

Kokoro – My Parents and I – Parts 10 to 18

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

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A week or more passed with no change in Father's condition. During that time, I wrote a long letter to my brother in Kyūshū and had my mother write to my sister. I was convinced that these were the last letters we'd write them concerning Father's health. We indicated in both letters that when the time came we would send word by telegram, on receipt of which they should come at once.

My brother was steeped in his work, and my sister was expecting a child, so neither could be called home unless the moment demanded it. At the same time, I dreaded the thought of them making the journey only to arrive too late. The decision on when to summon them was mine, and they couldn't know how heavily it weighed on me.

"I can't give you a definitive answer. All I can tell you is prepare yourselves. The critical stage could come any time now."

These were the words of the doctor whom I'd fetched from the station in town. I talked with my mother, and we decided to ask him to send us a nurse from the clinic. Father looked strangely at the woman in white who arrived at his bedside.

Father had known for some time that his illness was terminal. Even so, he had not yet acknowledged the actuality of death.

"When I'm better, I'll go see Tōkyō once more. One never knows the number of one's days. One has to act while one can."

"Take me with you when you go."

My mother had no choice but to humor him.

There were times too when he felt terribly despondent.

"After I'm gone, take good care of your mother for me."

The words "after I'm gone" were linked in my mind to another occasion. On the evening of the day of my graduation, prior to my departure from Tōkyō, Sensei had used these words repeatedly in conversation with his wife. I remembered the light grin on Sensei's face, and I remembered his wife's refusal to engage, warning him that he was only inviting misfortune. On that occasion, "after I'm gone" had been purely hypothetical. As I heard it now, it was imminently real. I couldn't brush it aside as Sensei's wife had done. All the same, I did what I could to take my father's mind off the matter.

“Don’t let yourself get down. Didn’t you say that as soon as you’re better you’ll go see Tōkyō? And that you’ll take Mother too? You’ll be amazed at all that’s changed. There are new rail lines everywhere. Once a line comes through, the city transforms itself. Urban renewal programs are underway as well. In the course of a day, you won’t see Tōkyō at rest for even a moment.”

I may have felt compelled to say too much, but Father, for his part, listened appreciatively.

With an invalid in the house, a natural succession of visitors appeared. Nearby kinfolk would stop by in turn, one every day or two. There were also distant relatives whom we saw only rarely.

“We were wondering how he is. He seems all right. His speech is coherent, and his face is hardly gaunt.”

With such remarks they would make their way back home. Our house, which upon my return had been quiet to a fault, grew livelier by the day with this traffic.

Father lay still in the center of it all, his condition slowly deteriorating. I consulted with my mother and uncle and finally wired my brother and sister. My brother replied that he’d come at once. My sister’s husband also confirmed an immediate departure. My sister’s previous pregnancy had ended in miscarriage, and her husband had informed us already that he thought to take no chances this time. We expected he might come alone in her place.

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In the midst of all this commotion, I could still sit quietly at times. On some occasions, I could open a book and read ten pages undisturbed. My baggage, once bound up so tightly, was by now fully undone. I took out various items as needed. I thought back to the goals I’d set for the summer on leaving Tōkyō. I hadn’t achieved but a third of them. The discontent of such failure was nothing new to me. However, I’d rarely fallen so short as this past summer. I told myself such failures were typical, common to all men, but to little consolation.

Stewing in my displeasure, I thought on the one hand of my father’s illness. I imagined our lives without him. At the same time, I thought on the other hand of Sensei. These two countenances, so different in their schooling, disposition, and social standing, bracketed my sour mood at both ends.

As I sat there, away from my father’s bedside and off by myself among scattered books, with arms folded in front of me, my mother appeared.

“Why not rest for a bit? You must be worn out.”

My mother did not understand what I was thinking. And I was not so naïve as to expect that she should. I merely thanked her. She remained in the doorway.

“How is Father?” I asked.

“He’s sleeping soundly now,” she answered.

To my surprise, she came in and sat at my side.

“Any word yet from Sensei?”

She’d placed her faith in me. I’d assured her that Sensei would write me back without fail. From the start, however, I’d never anticipated the kind of answer my parents were hoping for. As things now stood, it was as though I’d knowingly misled them.

