

Kokoro – Sensei’s Testament – Parts 19 to 27

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

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I’ll refer to that friend here as K. K and I were close from childhood. Being close from childhood, it goes without saying that we share the same hometown roots. K was the son of a Shinshū priest. He was not the eldest son, though, but the second. That being the case, he was sent to the house of a certain physician as an adopted son. The Honganji sect held great influence in my home region, and a Shinshū priest could live in relative comfort. As an example, if a priest had a daughter, and that daughter came of marriageable age, the parishioners would band together and find a suitable household into which she could marry. The expenses involved, of course, would not be borne by the priest. For such reasons, temple finances were generally in good order.

K’s household was well enough off. However, I don’t know that they could have sent a second son to Tōkyō for schooling. I also don’t know what role educational opportunities played in deciding K’s adoption. At any rate, K was adopted into the physician’s household. This was when we were still in middle school. I remember my surprise when the teacher called roll in class and K’s family name had suddenly changed.

K’s adoptive father was a wealthy man. K was provided with educational funding and came to Tōkyō. We didn’t come to Tōkyō together, but after arriving we both took up lodgings in the same place. At that time, it was not uncommon to sleep and study two or three to a room. K and I took a room together. Like a pair of animals captured from the hillside and caged, we embraced each other within our confines and viewed the surroundings outside with suspicion. We were wary of Tōkyō and its people. Even so, from our six-mat room we dreamed about ruling the world.

We were quite serious. We had every intent of achieving greatness. K was especially driven. The word “devotion,” harkening back to his temple upbringing, was constantly on his lips. And in all his deeds and actions, it seemed to me, devotion was duly embodied. Inwardly, I always held him in highest esteem.

From our middle school days, K would often stump me with difficult questions on religion or philosophy. It may be he was influenced by his father, or it may have been the rare air of the house into which he was born, a temple with its distinctive structures. At any rate, in comparison to your average priest, K came across as far more priest-like. K’s adoptive family sent him to Tōkyō to learn medicine. K though, strong-willed in his thinking, came to Tōkyō resolved to not study medicine. Wasn’t that the same thing, I asked him reprovingly, as defrauding his adoptive parents. He boldly affirmed that it was. It was a small price to pay, he said, for the sake of “the way.” I don’t think he really knew what he meant when he talked of “the way.” I certainly can’t say that I did. However, to us in our youth, these nebulous words rang sacred. Understanding aside, we proceeded forward in high-minded fervor, oblivious to any ignoble side to our actions. I thus came to support K in this views. I don’t know how much difference my support made. Determined as he was, it’s hard to imagine I could have dissuaded him through counterargument or objection. In encouraging him, though, I was fully aware, even in my youth, that I was taking a stake should things go

awry. Even if I wasn't prepared for it at the time, it's always been clear to me in retrospect that my avid support implied a willingness to bear some share of the consequences.

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K and I enrolled in the same college. With his devil-may-care attitude, he proceeded to use the money from his foster family to pursue his own studies. I couldn't but conclude that there were two thoughts in his mind. The first was that they wouldn't find out, and the second was so-what-if-they-did. Between the two of us, K seemed the lesser concerned.

K didn't return home that first summer. He told me of his plans to rent a room at a temple in Komagome and study there. I returned in early September and, sure enough, found him holed up in a tumbledown temple near the Great Kannon. He had a small room off the main hall, where he seemed most content to study as he pleased. That was, I believe, when I first noticed how priest-like he'd become. He wore a ring of prayer beads on his wrist. I asked what they were for, and he showed me how he could count them off with his thumb. Each day, it seemed, he counted his way round and round the ring. I failed to see the significance of this. In counting beads round a ring, there was no end. At what point in his counting, or with what thought in his mind, did he bring his hand to a halt? This is a trifling point, but I often wondered nonetheless.

I saw that K had a Bible in his room. This surprised me. I'd known him to talk often of the sutras, but I'd never heard him express any interest in Christianity. I couldn't help but ask why he had it. He asked in return why he shouldn't. Any writing so cherished by so many was certainly worth a read. In addition, he wanted to read the Koran when he had a chance. He seemed fascinated by the concept of "Muhammad and the Sword."

In our second summer, K was called home. Even when home, he apparently made no mention of his field of study. His family, for their part, did not pick up on it. Having received a formal education yourself, you'll understand when I say that the larger world, when it comes to academic life, is woefully disinterested. What we take for common knowledge is fully opaque to others. We live in and breathe our own air, immersed in the ins and outs of academia, and we're prone to believe that the outside world takes notice. On this point, K was a more astute observer than myself, and thus ventured home without concern. We returned from the country together, and as soon as we boarded the train I asked how things had gone. He replied that there was nothing worth reporting.

