

Kokoro – My Parents and I – Parts 1 to 9

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

Book Two - My Parents and I

1

What struck me on returning home was how little my father's health had changed in my absence.

“Welcome home. So, you've graduated. Splendid. Give me a moment to go wash up.”

Father had been doing something in the garden. He was wearing an old straw hat with a soiled handkerchief tied behind to block the sun. The handkerchief flapped as he hurried round back to the well.

To me, graduation was nothing special. It was what one did as a matter of course. Father's elation caught me off guard.

“You've graduated. Splendid.”

He repeated this time and again. In my mind, I compared my father's elation with Sensei's expression as he'd toasted me that night at his dinner table after the ceremony. Sensei, who'd outwardly cheered my graduation while inwardly disparaging it, seemed nobler somehow than my father, who was overly pleased by something mundane. I began to fault him for his provincialism.

“A university graduation is nothing all that splendid. Hundreds graduate each year.”

When I finally voiced my thoughts, he looked at me in an odd way.

“It's not just your graduation I'm calling splendid. Your graduation, no doubt, is splendid enough, but there's more to my words than just that. If you'd see things once from my perspective ...”

I tried to ask what he meant, but he was reluctant to continue. After a bit, he finally went on.

“Let me tell you what's splendid. You're aware that my health is failing me. When you were home last winter, I wondered if I'd last even three or four more months. By whatever good fortune, I'm still here today in sound mind and of able body. And now you've graduated. What more could I wish for? Can you not indulge the joy of a parent at being alive, rather than dead, for his son's hard-won graduation? I know you have grand plans, and I know your graduation is only the start, so I suppose my fussing annoys you. Imagine yourself in my shoes, though. Things are quite different. Your graduation is far more splendid to me than it is to you. Can you understand that?”

There was nothing I could say. Too ashamed to even apologize, I merely hung my head. My father had been calmly resigned to his own death. He had convinced himself, it seems, that he wouldn't live to see me graduate. I'd been too far the fool to see what my graduation meant to him. I took my diploma from my bag

and presented it to my parents with due respect. Something in the bag had bent it out of shape. My father carefully unrolled it.

“A thing like this should be kept rolled and hand carried.”

“You should have set something in the center,” my mother advised.

After examining the diploma for a time, my father rose and carried it to the alcove, where he placed it in prominent view for all to see. I refrained from voicing my usual objections. I had no intention any more of defying my parents. I let my father do as he pleased. The damaged parchment, though, had a mind of its own. As soon as it set in place, it wanted to pull in on itself and topple over.

2

I took my mother aside to ask after my father’s condition.

“Father was out in the garden. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“He seems fine these days. I suppose, perhaps, he’s recovering.”

I was surprised how she took things in stride. Like any woman living a quiet life in the country, she was utterly uninformed in such matters. Even so, I struggled to reconcile her current calm with her anxious fretting in those days after Father’s initial bout.

“But didn’t the doctor pronounce his condition grave?”

“The human body, it would seem, is truly a wondrous thing. Despite the doctor’s solemn words, your father’s still going and active on his feet. I was worried at first, and I did my best to keep him in bed, but you know how he is. He tries not to overdo it, but he’s stubborn in his ways. Since he’s convinced he’s okay, he has no more mind to heed me.”

I recalled Father’s behavior on the occasion of my previous visit. He’d forced himself out of bed and shaved, telling me the while that he was fine, and that Mother was making much ado of nothing. It wouldn’t be fair to reproach my mother on his account. I wanted to tell her to at least caution him, but in the end I held my silence. I did explain to her all that I knew of the nature of Father’s illness. Most of this was from Sensei and his wife. Mother didn’t seem particularly moved by this new information. She merely nodded, expressed pity, and asked how old the deceased had been.

The only thing to do, I decided, was to talk to Father directly. He listened more receptively to my counsel than my mother had.