“Why not try writing once more?”

I would gladly write any number of letters, even to no avail, for my mother’s sake. However, the last thing I wanted to do was badger Sensei. Much more than my father’s scolding or my mother’s disappointment, I feared the loss of Sensei’s respect. I was worried I might have perturbed him already, and hence his silence with respect to my request.

“It’s easy enough to write a letter, but this isn’t something one manages by post. I’ll need to get to Tōkyō and do some legwork.”

“True, but with your father’s condition there’s no telling when that might be.”

“I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. Until we have an outcome, recovery or otherwise, I intend to stay right where I am.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to. One can’t leave a man in your father’s state to go and roam round Tōkyō.”

At first, I was sympathetic toward my mother and her lack of worldly experience. I couldn’t understand, though, why she insisted on raising this subject again at this time. I wondered if it was for her a form of diversion. Just as I could forget my ailing father and read quietly, maybe she too could shift her mind from caregiving and think on other things.

“The truth is ...” my mother started again.

“The truth is, I can’t help thinking it would ease your father’s mind if you secured a post before he passed. It looks like it may be too late, but he’s still conversant and his mind is still sound. If only you could manage this one last thing for him.”

I was in no position to perform such filial duty. I wrote not a word to Sensei.

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When my brother arrived, Father was reading the paper in bed. Father had always been an avid reader of the news, and now that he was bedridden with nothing to do, his interest was even greater. My mother and I indulged him during his illness and did not try to dissuade him.

“Great to see you’re feeling so well. I’d feared for the worst, but it seems my fears were misplaced.”

My brother spoke thus toward my father. To me, his tone was much too upbeat and came across as disingenuous. Away from Father's side though, when we spoke in private, he was duly subdued.

"Are you sure you should let him read the paper?"

"I'd rather he took it easy, but he insists on reading, so what can we do?"

My brother listened in silence as I explained myself.

"Does he even know what he's reading?" he asked.

He was questioning Father's mental faculty. He'd sensed, it seems, that Father's illness might have dulled his mind.

"His mind is sound. I sat with him earlier, and we spoke for a good twenty minutes on various topics. Nothing he said was off-kilter. At the rate he's going, he may hold out a while yet."

My sister's husband, who arrived around the same time as my brother, was even more sanguine. Father talked with him at length, asking after my sister.

"In her condition, I wouldn't want her hazarding a long train ride. If she overexerts herself, she'll be the one at risk," Father said.

"But don't you worry. As soon as I'm better, I'll go see the baby myself. It's time I did some traveling," he added.

When General Nogi died, Father was first to learn of it through the paper.

"It can't be! It can't be!" he exclaimed.

The rest of us, who didn't know what had happened, were surprised by his outburst.

"I was afraid for a moment he'd finally lost it," my brother told me later.

"I was caught off guard too." My sister's husband expressed a similar sentiment.

The newspaper in those days was a lifeline for us in the country. Each day we anticipated its arrival. I would sit at my father's bedside and read it through. When there wasn't time, I'd quietly carry it to my room and scan each article. The image of General Nogi in uniform, with his wife beside him in courtly dress, stuck in my mind for a long while.

The winds of sorrow carried to the farthest corners of the countryside, rustling our sleepy woods and fields. In the midst of this, a telegram from Sensei arrived unexpectedly. In a place like this, where dogs bark at a man in Western dress, the arrival of a telegram was always a big event. My mother, who had been the one to receive it, called me away from the others with an air of due gravity.

“What is it?” She waited at my side while I broke the seal.

It stated simply that Sensei wanted to see me and asked if I could come. I was unsure what this meant.

“It must be about your request for a position,” my mother surmised.

I thought she might be right. At the same time, there was also something odd about it. At any rate, I was in no position, having summoned my brother and my sister’s husband, to abandon my ill father and head off to Tōkyō. On consulting my mother, I wired back that I couldn’t come. I added a few words to the effect that my father’s illness was nearing a critical juncture. Unsatisfied to leave it at this, I followed up that same day by posting a detailed letter explaining our circumstances.

My mother, fully convinced it was about my requested position, consoled me with a disappointed look. “I’m afraid it’s just come at a bad time. What can we do?”