Our third summer was the one in which I turned my back on the land where my parents lay buried, resolved to never return. I had advised K that he should return home too, but he'd declined. He questioned the purpose of returning home each year. He found more value in staying put to study. Having no other recourse, I set off from Tōkyō alone. I've already written of how those months at home altered my destiny, so I won't revisit that story here. When I next saw K in September, my soul was brimming with discontent, melancholy, estrangement, and loneliness. K's destiny too, was in similar throes of its own. Unbeknownst to me, K had written to his adoptive family and confessed his deception. He told me he'd planned all along to do so. He may have figured that at this point, when it was too late to change course, they'd bless his choice and direct

him to carry on. At any rate, he had no intention of deceiving his adoptive parents all the way into his graduate studies. Even had he wanted to, it was clear, no doubt, that deception had its limits.

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K's adoptive father was outraged at his letter. He fired back a severe reply. In light of such brazen parental deception, K was immediately disqualified from further financial support. K showed me this response. He also showed me a letter from his birth family that he'd received at about the same time. This one was no less scathing in its reproval. Perhaps in deference to his adoptive family, it stated clearly that he should expect no support from their side either. The question of whether K would be reinstated into his birth family or somehow negotiate to remain with his adoptive family was left for a future day. K's immediate problem now was how to get by from month to month.

I asked K for his thoughts on the matter. He said he would take a job, teaching night school or such. Things were simpler then than they are now, and finding a side job was not as hard as you might imagine. I didn't doubt that K could likely get by. However, I was also aware of my own obligation. When K had gone against his adoptive family and charted his own course, I'd come to support him in his decision. I couldn't just stand idly by. I immediately extended an offer of material assistance. K dismissed this offhand. In his mind, self-sufficiency was preferable by far to dependency on the patronage of a friend. Once in graduate school, he asserted, any man worth his salt should know how to fend for himself. I had no intention of wounding K's pride for the sake of my own satisfaction, so I withdrew and left him to his own means.

K soon found the kind of position he sought. However, to one who so cherished his time, it was clearly a burden. Despite the demands of his new job, he persevered and didn't let up on his studies. I worried about his health. Determined as he was, though, he laughed off my concerns and heeded me not in the least.

K's relationship with his adoptive family, all the while, grew more and more tumultuous. He no longer had the time to talk with me like before, so I didn't hear all the details, but I could see that any hope for resolution was slipping away. I knew that a certain someone had interceded with efforts toward conciliation. This someone wrote to K and urged him home. K, deciding the cause was already lost, did not comply. K's obstinacy - he explained that he could not return during the school year, but the other side still viewed it as obstinacy - seemed to just make bad things worse. His adoptive family was offended, and his birth family was angered as well. Out of concern, I wrote a letter in attempt to placate the parties, but to no avail. For my troubles they sent not a word in return. This bothered me greatly. Given the circumstances of the situation, I'd already been sympathetic to K. From that point on, objectivity be damned, I was fully in K's camp.

It was finally decided that K would be reinstated into his birth family. His birth family would reimburse his adoptive family for all monies applied toward his schooling. In exchange, his birth family was through with him. He was on his own from here on. To apply an archaic term, one could say that K had been disinherited. It may not have been quite that dire, but K himself saw it as such. K had grown up without his mother. Some facets of his character, it seemed, could be attributed to his upbringing under a stepmother. Had his real mother lived, I believe he might not have broken so severely from his birth family. His father, as I've already

related, was a Buddhist priest. However, in his strict adherence to obligation, he came across as more warrior than priest.

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After K's situation had settled a bit, I received a long letter from the husband of his older sister. K's adoptive family were relatives of this man, and according to K his opinion had carried weight both in mediating the adoption and in later reversing it.

The letter asked for news on how K was faring. His sister was worried, it added, and could I please respond without delay. K was closer to this older sister, who had married into another family, than to his older brother who had succeeded his father at the temple. They were all three siblings of the same mother, but there was a significant gap in age between K and his sister. From his childhood, K's sister had been as a mother to him, more so than his stepmother.

I showed the letter to K. He seemed unsurprised and revealed to me that he'd received several such letters already from his sister. He said he'd written back that there was no need for concern. The family his sister had married into, unfortunately, was not well off. However sympathetic his sister might be, she was in no position to offer material assistance.