“No doubt, no doubt. You’re absolutely correct. However, at the end of the day it’s my body, and over the years I’ve come to know it well. More than anyone else, I believe I know its limitations and its needs.”

My mother listened with a wry smile. “See what I mean?” she said.

“Even so, Father’s resolved himself to what’s coming. That’s why he was so pleased to see me graduate and return home with my diploma. He told me himself he didn’t think he’d live to see the day, much less still have his health.”

“Don’t be fooled by what he says. Deep down, he knows he still has time.”

“You really think so?”

“He intends to keep on. Maybe for ten years, maybe for twenty. Granted, he does worry me at times. He tells me he doesn’t have long. Then he asks what I’ll do when he’s gone, if I can manage alone.”

I suddenly imagined my mother, minus my father, in this big old country house. Could she run things herself with Father gone? What would my elder brother do? What would Mother’s wishes be? In light of all that, could I leave this place for a comfortable existence in Tōkyō? As thoughts of Mother filled my mind, I also recalled what Sensei had said - if there’s property involved, receive your due share now, while your father is still of sound mind and body.

“Not to worry. The ones who say they’re dying never do. Who knows how many years he’ll go on, pronouncing his own demise all the while. It’s the healthy ones, with nothing to complain of, who end up going first.”

I listened in silence to my mother’s clichéd remark, defensible by neither rational thought nor statistical evidence.

3

Mother and Father began to talk about inviting guests for a red-rice banquet in my honor. From the day of my return, I’d been secretly dreading such a thing. I immediately begged off.

“Please, you mustn’t go to any great lengths.”

I hated these country guests. Their purpose in coming, betrayed by their behavior, was solely food and drink, never mind the occasion. Even from my childhood, I’d cringed at the thought of serving them at our table. Far worse this time, they’d be coming on my account. I couldn’t tell my parents point blank to dispense with this vulgar horde. All I could do was insist that they shouldn’t put themselves out.

“But we’re not putting ourselves out. Not in the least. How many times will our son graduate from college? Don’t be so modest - it’s only natural to celebrate.”

My mother took great pride in my graduation. To her, it was no less an occasion than marriage.

“We don’t have to invite guests, but if we don’t then folks will talk.”

This was my father’s view. He was concerned what people might say. It was indeed true that, on occasions such as this, unmet expectations would invariably lead to whispers among the neighbors.

“It’s not like Tōkyō. Folks around here are set in their ways.”

“Your father has his reputation to consider,” my mother added.

I could argue my case no further. I decided to let them do as they best saw fit.

“I only meant that you shouldn’t go to great lengths on my account. If you need to placate the neighbors to stop their grumbling, then that’s another matter. Far be it for me to assert myself and put you in arrears.”

“Don’t get so cynical on us.” Father looked annoyed.

“Father never said it wasn’t on your account, but I trust you have at least some inkling of what societal obligation means.”

Mother pitched in her usual measure of female incoherence. In the same vein, she could easily outtalk both Father and I combined.

“You educate a man and he comes back a cynic.”

Father said no more. However, in this single remark he’d laid bare his long-standing resentment. At the time, I was oblivious to my own abrasive manner. I saw myself only as a victim of unfair judgments.

That evening, in a quieter mood, Father asked my preferences, if we were to invite guests, for a date. He knew full well that I was biding time in that old house, and any day was as good as the next. Asking my preferences was a conciliatory gesture on his part. In response, I lowered my head in deference. We talked together and settled on a date.

As we awaited our chosen date, momentous news arrived. It was announced that Emperor Meiji had fallen ill. News of this happening, which the papers immediately proclaimed to the nation, hit our country house and blew asunder the plans for my party, those plans that we’d worked so to settle.

“Well, I guess we’d better hold off,” Father said as he perused the paper through his reading glasses. He seemed to also be reflecting on his own health.

I thought back to my recent graduation, and how the Emperor had honored the occasion with his customary appearance.