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The letter I wrote was quite lengthy. Both my mother and I were confident that this time Sensei would respond. Then, two days after I’d posted my letter, another telegram arrived. All it said was that I needn’t make the trip. I showed it to my mother.

“He probably intends to fill you in by letter.”

To my mother, all of this confirmed that Sensei was moving on my behalf. I couldn’t rule this out offhand, but it was not in fitting with Sensei as I knew him. I struggled to imagine him landing me a job.

“Anyway, he couldn’t have received my letter yet, so no doubt this telegram preceded it.”

I stated the obvious to my mother. After a moment of serious thought, she was compelled to voice her agreement. Whether Sensei had read my letter or not, of course, shed no light whatsoever on the current situation.

Our family doctor was coming from town that same day, and he was bringing the head doctor with him, so we talked no further on this matter. The two doctors examined their patient, flushed him out with an enema, and took their leave.

Since ordered to bedrest by his doctor, my father had relieved himself in bed and relied on others for assistance. This went against his nature, and initially he loathed the thought of it. Circumstances being what they were, though, he grudgingly acquiesced. It may have been that his illness was slowly dulling his senses, but with the passing of days he came to think nothing of such indulgence. On occasion he’d soil his futon or sheets. In contrast to the chagrin of those attending him, he himself seemed little concerned. One result of his illness was a sharp drop in the volume of his urine. This concerned his doctor. His appetite too gradually diminished. Once in a while he would get a craving, but it was only a craving of the tongue, and very little would make it past his throat. He lacked the vigor to reach for his cherished paper. The reading

glasses by his pillow remained tucked away in their black sleeve. Saku, a childhood friend who still resided nearby, called to see how he was doing. Father greeted him by name and looked at him with heavy eyes.

“Saku-san, thank you for coming. I wish I had your good health. I’m afraid I’m nearing my end.”

“You’re doing alright. With two university graduates in the family, a little illness is nothing to complain of. Look at me. I’ve lost my wife and I have no children. I’m merely soldiering on. What does my health get me?”

It was several days after Saku’s visit that Father was given the enema. The doctors, he said, had done a wonder on him. His mood was greatly improved, and his outlook a little less morbid. My mother, either affected by his spirits or simply hoping to encourage him further, spoke of Sensei’s telegram. She talked as though a position in Tōkyō, just as he’d wished for me, had indeed been secured. I was sitting close by, beginning to feel uneasy, but I couldn’t interrupt my mother. I listened in silence. Father’s face was beaming.

“That’s wonderful,” my sister’s husband added.

“Do you know what kind of work it is?” my brother asked.

By this time, I lacked the courage to challenge their misconceptions. I gave them a vague answer and rose from my seat.

14

Father’s illness brought him to death’s doorstep and then appeared to hesitate. We wondered each night, as we retired, if fate’s final verdict would fall the next day.

Father was not in such pain as to distress those around him. On this point, at least, caring for him was not a burden. Out of caution, one of us in turn would sit with him through the night. The rest were free to retire to their own beds at the appropriate time. On one occasion I couldn’t sleep for some reason, and I thought I heard a faint groaning from the sick room. I slipped out of my own bed and went to Father’s bedside to check on him. It was my mother’s turn for night duty, but I found her asleep at Father’s side, her head resting on her bent arm. Father was resting soundly, as though he’d been gently placed into deep slumber. I made my way quietly back to bed.

My brother and I slept under shared netting. My sister’s husband, who was family but also our guest, slept alone in a separate room.

“Poor Seki. Pulled away from home and stuck here for who knows how long.”

Seki was my sister’s husband’s family name.

“He must not be so busy, to be able to stay here with us. I’m afraid it’s hardest on you if this drags on too far.”

“Hardship or not, I have no choice. Other demands will have to wait.”

My brother and I, with our bedding side by side, talked at night before turning in. My brother knew in his mind, and I sensed in my heart, that there was no hope for our father. We were children waiting for a parent to die. As his children, we were not inclined to speak such thoughts out loud. However, each knew full well what the other was thinking.

“Father still seems determined to recover,” my brother said to me.

