there's nothing I can do. I'm a man unfit to answer society's call." There was a certain kind of profound look etched on his face. I didn't know if it was despondence, discontent, or sorrow, but its intensity overwhelmed me. I didn't have the courage to challenge him further.

As I talked with Sensei's wife, our discussion, in due course, fell first to Sensei and then to this very subject.

"How can Sensei be so studious in his own home yet not engaged with the world outside?"

"Engagement is out of the question. He won't even think of it."

"Because he views it as futile?"

"I can't say how he views the world -- as a woman it's not my prerogative to know. However, I don't believe that's the case. I think he wants to engage. He wants to, but he can't. It's terribly unfortunate."

"But he seems quite capable. He's perfectly healthy, is he not?"

"His health is fine. There's nothing wrong with him."

“Then what could stop him from pursuing an occupation?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you. If I knew that much, then I wouldn’t worry so. I’m in the dark, unable to ease his plight.”

In her voice was great sympathy. Still, she managed to put on a faint smile. On the surface at least, I was the more intent one, brooding in silence. As if suddenly remembering, she spoke again.

“He wasn’t always like this. He was a different man in his youth. He’s changed completely.”

“How long ago do you mean?”

“His student days.”

“You knew Sensei in his student days?”

She blushed a bit.

12

Sensei’s wife was a native of Tōkyō. I’d heard this through Sensei, and I’d also heard it directly from her. “I’m actually a child of mixed blood,” she’d told me. She’d said this half-jokingly, as her father hailed from the Tottori region, and her mother was born in Ichigaya, back in the time when Tōkyō was still called Edo. Sensei, for his part, was a native of Niigata, an altogether different region. Any knowledge she had of Sensei’s student days was clearly not through hometown connections. Having blushed a bit at my question, she seemed reluctant to expound further. I refrained from pressing the matter.

From the time I met Sensei until the time of his passing, I was exposed to his thoughts and sentiments through discourse on myriad topics. However, I learned very little of the circumstances surrounding his courtship and marriage. At times I credited him for his exercise of discretion. As an older man, he knew to spare a younger listener from amorous reminiscences. At other times, though, I faulted him for it. Sensei, and his wife too for that matter, had both come of age in an earlier time whose social conventions differed from those of today. Their generation, it seemed, was incapable of acknowledging romance. These were both, of course, nothing more than conjecture on my part. Behind both conjectures was my supposition of an impassioned courtship, one that still lent its warmth to the heart of their marriage.

My supposition, to be sure, was not in error. However, the romance I imagined in my head was only half the story. Beneath the beauty of their romance lurked a dreadful misfortune. Completely unbeknownst to his wife, this misfortune was tearing at Sensei’s soul. To this day, she still doesn’t know. Sensei carried his secret to the grave. Rather than destroy his wife’s happiness, he chose to destroy himself.

I won’t talk here of this misfortune. The affection between Sensei and his wife, which was in some sense inseparable from the misfortune that underpinned it, was indeed as just described. Neither talked much of their courtship. Sensei’s wife for modesty’s sake, and Sensei himself for deeper reasons.

There was, however, one incident that comes to mind. It was the season of blossoms, and Sensei and I were in Ueno. We saw a handsome couple, strolling closely arm in arm. The place being what it was, there were many sightseers, some of whom took more interest in this couple than the blossoms.

“A newly married couple,” Sensei remarked.

“They seem quite taken with each other,” I replied.

Sensei did not so much as feign a grin. He changed direction, removing the couple from our view. Then he asked me, “Have you ever been in love?”

I told him no.

“Do you ever wish you were?”

I didn’t answer.

“I imagine you sometimes think of it.”

“Yes.”

“Your remark toward that couple was rather dismissive. I also sensed in it, though, the discontent of a man who thirsts for love but hasn’t found it.”

“Is that how it came across?”

“Yes. Any man knowing love would have spoken with greater warmth. However ..., listen to me, love is iniquity. Mark my words.”

This caught me off guard. I said nothing in response.