4

In the quiet of that old house, which was far too large for the few of us there, I unpacked my bags and began to tackle my texts. For whatever reason, I struggled to concentrate. In that second floor room of my lodgings in Tōkyō, where the great city had clamored and the rattle of distant trains had filled my ears, I’d matched the vigor of my surroundings, plowing my way through page after page.

I caught myself readily dozing at my desk. At times, I would even grab a pillow and indulge in a full-fledged nap. On waking, the sounds of cicadas filled my ears. Their chirping, which carried like a call from the greater world outside, would suddenly overwhelm me. I'd listen intently, sometimes struck by a feeling of loneliness.

I took up my pen and wrote to various friends. To some I penned brief postcards, to others lengthy letters. Some of these friends were still in Tōkyō. Others had returned to far away homes. Some wrote back, and others I didn't hear from. I didn't forget Sensei, of course. I decided to tell him all that had happened since my return home, and I filled three pages with small print in the process. As I sealed the envelope, I wondered whether Sensei was even still in Tōkyō. When Sensei left home with his wife, he always had the same woman tend his house. She looked to be fifty or so, and she wore her hair loose in the style of a widow. I'd once asked Sensei about her, and he'd asked in return who I thought her to be. I'd assumed, incorrectly it turned out, that she was one of his relatives. Sensei informed me that he had no relatives. He'd severed all contact with remaining relations back home. The woman I'd asked about, who tended his house, was of no connection to Sensei. She was a relative on his wife's side. As I posted my letter, I suddenly called her to mind, her narrow kimono sash tied comfortably in back. I wondered, should my letter arrive while Sensei and his wife were away for the summer, if this elderly widow would have the foresight and consideration to forward it on to them. I knew full well, of course, that there was nothing in it to warrant such handling. I was simply lonesome and hoping for a return letter from Sensei. None arrived.

Unlike during my home time the previous winter, Father this time was uninterested in shōgi. The shōgi board had been set aside in a corner of the alcove, and it remained there gathering dust. Especially since the Emperor's illness, Father seemed lost in his own thoughts. Each day he waited on the newspaper, and each day he read it first off. When done, he would seek me out, paper still in hand.

“Take a look. There's lots again on His Highness.”

Father always referred to the Emperor as His Highness.

“It may be presumptuous of me, but I believe His Highness and I are suffering from the same thing.”

As he spoke, a dark shadow of concern clouded his features. I felt anxious myself at his words, wondering when he might next be forced off his feet.

“He'll be alright, though. If a common man like myself can manage ...”

Even as he sought to reassure himself, his words fell heavy with an imminent sense of foreboding.

“Father really fears for his health,” I told my mother. “He doesn't share your confidence in ten or twenty more years.”

Mother seemed at a loss.

“See if he'll play shōgi with you.”

I pulled the shōgi board from the alcove and dusted it off.

5

Father's health slowly deteriorated. His old straw hat with the handkerchief tied behind, the one I'd been alarmed to see him putter around in, in due course fell out of use. When I saw that hat sitting idle on the soot-darkened shelf, I felt pity for my father. Before, when he'd move about easily, I'd worried he was overtaxing himself. Now that he sat quietly, I felt he'd been right in keeping active. I often discussed Father's health with my mother.

"It's all in his head," my mother remarked. She believed Father's suffering was sympathetic, in deference to the Emperor.

"It's not in his head. Do you believe he's really not ailing? I think he's wearing a brave face in spite of his physical failing."

As I answered, I was thinking to myself that I might call the specialist back to examine him.

"I'm afraid this summer's been a disappointment for you. You've graduated from the university, yet there's no celebration. Your father's in such a state, and then there's the Emperor. -- We should have summoned guests immediately on your return."

I'd returned around the fifth of July. A week later, my mother and father had started talking about inviting guests to celebrate my graduation. When we'd finally settled on a date, it was another week and some days further out. From my perspective, the leisurely pace of country life, unfettered by time, had spared me the pain of unpleasant company. My mother still had no idea how I saw things.