I wrote back to K's brother-in-law with a similar response as K's to his sister. I assured them, in no uncertain terms, that I would step in on K's behalf should the need arise. This was fully in fitting with my intent. In stating it so, I hoped to comfort K's sister who worried for his future. I also meant it as a rebuke against K's adoptive and birth families, whom I felt had disrespected me.

K was in the first year of his graduate studies when he was reinstated into his birth family. For the next year and a half, until around the middle of his second year, he supported himself through his own efforts. However, the toll this took on him was beginning to show, both physically and mentally. His troubles with his adoptive family, and the question of whether or not they would keep him, were also to blame. His sentiments were gradually getting the best of him. He sometimes talked as though all of humanity's sorrows were his to shoulder alone, and he would react most severely if challenged. He was irritated too by thoughts that his grand future, with so much potential, was slipping out of sight. When beginning academic endeavors, we all set out afresh with great ambitions. A year passes, then another, and graduation draws near. At this point, reality suddenly sets in, and most of us are disappointed in our own limitations. The same was true for K, but he took it so much harder than others. I finally decided I had to intervene.

I advised K to stop pushing himself so. I told him he'd find greater success in the long run by taking rest and engaging in leisure. Given K's obstinacy, I'd tempered my expectations from the start, but even at that I was unprepared for what I went through to finally persuade him. K asserted that his aim was more than just learning. He sought to fashion a mind of the strongest will. Austerity, he'd decided, was an essential means to this end. He was eccentric in this regard. His austere lifestyle, though, seemed not to be serving his will in the least. It was leading him, rather, toward a nervous breakdown. Finding no other recourse, I embraced his ideas with full-on empathy. I declared to him a like intention for my own life. (From my side, these were more than hollow words. K had a power of persuasion, and in expounding his views he'd begun

to win me over.) I finally proposed that we room together to support each other in traversing the noble path. To break his stubborn will, I threw myself at his feet. Only in so doing was I able to draw him in.

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Adjoining my room was a four-mat antechamber. Coming from the entry hall, one had to pass through this antechamber to reach my room, a situation that rendered it of little practical use. I put K in this room. My initial thought had been to place our desks together in my larger eight-mat room and reserve this smaller room for our shared use. K decided, though, that he preferred his own space, however cramped it might be, and chose to take the smaller room for his own.

As I've already noted, Okusan initially opposed these measures I sought to take. If she were running a boarding house, she said, then two would be better than one, and three would be better still. However, she was not in business, and she'd prefer that I drop the matter. I assured her she needn't worry, as K was not the burdensome type. Burdensome or not, she replied, he was fully unknown to her. When I countered reprovingly that I, her current lodger, had been no different, she did not back down but insisted she'd had a read on me from day one. I gave her an exasperated look. Then she changed her line of argument. For my own sake, I should not bring in K. I asked how this was for my own sake, and this time the look of exasperation was hers.

In all honesty, it was not essential that I room with K. However, had I doled out a monthly cash allowance before him, I firmly believed he would have refrained from accepting. He was too much the independent spirit. So I brought him into my home and discreetly paid Okusan the extra to cover his meals. At the same time, I made a point of not disclosing K's financial predicament to her.

I did make various mention of K's health and how, if left alone, he would only skew more eccentric. I also talked about K's failed relationship with his adoptive family and his estrangement from his birth family. In bringing in K, I informed her, I was prepared to embrace a drowning man and revive him with my own lifeblood. On that note, I implored both Okusan and her daughter to treat K with utmost kindness. At this point, Okusan was finally persuaded. K though, to whom I said nothing, was unaware of all this. I thought this for the best, and as he stolidly moved himself in, I welcomed him with a look of indifference.

Okusan and her daughter helped K settle in and attended kindly to his needs. Inwardly, I was well pleased, as I knew they were doing so in deference to me. -- K, for his part, was his usual sullen self.

When I asked K how he liked his new surroundings, he replied simply that they weren't bad. As I saw things, this was quite the understatement. His previous place was a north-facing room. It was damp, musty, and filthy. And the board was no better than the room. For K, moving from there into my house was akin to coming out of a deep ravine to the top of a tall tree. His subdued response was in part due to his obstinacy and in part due to his tenets. Brought up as he was in Buddhist doctrine, he viewed anything beyond the essentials as extravagance and moral corruption. He was versed in the tales of virtuous priests and eminent saints of old, and he sought to separate the spirit from the flesh. He may have, at times, been wont to scourge his body for the betterment of his soul.

I took great care not to confront him. The best way to melt ice, I reasoned, was to set it out in the sun. In due time it would melt into warm water, and when it did it would react to its own transformation.