13

We were amongst the crowds. All around us were happy faces. Until we’d moved on to the woods, away from both blossoms and people, there was no opportunity to continue on this topic.

“Love is iniquity?” I asked abruptly as we entered the woods.

“It is, without a doubt, iniquity.” Sensei’s reply was no less emphatic than before.

“How so?”

“You’ll understand in time. Then again, you may understand already. Isn’t there some aching in your heart, there for a good while now, that’s stirred by love?”

I paused for a moment to reflect on my innermost feelings. Contrary to Sensei's premise, there was nothing there. Nothing at all came to mind.

"My heart, as clear as I can reckon, has nothing for which it aches. I wouldn't hesitate to confide in you if it did."

"That's precisely why it aches. It lacks any object of affection, and it won't find peace until it's grasped one."

"At present, I can't say it bothers me."

"You're somehow unfulfilled. Isn't that what brings you to seek my counsel?"

"That may be the case, but it's not related to love."

"It's a step on the path toward love. The bond you've formed with me is but preparation for the greater bond you'll form with a woman someday."

"The two things strike me as entirely dissimilar."

"No, they're the same. As a man, of course, I can never satisfy the aching in your heart. Furthermore, there are certain circumstances that render me of much less use to you than I should be. Of this I'm truly sorry, for your sake. You'll have to turn away from me and go elsewhere. I'm even compelled to hope that you do. However ..."

I felt a strange sense of sorrow.

"If you're convinced that I'll turn away from you, then so be it, but the thought's never crossed my mind."

Sensei paid no heed to my words. "You have to be vigilant. Love is, indeed, iniquity. While you won't find contentment in my company, you won't face peril either. -- Do you know how it feels to be bound by long black hair?"

I could imagine what he meant, but it was not something I'd ever experienced. At any rate, what Sensei meant by "love is iniquity" was not at all clear to me. I was growing a bit uncomfortable.

"Sensei, explain to me clearly how love is iniquity. Otherwise, let's leave this subject for another day, some day when I might understand."

"Forgive me. I'd intended to share a truth with you, but I've only confused the matter. I shouldn't have done that."

We strolled on at a leisurely pace, passing behind the museum and on toward Uguisudani. A thicket of bamboo grass, growing in seclusion in one corner of a vast garden, was visible through gaps in the fence.

“Do you know why I visit my friend’s grave in Zōshigaya each month?”

Sensei’s question was entirely out of the blue, and he knew very well that I had no answer. I refrained for a bit from replying. Sensei, realizing as much, spoke further. “Forgive me again. I felt bad for confusing you, and in thinking to explain things I’ve only made matters worse. It’s no use. Let’s leave it at that. Anyway, love is iniquity. Trust me. But it’s also divine.”

Sensei’s words only confounded things further. However, he spoke no more on love.

14

As a young man, I was prone to take counsel of my passions. That, at least, was how Sensei saw me. More than the lectures at school, I cherished my talks with him. More than the opinions of professors, I valued his insights. In short, more than the distinguished men who instructed me from their lecterns, I held in esteem the reticent and reclusive Sensei.

“You mustn’t put me on a pedestal,” Sensei once cautioned me.

“My opinion of you is rational and grounded,” I answered back in full confidence.

Sensei did not share my conviction. “You’ve let yourself be carried away. When you see me for what I am, you’ll come to despise me. As it is, I bear your respect as a burden. However, what troubles me most is the thought of how you’ll change, of how you must change.”

“Do you think me so fickle, so untrustworthy?”

“I can’t help but pity you.”

“You say you pity me, but you also imply you can’t trust me.”

Sensei turned toward the garden, a troubled look on his face. On the camellia bush, which had recently dazzled with brilliant splashes of red, not a single flower remained. Sensei was fond of gazing on this bush from his parlor.

“As far as trust is concerned, I don’t distrust you in particular. It’s all of humanity whom I distrust.”