There was some truth to what my brother said. When the locals called to wish my father well, he always insisted on receiving them. In the course of their exchange, he never failed to bemoan the fact that he hadn’t been able to fête my graduation. He sometimes added that he’d set things right as soon as he recovered.

“You’re lucky your graduation party was canceled. Mine was an awful affair,” my brother reminded me.

Remembering the drunken disorder of that day, I forced a smile. I could still picture the scene, with Father shamelessly pushing endless food and drink on the guests.

As brothers go, my brother and I weren’t very close. We’d often quarreled growing up, and I, as the younger one, had always ended up on the losing end. Our differences in character led to divergent academic interests. During my university days, and especially after making Sensei’s acquaintance, I thought of my brother from afar as much more a brute than a gentleman. I hadn’t seen him in a long time, and he was living in remote quarters. Both time and space precluded any sense of connection. Even so, when we finally came together now, the natural bonds of brotherhood still held firm. The current situation accentuated these bonds and drew them tighter. At the bedside of our father, a man on the verge of death, we joined hands in common cause.

“What will you do next?” my brother asked me.

I responded with a very different question.

“How much wealth do we have?”

“I can’t say. Father’s never told me. Apart from property, though, I don’t think there’s much.”

Then there was Mother, who continued to fret over Sensei’s response.

“Still no letter yet?” she would press me.

15

“Who is this man you refer to as Sensei?” my brother asked me.

“Haven’t I told you already?” I replied.

Even as I asked this, I felt annoyance at my brother for disregarding all that I'd already explained.

"I know what you told me. It's just that ..."

My brother, it turned out, was not satisfied with what he'd been told. I felt no obligation to enlighten him further. It wasn't worth the effort. Nonetheless, I was annoyed. That facet of him which chafed me so was again rearing its head.

My brother assumed that anyone I admired and addressed as Sensei must surely be a gentleman of worldly renown. At least on the order of a university professor. What merit could there be in an unknown man who'd accomplished nothing? On this point, my brother and father were of like mind. However, where my father had dismissed Sensei offhand as an impotent idler, my brother took a harsher view. Any man, he intimated, who fails to do that of which he's capable, is no man at all.

"Watch out for egoists. A life of leisure is the height of indolence. There's no excuse for squandering one's talents."

I wanted to ask my brother if he even knew what "egoist" meant.

"That being said," my brother went on, "if he can secure you a position then take it. You saw how pleased Father was."

Without confirmation from Sensei, I was disinclined to place my faith in any such outcome. At the same time, I lacked the courage to voice my doubts. Since Mother had rashly announced my triumph, I was stuck now, having no firm grounds for disavowal. With or without Mother's urging, I awaited Sensei's letter. I hoped to find in it the good news that my family was expecting. In light of my dying father, of my mother who sought so to comfort him, of my brother who disparaged men of leisure, of my aunt and uncle and others, I worried intensely now on this matter for which I'd had little regard.

Father coughed up a strange yellowish substance, and I remembered the warnings of Sensei and his wife.

"Being bedridden so long has affected his stomach," my mother concluded.

She didn't know what was happening. I looked into her eyes and was overcome with pity.

When my brother and I were together in the hearth room, he asked if I'd heard. He was referring to what the doctor had said on taking his leave. I knew full well what it was, even without having heard.

My brother turned to me. "Would you be willing to stay and take care of the house?"

I didn't answer.

"Mother can't do it alone," he added. The thought of me wasting away here, drinking in smells of the earth, seemed not to concern him. "If you just want to read your books, you can read them here in the country. You won't need to hold down a job. What could be better?"

“Isn’t that the role of the eldest son?” I responded.

“You know I’m in no position to do it,” he dismissed me offhand.

My brother, it seemed, was determined to make a name for himself in the world.

“If you can’t do it, then we’ll have to impose on our uncle. In that case, though, one of us will likely have to take Mother in.”

“I’m not so sure she’ll agree to leave.”

Before our father was even in his grave, we were thus discussing life without him.

16

Sometimes Father would mumble deliriously.

“General Nogi, forgive me. I’ve known no honor. But rest assured, I’ll follow you soon.”