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In my own case, as a result of Okusan's care, the clouds hanging over my spirit had gradually cleared. I was aware of what had transpired, and now I sought the same effect for K. Having known K for many years, I knew that we were not of the same mettle. However, my own nerves had been soothed in this household, and I reasoned the place should work its same magic on K as well.

K was a man of greater resolve than myself. He studied twice as hard as I did, and he was blessed with a finer mind than my own. Our areas of study had diverged, but during our time together, in middle and high school, K was always the top student in the class. It was clear to me that I would never be his equal. However, in this time when I worked so to bring him into my home, I did believe myself the more sensible of us two. From my perspective, it seemed that K had lost sight of the difference between privation and perseverance. I write this especially for your sake, so please take note. Our faculties, whether those of the body or those of the mind, thrive or perish under external stimuli. In either case, it goes without saying that stimuli must increase over time. If one isn't careful, one can unwittingly, and unbeknownst even to those close by, steer oneself into great peril. Physicians will tell you there is nothing so indolent as the human stomach. Feed it only with gruel, they say, and it'll soon enough be incapable of anything solid. They advocate a diverse diet, but I think there's more to this than simply keeping in practice. It has to be the case, I also believe, that a gradual increase in stimuli be accompanied by a gradual increase in digestive resilience. Think of the consequences of the converse, if the stomach's faculty grew weaker with time, and I think you'll see my point. K was a greater man than myself, but he'd failed to grasp this truth. He seemed intent on living with hardship and making it his friend. He was convinced that through the virtues of repeated privation, he could one day embrace privation as his own.

I wished very much to enlighten K in such matters. It was a given, however, that he would only challenge my thoughts. No doubt, I reckoned, he would call up examples of great personages past. I on my part, then, would be compelled to point out that he and they were not the same. If he were amenable to such an idea, then that would be the end of it. Given his nature, though, having argued thus far he would not back down. He would push it further. He would shore up his words with actions. He would show himself a formidable man, not to be taken lightly. He would carry forward to his own detriment. In the end, he would only prevail in securing his own demise, but he would do so in grand fashion. Knowing his nature as I did, I had to hold my silence. Also, as I've noted before, from my perspective he seemed very close to a breakdown. If I did manage to argue him into submission, it would only serve to set him off. I wasn't one to shrink from a quarrel. However, when I thought back to my own situation, and the terrible isolation I'd felt, I was loathe to leave a close friend in such straits. I had no intention of pushing him further away. With this in mind, I refrained, even after he moved in with us, from doling out anything he might perceive as rebuke. I held my tongue and simply observed, waiting to see the effects of his new surroundings.

Behind the scenes, I encouraged Okusan and her daughter to engage with K. His heretofore reticent lifestyle, I believed, was doing him great harm. I could only conclude that his heart, like steel left untouched, was showing signs of rust.

Okusan remarked with a laugh that she found him unapproachable. Her daughter offered up a specific example by way of illustration. When asked if he had coals in his hibachi, K had replied to her that he had none. When asked then if she should bring some, he'd declined, adding that there was no need. When asked if it wasn't cold, he'd acknowledged it was cold but stated again that he needed no coals. That had been the end of it. I couldn't just brush this off with a forced smile. I felt bad for her, and I did my best to try and smooth things over. It was springtime, and coals were by no means essential, but at the same time I could understand how the women were finding K difficult.

From then on, I did what I could to intervene in bringing K and the two women closer. If K and I were talking I would call one of them over. Or if I were with them in the same room I would pull in K. In either case, as the situation allowed, I worked to draw them closer. K, of course, did not appreciate my efforts. On one occasion, he abruptly rose and left the room. On another occasion, I called for him and he failed to appear. Where was the value, he asked, in idle chatter. I laughed this off, but I was all too aware of the contempt in his voice.

In some respects, K's contempt for me may have been justified. It could be argued that he'd set his sights much higher than mine. I wouldn't refute it. However, lofty goals, when coupled with day in and day out drudgery, make for the proverbial strange bedfellows. What he desperately needed, in my opinion, was a healthy dose of humanity. He could fill his head with images of great men, but to what purpose, I asked myself, if his own path to greatness were thwarted. His first lesson in humanity, I decided, should be exposure to the opposite sex. By exposing him to female company, I hoped to loose the rust from his lifeblood and see him renewed.