When news of the Emperor's death arrived, my father held the newspaper in his hands and let out a sigh.

"It's happened. His Highness is gone. I suppose ..."

He didn't finish his thought.

I went to town for some black silk. I wrapped the ball on the end of the flag pole, tied a trailing strip just below it, and mounted the pole on the gateway pillar angled out toward the road. Both flag and black strip hung loosely in the still air. The roof over that gateway of our old house was thatched in straw. Wind and rain had buffeted the straw over time and faded its color. It was now tinged an ashen gray and was noticeably uneven in places. From outside the gate, I surveyed the black strip and the white woolen flag with its red-dyed sun circle. I also viewed them against the weathered straw of the gateway roof. I recalled how Sensei had once asked me about the construction of our house, wondering if it differed much from the houses in his own home town. I'd wished I could show him this house where I'd been born. At the same time, I'd feared I might feel shame in doing so.

I went back inside. Returning to the room where my desk was, I read the paper and let my thoughts drift off toward Tōkyō. I conjured in my mind an image of the great metropolis. I imagined it dark and somber, yet

fluid with restless motion. In that city that couldn't stay still, that was steeped in anxiety, I imagined Sensei's house as a fixed point of light. I was yet unaware that this light would be swallowed in a silent maelstrom, that this lamp was confronting its fate and was soon to shine no more.

I took up my pen to update Sensei on recent events. I wrote ten lines and then stopped. I tore up my draft and tossed it into the trash. (There was no point writing such things to Sensei, and there was no reason to think that this time he'd write me back.) I felt forlorn. That was why I wrote. I was holding out hope for an answer.

6

In mid-August a letter arrived from a friend. In it, he mentioned an instructor's post at a provincial middle school and asked if I was interested. This friend, spurred by financial necessity, had been seeking such a position. When this offer had come to him, he'd already settled on something more favorable. Hence he'd been considerate enough to write and recommend it to me in turn. I immediately wrote back and declined. An acquaintance of mine was struggling to secure a teaching post. I suggested this fellow would likely be receptive to the offer.

After sending off my reply, I informed my parents. They seemed to have no objection to my declining the offer.

"There must certainly be better positions that aren't so remote."

Behind these words, I could sense they harbored great expectations for my future. Uninformed as they were, they anticipated that renown and fortune awaited me now that I'd graduated.

"Good positions are hard to come by these days. Things have changed since my brother's time, and our areas of expertise are different. You mustn't assume a similar outcome."

"With degree in hand, though, you need to at least establish yourself. What will I say when people ask after my second son and what he's made of himself after graduating?"

Father made a sour face. With no experience in the broader world, he was fully provincial in his thinking. The local folk were bound to ask about me. They'd want to know how much a university graduate earned, whether it topped a hundred yen. If I didn't arm him with a sound answer, his reputation would suffer. My own thinking had been shaped by the big city and was fully alien to that of my parents. No doubt they saw me as an odd species, like a being that walked with its legs skyward. For my part, I sometimes felt I was such a creature. The gulf between us was so wide that I largely refrained from sharing my thoughts.

"What about that man you call Sensei? If ever he's going to help you, then isn't this the time?"

This was the extent of Mother's understanding of Sensei. The same Sensei who, on my return home to the country, had urged me to receive my share of the family wealth while Father still lived. Brokering a position for me on my graduation was hardly within his purview.

“What was it that he does?” Father asked.

“He has no occupation,” I answered.

I’d told my parents from the start that Sensei was not employed. My father, I expect, had not forgotten.

“How can he not be employed? He must do something to have earned your admiration so.”

Father was goading me. The way he saw things, any man of worth should have established himself in the world in a position of respect. A man of leisure, it thus followed, could be nothing but a wastrel.

“I don’t earn a paycheck myself, but I try to at least keep busy,” Father continued.

I held my tongue.

“If he’s the distinguished gentleman you describe him as, then certainly he can find you something. Have you tried asking him?”

“I haven’t,” I answered.