In that moment a voice, sounding like a goldfish vendor, sounded from beyond the hedge. Other than that, there was not a sound to be heard. The small lane, set back several blocks from the main thoroughfare, was surprisingly quiet. As always, all was still within the house. I knew that Sensei’s wife was in the next room. I also knew she could hear my voice as she worked silently at her sewing or other tasks. At the same time, however, I was oblivious to her presence.

“Then you don’t trust even your wife?” I asked.

Sensei looked a little uneasy. He did not answer me directly. “I don’t trust even myself. If I can’t trust myself, then how can I trust another? I’m cursed by my own soul.”

“You’re thinking too critically. Who could withstand such scrutiny?”

“No, it’s not how I think, it’s what I’ve done. I’ve been shocked, then later horrified, by my own actions.”

I wanted to pursue this further, but Sensei’s wife called out to him from the next room. He asked what it was, and she replied that she needed him for a moment. He went to her, and what transpired I cannot say. I had little time to wonder, as he quickly returned to the parlor.

“At any rate, you mustn’t place your faith in me. You’ll only regret it. You’ll come to feel deluded and retaliate most callously.”

“I’m not sure what you’re implying.”

“The thought that you once admired a man will drive you later to tear him down. To preclude your future disdain, I wish to forgo your present admiration. I prefer my current loneliness to a future that’s lonelier still. For this modern age, with its personal freedoms, independent thought, and egotistical pursuits, loneliness is the price we pay.”

Faced with such resignation from Sensei, I could offer no response.

15

Thereafter, the sight of Sensei’s wife evoked my concern. I wondered if Sensei’s demeanor toward her was always such, and if so, did it not upset her.

From appearances, I couldn’t judge if she were troubled or not. Part of the problem was that I didn’t often see her. And when I did see her, I detected nothing unusual. Finally, we rarely interacted if not in Sensei’s presence.

My misgivings didn’t end there. I wondered about Sensei’s resignation toward humanity. Was it simply the consequence of rational introspection? A product of detached observation of the modern age? Sensei was wont to sit and think. With a mind like his, did such resignation arise as a matter of course in reaction to the world? I couldn’t accept that this was wholly the case. Sensei’s resignation seemed to harbor a passion. It wasn’t the cooled remains of some burned-out stone structure. Sensei, in my eyes, was a thinking man. However, behind the doctrine this thinking man had arrived at, some powerful truth seemed to resonate. It didn’t belong to the people he’d pushed away. It was a truth felt keenly and first hand, a truth that had made his blood race, a truth that had made his heart skip. Such a truth, it seemed, was layered throughout his thoughts.

This was more than gut instinct on my part. Sensei himself had confessed as much. His confession, though, was like a rampart in the sky. It hung above my head, and it frightened me, though I couldn’t quite say why. Sensei’s confession was murky at best. Perhaps for this reason it unsettled me so.

I supposed that Sensei's worldview had been shaped by passionate love (occurring, of course, between Sensei and his wife). Sensei's insistence that love is iniquity was partly what led me to this supposition. However, Sensei had told me himself how deeply he cared for his wife. How could their love, then, have led him to despondent resignation? Sensei had told me, "The thought that you once admired a man will drive you later to tear him down." These words were directed, it seemed, to the modern world in a general way. They did not apply to Sensei and his wife.

The grave in Zōshigaya, whomever it might belong to, crossed my mind from time to time. I knew that Sensei felt a deep connection to it. It occupied a corner in his mind, and as I strived to be close to him, I couldn't help but focus my thoughts on it. To me, though, it was something utterly lifeless. It would never serve to draw us together. In fact, it stood between us, like an apparition, inhibiting our intimacy.

By and by, another occasion brought me face to face with Sensei's wife. It was late autumn, with a marked chill already in the air, and folks hurrying on their ways through waning daylight. Over a short period, a number of homes in Sensei's neighborhood had been burglarized, all in the evening hours. In most cases, nothing of great value was taken. Nevertheless, in all cases, something or other was missing. Sensei's wife was on edge, and on one particular evening Sensei could not stay home with her. A friend from his home town, now serving at a provincial hospital, had come to Tōkyō. Sensei, along with several other gentlemen, had arranged to take this friend to dinner. Sensei explained the circumstances to me and asked if I could mind the house in his absence. I readily accepted.