Out of the blue he would mutter so, unsettling our mother, who would call for the family to gather at his bedside. When his mind cleared, he seemed to relish the respite from his solitude that our company offered. Whenever he didn’t find Mother in the room, he would call out her name.

“Where’s Omitsu?”

Even when he didn’t ask for her by name, he sought her with his eyes. Many times I rose to go get her. She’d ask what he needed, stop whatever else she was doing, and come to the sickroom. Sometimes Father said nothing, but simply fixed his eyes on her. Then again, at times he would surprise her with unexpectedly tender words.

“Omitsu, to think of all you’ve done for me.”

Mother could not help but be touched. Afterward, it seemed, she would reflect back on how Father was before, a healthy man so different from what he was now.

“He speaks so dolefully now, but that man in his day was a terror.”

She would tell, for instance, of the time he took a broom and beat her over the back. This story, though my brother and I had heard it many times, was different now. Her words rang like a keepsake from our father’s past.

Death’s dim specter danced before Father’s eyes, yet he kept his final wishes to himself.

“I wonder if we shouldn’t question him while we can,” my brother confided to me.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

I worried about the effect on him of pressing the matter from our side. Unsure what to do, the two of us consulted our uncle. Our uncle pondered the question.

“If he does have things to say, then now’s the time. On the other hand, it wouldn’t be right to rush him.”

Father’s speech finally began to falter. Then he became comatose. Mother, again not understanding, mistook this for slumber and welcomed it.

“It’s easy on us all when he sleeps so soundly.”

Father would sometimes open his eyes and suddenly call someone’s name. The one he called for was always the one who’d been last by his side. Father was slipping in and out of consciousness. His moments of clarity, like a white thread stitching through darkness, were intermittent yet connected. It was understandable that Mother should take his comatose state for normal sleep.

As the days passed, his faculty for speech abandoned him. He would start to say something but not complete his thought, often leaving his listeners in the dark. In doing so, he would start out in a strong voice, hardly that of a man on his deathbed. For our part, we had to raise our voices and bring our mouths close to his ear.

“Would you like us to cool your head?”

“Please.”

The nurse helped me to change out his water pillow and place the ice bag, loaded with fresh ice, over his head. I supported the bag lightly at the periphery of Father’s hairline, giving the sharp ice shards a chance to lose their edges. In that moment, my brother came in from the hallway and quietly handed me a letter. As I received it in my open left hand, I felt there was something not right.

It was much heavier than any normal letter. It was not in a standard envelope, nor would it have fit in one. It was wrapped in writing paper, carefully glued at the seam. As my brother had handed it to me, I’d noticed it was registered mail. I flipped it over and saw Sensei’s name in discreet writing on the back. Occupied as I was, I slipped it into my breast pocket. It would have to wait until later.

17

On that day, our patient’s condition seemed especially dire. When I vacated my post to go to the toilet and ran into my brother in the hallway, he asked where I was going, challenging me with the tone of a guardsman.

“His appearance concerns me. We’ll need to watch him closely,” he advised.

I was of the same opinion. Forgetting the letter in my pocket, I soon returned to the sickroom. Father opened his eyes and asked Mother to tell him who was present. Mother explained, one by one, who was there. Father nodded at each name. When he didn’t nod, Mother repeated herself in a louder voice and confirmed with him that he’d understood.

“Thank you all for your kind care,” Father said before again losing consciousness.

We watched him intently for a while. No words were spoken. Finally, one person rose and went to the next room. Then another rose. I was the third to rise, leaving for my own room. I wanted to open that letter I’d placed in my pocket. I could certainly have opened it easily enough there in the sick room. However, given its length, I couldn’t well read it through on the spot. I needed to steal away and dedicate some time.

I ripped it open, tearing my way through the fibrous paper that wrapped it. What I found inside was page upon page of neatly-written characters on quad-ruled paper, much like a manuscript. The pages were bent into fourths to facilitate mailing. For ease of reading, I reversed the bends to flatten them out.

Astonished at the volume of writing, I wondered what this mass of paper and ink would tell me. At the same time, the sickroom too was weighing on my mind. If I started in reading, I was certain to be called away before finishing. I had the feeling that something would happen with Father, or if not, then that my mother or brother or uncle would need me. I couldn’t settle myself to focus on Sensei’s words. In a restless state I read just the opening page. Its content was as follows.