“You won’t know if you don’t try. Why not ask him? Write to him at least.”

“Okay.”

I returned a reluctant response and rose from my seat.

7

Father was clearly apprehensive about his health. However, he was not one to pester the doctor with pointless questions. The doctor, for his part, refrained from belaboring the situation.

Father, it seemed, was considering our lives without him. At the very least, he was considering the fate of his household.

“Educating one’s children is both good and bad. You work to provide them with schooling, and it’s guaranteed they won’t stay home. Higher learning is an expedient for dissolving one’s family.”

My older brother’s education had drawn him far away. The result of my own education was a firm resolve to reside in Tōkyō. Father’s grumblings on this account were not unjustified. The idea of my mother left alone in this old country house to fend for herself clearly unsettled him.

Father firmly believed that his household was rooted in place. He also believed that my mother would remain there for all of her days. He worried greatly for her, left alone to care for the large house without him. At the same time, he urged me to secure a prominent position in Tōkyō. His inconsistency afforded me the chance to return to Tōkyō, and for this I was grateful.

Before my parents, I did my best to feign an effort at securing a prominent post. I wrote to Sensei and explained the situation at home. I asked if he couldn't, through his connections, mediate any sort of position on my behalf. Even as I penned my request, I didn't expect he would act. Even if he wanted to, I thought as I wrote, he had no network to draw on. I did expect, however, that this letter must certainly merit a response.

Before sealing and posting it, I turned to my mother and offered, "I've written to Sensei, just as you suggested. Give it a look."

As I'd imagined, she declined.

"If it's ready then post it without delay. You should have done so sooner, without folks having to prompt you."

Mother still regarded me as a child. And I felt, in fact, like I was still a child.

"A simple letter, you know, won't suffice. Come September or so, I'll need to travel to Tōkyō."

"I suppose so, but you never know that there might not be some chance just waiting. The sooner you get your request in the better."

"Agreed. Anyway, an answer is sure to arrive. Once it does we can talk about next steps."

I had full faith in Sensei, who was always so meticulous in such matters. I looked forward to his response. My expectations, however, were disappointed. A week went by with still no word.

"They must have gone off to escape the summer heat."

I felt compelled to offer some explanation, not just for my mother's sake, but for my own as well. To quell my concerns over Sensei, I conjured up circumstances to explain his behavior.

At times I forgot about Father's illness. All I would think of was getting back to Tōkyō. Father himself seemed to also forget he was ill. He was concerned for the future, but his concern induced no action. Time went by with no chance, as Sensei had advised, to talk through division of assets.

8

In early September I was finally ready to return to Tōkyō. I went to my father and asked for a resumption of my educational stipend.

"Remaining here like this, I'll never secure the kind of position you've suggested."

I presented my return to Tōkyō as a quest to fulfill his expectations.

"Of course it's only until I find a position," I added.

Inwardly, I held little hope of procuring anything remarkable. My father, though, who had little knowledge of the ways of the world, saw things differently.

“I suppose we can manage for a while then. But don’t let it be for too long. As soon as you’ve found a suitable post, you’ll need to support yourself. In principle, the day you graduate should be the last day you rely on anyone else. Today’s youth are well versed in spending but give no thought to earning.”

Father voiced multiple grievances. Among them were statements like, “It used to be that children supported their parents, but today’s children just take and take.” I simply listened in silence.

When the airing of grievances came to an end, I quietly moved to rise from my seat. Father asked when I was planning to leave. From my perspective, sooner was better.

“Ask your mother to choose an auspicious day.”

“I’ll do that.”

In those days I was uncharacteristically deferential toward my father. I hoped to take my leave without upsetting him. Father stopped me again.

“When you leave for Tōkyō, the house will be lonely again. At any rate, it’ll just be your mother and me. It would be one thing if I were healthy, but in my current state there’s no telling what may happen.”