16

I arrived in the early evening, just as lights were coming on in the houses. Sensei, who was by nature a punctual man, was already gone.

"He left just a moment ago," Sensei's wife explained. "He didn't want to risk being late." She guided me to Sensei's study.

Aside from a desk and chair, there were numerous books arranged in cabinets. Their handsome bindings were illuminated by the electric light that shone through the glass. Sensei's wife directed me to a seating cushion that she'd set out before the brazier. She told me to help myself to Sensei's books, and then she took her leave. I felt a bit awkward, like a guest waiting for the master of the house to return. I remained where I was, rooted to my cushion, and had a smoke. I could hear voices from the hearth room. Sensei's wife was explaining something to the maidservant. To get to the study, one could follow the hearth room veranda to its end and turn the corner. From a floor plan perspective, it was off in its own corner, quieter yet than the parlor. After a while, the conversation in the hearth room ceased, and the house fell silent. I imagined myself lying in wait for a burglar. I kept still and maintained my vigilance.

Thirty minutes passed. Sensei's wife reappeared at the study entrance and looked at me with mild surprise. I was still formally seated, like a guest in waiting.

"You should make yourself comfortable."

“I’m comfortable like this.”

“You’re not bored?”

“Not at all. Not with the thought of a burglar about.”

She stood there smiling, a tea cup in her hand.

“Perhaps,” I added, “this corner of the house is not so ideal for keeping watch.”

“Might I suggest that you relocate closer to the center? I thought you might be bored here and made you a cup of tea. If you don’t mind moving, I’ll serve you in the hearth room.”

I left the study and followed Sensei’s wife to the hearth room, where an iron kettle whistled on a handsome brazier. I was served tea there and treated to sweets. Sensei’s wife did not take any tea. She said it would keep her from sleeping.

“Does Sensei sometimes participate in such gatherings then?”

“Very rarely. Lately he seems less and less fond of company.”

Sensei’s wife, as she said this, gave no indication of being particularly troubled by it. Feeling emboldened, I pursued the subject further. “Then you’re his one exception, I suppose.”

“No, I’m no different from the rest.”

“That can’t be the case,” I replied. “And I expect you know it’s not the case.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, as I see it, it’s his fondness for you that lets him forget the world.”

“Like all good scholars, you’re practiced in eloquence, but your logic rings hollow. Couldn’t you as well have argued that in spurning the world he has to spurn me as well? The logic is equally sound.”

“I could have argued either way, but the argument I chose, in this case, is the correct one.”

“I’ve no wish to debate you. Men love to argue for argument’s sake. It never ceases to amaze me, how they amuse themselves exchanging empty cups.”

Her words were somewhat harsh, but they weren’t delivered with full force. Sensei’s wife was not so modern as to wield her intellect for personal conquest. She seemed intent, rather, on dispensing with the superficial in favor of deeper truths.

There was more that I wanted to say. However, I did not wish her to see me as the argumentative male, so I held my tongue. As I gazed into the bottom of my empty tea cup, she re-engaged me by offering to refill it. I handed her the cup.

“How many? One? Two?”

She held a cube of sugar with a curious utensil. She was looking at me to ask how many I’d like in my tea. Her manner seemed somewhat contrite. She was trying, through use of feminine charm, to soften the blow of her earlier words.

I drank my tea in silence. The cup was empty, and still I held my silence.

“You’ve become awfully quiet,” she remarked.

“I’m afraid,” I answered, “that should I speak, you’ll dismiss me as argumentative.”

“I promise not to,” she assured me.

We began conversing again, and the subject of our conversation soon returned to Sensei, in whom we shared a common interest.

“Can I continue a bit where we left off previously. It may have struck you as empty argument, but to me it was no such thing.”

“Alright then.”