“You once asked me to tell you about my past, and at the time I lacked the courage to comply. Now, however, I believe myself at liberty to candidly tell you all. This liberty, though, is purely circumstantial, and if I await your arrival then the chance will be past. If I fail to exercise it now, the possibility of affording you the benefit of my experience will be lost forever. In such case, the promise I made that day, in full sincerity, would prove but hollow words. Having no other recourse, I set here in writing all that I should rather have told you in person.”

Having read thus far, I knew now the reason for the great length of Sensei’s letter. I’d doubted all along that he would trouble himself over the question of my employment. Why though would Sensei, ever the poor correspondent, take up his pen and write at such length? Why could he not wait for my return?

“He’s now at liberty to tell me. This freedom, though, is fleeting and soon to be lost forever.”

I repeated these words to myself, struggling to fathom their meaning. I was suddenly hit by a wave of unease. I turned to read further. In that moment, my brother called loudly from the sickroom. I rose in alarm and rushed down the hall toward the others. I steeled myself for Father’s last moment, fearing it was at long last upon us.

18

The doctor, whom I didn’t realize had called, was there in the sick room. In hope of bringing comfort to his patient, he was preparing another enema. The nurse was asleep in another room, resting from the previous night’s watch. My brother, unaccustomed to such tasks, was on his feet and flustered. As soon as I appeared, he instructed me to help and returned to his seat. Acting in his place, I positioned an oiled paper underneath Father’s buttocks.

Father's condition eased a bit. The doctor stayed for half an hour to confirm the efficacy of the enema, then took his leave with a promise to call again soon. On his way out, he made a point to say that we should not hesitate to summon him if the situation demanded.

I withdrew from the sickroom, where a turn for the worse seemed imminent, and went back to Sensei's letter. Try as I might, though, I couldn't calm my nerves. As I sat at my desk, I imagined my brother would call at any moment. I feared that his next call would be the last, and the thought set my hands to trembling. I paged mechanically through Sensei's letter. I regarded the characters, each neatly penned within its box on the page. However, I lacked the faculty to draw out any meaning. Even skimming proved too great a chore. I flipped my way to the final page and prepared to refold the pile for safekeeping back on my desk. In that moment, one line near the end caught my eye.

“By the time this letter reaches you, I'll be gone from this world. I'll be already deceased.”

I was shocked. My breast, so agitated and restless as it was, seemed to freeze in an instant. I flipped through the pages in reverse order, grabbing a line from each as I went. Eager to learn what I needed to know, I stabbed at the dancing text with my eyes. In that moment, the only question was Sensei's well-being. His past, and all the unknowns he'd promised to reveal, were no longer of consequence. As I reversed through its pages, the lengthy letter was loathe to reveal an answer. I tossed it down in frustration.

I went to the sickroom to check again on Father. To my surprise, all round the sickbed was calm. I motioned to my mother, who was seated there with a tired and helpless look, and asked how he was.

“He seems to be holding out better now,” she replied.

I leaned close to Father's face. “How do you feel? Did the enema help a bit?”

Father nodded, then said, “Thank you,” quite clearly. His mind was not as far gone as I'd feared.

I withdrew again from the sickroom and returned to my own room. I looked at the clock and checked the train schedule. In an instant, I was back on my feet and was straightening my sash. I dropped Sensei's letter into my sleeve pocket. After that I left through the side door. Hardly conscious of my own actions, I rushed to the doctor's house. I intended to ask him frankly if Father would last a few more days. I intended to ask his help, through injections or any means possible, to make Father hold on. Regrettably, the doctor was out. I didn't have the time, or the self-composure, to await his return. I immediately hired a rickshaw and raced to the station.

I held a piece of paper against the station wall and penciled a note to my mother and brother. It was tersely worded, but still preferable, I reckoned, to disappearing with no notice. I instructed the rickshaw driver to quickly run it back home. Then, with a burst of resolve, I jumped aboard the train bound for Tōkyō. Amid the rumbling of the third-class carriage, I pulled Sensei's letter from my sleeve pocket and read it through from start to finish.