I did my best to console my father and then went back to where my desk was. Sitting among my scattered books, I replayed in my mind his forlorn look and rueful words. I heard again the chirping of the cicadas, but the sound was different than before. It was now the “tsuku-tsuku” sound of a different variety. Whenever I’d returned home in summertime and sat quietly among the seething sound of cicadas, I’d been often struck by a strange melancholy. It was a sorrow that, wrapped in the fervent cries of these insects, permeated my soul to its core. In such times I’d remain still and think back on my life.

This summer, the sorrows I’d felt since returning had gradually shifted in tone. Like the voices of different cicadas, one giving way to the next, I pictured the fates of those who were close to me, steadily treading a grand cycle of death and rebirth. While reflecting on the lonely words and lonely look of my father, I also thought of Sensei, who had left my letters unanswered. The impressions in my mind of Sensei and my father were extreme opposites, but whether for purpose of comparison or through stream of consciousness, I would often think of them together.

I was intimately familiar with my father. If I saw him no more, then my regret would be merely that of a child missing a parent. Sensei was largely unknown to me still. He’d promised to share his past but had not yet done so. In short, he was a figure in the dark. I couldn’t be content, I felt, until I’d pulled him into the light. The thought of losing him distressed me greatly. I consulted with my mother, and we chose a day for my departure for Tōkyō.

As the day of my departure finally approached (I believe it was the evening two days prior) Father blacked out again. I was securing my baggage, which I'd packed full with books and clothing. Father had just gone in to bathe. My mother, who'd gone in to scrub his back, cried out for me in a loud voice. I went and saw my father, fully naked, supported from behind by my mother. By the time we got him back to the parlor, he was insisting again that all was fine. Out of caution, I stayed at his bedside and cooled his head with a damp washcloth. It was past nine when I finally finished a cursory dinner.

The next day, Father was in surprisingly good spirits. Despite our objections, he insisted on walking to the toilet unaided.

"I'm fine now."

Father repeated the same words he'd said to me after swooning late last year. At that time, true to his word, he really had seemed fine. I thought maybe this time might be the same. The doctor, however, could not be pressed to give any definitive prognosis. He simply advised an abundance of caution. The day of my departure came, but I was too unsettled to bring myself to leave.

"Maybe I should wait a bit and see how he's doing," I suggested to my mother.

"Yes, please do," she replied.

My mother, who had shown no concern before with Father puttering about in the garden or backyard, was now overly concerned and worrying herself sick.

"Weren't you leaving for Tōkyō today?" my father asked me.

"Yes, but I've put it off for a bit," I replied.

"On my account, I suppose?" he asked further.

I hesitated. If I answered yes, it would only confirm the gravity of his condition. I didn't want to set his nerves on edge. My father, though, could see what I was thinking.

"I'm sorry for this," he said as he gazed at the garden.

I went to my room and surveyed the baggage left lying there. It was tied up tightly, ready to be carried out at any moment. I stood before it, wondering vaguely if I should unpack.

I passed the next few days in a restless state, like one half risen from his seat. Then Father collapsed again. The doctor ordered absolute rest.

"What do you think?" Mother asked me privately in a quiet voice, a look of discouragement on her face.

I was ready to send out telegrams to my brother and sister. However, Father seemed to be resting comfortably. From his speech and overall manner, one would hardly know he was ailing from more than a cold. On top of that, his appetite was voracious. We cautioned him, but to no avail.

“I don’t have long anyway, so where’s the harm in a little indulgence?”

I found his use of the word “indulgence” both amusing and, at the same time, in some way pathetic. Father had never lived in the big city, and he had no idea of true indulgence. In the evenings, he would have my mother grill rice cakes and chew them down greedily.

“What’s behind these cravings? Somewhere inside, his body must still be sound.”

My mother was pinning her hopes in thin air. At the same time, her use of the word “craving” all but acknowledged that Father was not his usual self.

My uncle came to visit, and only reluctantly did Father let him leave. Loneliness was the main reason, but he also believed himself underfed, and he was looking for a sympathetic ear.