“Suppose that Sensei suddenly lost you. Do you think he could carry on?”

“Now how would I know? If you want an answer to that, you’d best ask Sensei. It’s really not for me to say.”

“But I’m serious. You mustn’t evade the question. Tell me honestly what you think.”

“I’ve told you already. I honestly wouldn’t know.”

“Tell me this then. How much do you love Sensei? This is something that you can answer better than Sensei, so I’m asking you.”

“There’s no need to ask so directly, is there?”

“You mean there’s no need to seriously pose this question, because the answer is already self-evident?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Sensei has in you, then, a devoted companion. If he suddenly lost you, how do you think he would fare? How would this man, who takes no interest in the outside world, cope without you? I’m not asking how Sensei would see this, I’m asking how you see it. In your opinion, would Sensei be happy or unhappy?”

“I can tell you how I see it. (Sensei may or may not agree.) Sensei would be most unhappy without me. He might even lose his will to carry on. This may sound pretentious, but I believe I make Sensei as happy as is humanly possible. I’m convinced that no one else could make him as happy as I do. That’s why we live so peaceably together.”

“Sensei, I believe, cannot help but sense and cherish your conviction.”

“That’s another matter.”

“You still fear that he doesn’t find favor with you?”

“It’s not so much that he doesn’t find favor with me. There’s no reason he shouldn’t. However, he’s turned his back on the world. Or rather, of late, he’s lost all faith in humanity. If he’s lost all faith in humanity, then how can he embrace me, his fellow human?”

I understood her meaning now. How she saw herself as cut loose by Sensei, the two of them drifting apart.

18

Sensei’s wife impressed me with her insight. Her thought process differed from that of a traditional Japanese woman, and this too greatly piqued my interest. Furthermore, she spoke plainly, eschewing the use of “modern” words that had, of late, come into common use.

I myself was an imprudent young man, yet to experience any meaningful female contact. As a man, of course, I was drawn to the opposite sex, and in my musings, women were a constant object of desire. In my musings, though, I evoked these women only vaguely. I saw them as lovely clouds, floating by on enchanting springtime breezes. When confronted with a real woman, my feelings were prone to tumultuous change. Rather than feel attraction, I might well be gripped by an odd sense of repulsion. Sensei’s wife, though, had no such effect on me. That gulf between men and women, who view the world so differently, was hardly apparent. I was no longer conscious of conversing with a woman. She was simply another who, through faithful observation and sympathetic reflection, knew Sensei well.

“A while back, when I asked you why Sensei had disengaged from the world, there was something you said to me. You told me he’d changed.”

“He really has changed. He wasn’t like this before.”

“What was he like.”

“He was exactly what we both wish him to be - a man full of promise.”

“How could he have changed so abruptly?”

“It wasn’t abrupt. It happened gradually, over time.”

“And you were by him all this time?”

“Of course. We’re husband and wife.”

“Then you must, I expect, have some idea what caused him to change.”

“That’s what troubles me. I wish I had an answer, but I honestly just don’t know. I’ve begged him so often to open himself to me, to share what he’s feeling.”

“What does he say?”

“He says it’s just his nature. There’s nothing to be said, and there’s no need to worry. He won’t confide in me.”

I listened in silence. She stopped there. The maidservant, in her quarters, made not a sound. I’d forgotten the burglar completely.

“You don’t think I’m to blame, do you?” she suddenly asked me.

“No,” I answered.

“Tell me the truth. I couldn’t bear for you to think of me thus.” She continued. “I like to believe that I’m doing all I can on Sensei’s behalf.”

“Rest assured, you are. I can attest that Sensei knows it.”

She leveled the coals in the brazier and replenished the iron kettle. The kettle’s singing was quickly quenched.

“I finally came to my wit’s end and confronted him. I implored him to tell me my faults. I promised I’d try to do better. He told me it wasn’t me, that the fault lay with him. I became despondent and burst into tears. More than ever, I wished for his rebuke.”

Her eyes were moist with tears.