My efforts began to gradually bear fruit. What once seemed immiscible slowly started to mix. It seemed to dawn on K, bit by bit, that there existed a world outside of himself. He turned to me one day and conceded that women were not so contemptible after all. He had initially, it seemed, expected of women the same scholarship and learning he expected of me. Not finding it, he'd unleashed his contempt in response. He hadn't learned to adjust his approach based on gender. He'd observed every individual, man or woman, through the same lens. I pointed out to him that if the two of us, as men, exchanged ideas just among ourselves, we'd be fated forever to walking a single straight path. He readily acknowledged my point. At the time, smitten as I was with the daughter, it was natural for me to talk so. I did not, however, divulge these feelings to K.

I was elated to see K's heart, which he'd heretofore entombed in ramparts built from books, breaking out into the light. Such had been my aim from the start, and I couldn't help but feel the joy that comes with success. I didn't share these thoughts with K, but I did share them with Okusan and her daughter. Both seemed duly pleased.

While K and I both studied in the same department, our areas of specialization were different, so it was only natural that our schedules should not coincide. When I came home early, I would simply pass through his empty room. When I came home late, I made it my habit to offer a simple greeting on the way to my room. K would always lift his eyes from his page and glance my way as I slid the partition aside. Then he would always ask if I'd just now returned. Sometimes I merely nodded in return, and at other times I voiced a simple affirmation as I passed on my way.

On one day, I had some business in Kanda and returned home much later than usual. I approached the gate at a quick pace and opened the latticework door with a clatter. At that same moment, I caught the sound of the daughter's voice. It seemed clearly to come from K's room. The hearth room and the daughter's room were straight back from the entry hall, in that order. To the left were K's room and my own. This was the lay of the house, and to one such as myself who'd been there a while, it was easy enough to know whose voice was coming from where. I closed the door behind me. As I did so, the daughter's voice immediately fell silent. As I removed my shoes – I wore stylish high-lace shoes at the time, which were quite a bother – as I was stooped over untying my laces, there was no sound at all from K's room. This struck me as odd. I wondered if I'd been imagining things. However, as I slid the partition aside for my usual passage through K's room, the two of them were, indeed, sitting there. K asked, as always, if I'd just now returned. The daughter welcomed me home from her spot on the floor. Maybe it was just in my mind, but her greeting somehow hit me as strained. I sensed something unnatural in her tone. I turned to her and asked after Okusan. I had no real reason for asking. I only did so because it seemed so still in the house.

Okusan, indeed, was away from the house. She had left with the maidservant. Consequently, K and the daughter were there on their own. This baffled me to no end. I'd been there a long time, and never once had Okusan gone out and left me alone with her daughter. I asked the daughter if something urgent had arisen. She merely laughed. I had a great dislike for women who laughed so in such situations. It may be a common fault among all young ladies, but this young lady seemed prone to find humor in every petty matter. One look at my face, however, was enough to bring her back to herself. It was nothing urgent, she told me sincerely, but a small errand had necessitated Okusan's absence. As a lodger, it was not my place to press any further. I held my silence.

I changed my clothes and had only just sat down when Okusan and the maidservant returned. After a bit, it was time to gather for dinner. When I'd first come in as a lodger, they'd treated me as a guest, with the maidservant bringing me my meals. After some time, they'd dispensed with formality and started calling me to join them. When K had moved in as a new lodger, I'd made a point of insisting that they treat him no differently. In exchange, I'd had a lightweight folding table made and presented it to Okusan. These are commonplace nowadays, but in those times it was unusual for family members to eat together around a table. I'd had to go all the way to a furniture maker in Ochanomizu, where I'd had it specially built to order.

At the table, Okusan explained that the fish vendor had not shown that day, and she'd had to go to town for our dinner. As I took this in and acknowledged it, the daughter looked at my face and again started laughing. Her laughter, however, was immediately shut down with a scolding from Okusan.

A week later, I again found K and the daughter talking in his room. On this occasion, the daughter took one look at my face and burst out laughing. I perhaps should have asked her then and there what she found so amusing. Instead, I held my tongue and continued into my room. K had no chance to offer his usual greeting. The daughter, it seemed, soon thereafter opened the shōji and made her way back to the hearth room.

At dinner, the daughter remarked that I was eccentric. I refrained from asking what she meant. I simply watched as her mother threw her a reproving look.

After dinner, I invited K to join me for a stroll. We passed behind the Denzūin Temple, circled through the botanical garden lanes, and emerged at the bottom of Tomizaka. It was by no means a short stroll, but we talked very little. K, by nature, was even more reserved than I was. I'm hardly the talkative type, but I did my best to engage him as we walked. Foremost on my mind was the family with whom we lodged. I wanted to know K's thoughts on Okusan and her daughter. All of his answers, however, were evasive and noncommittal. He spoke in simple terms yet still remained elusive. His mind seemed much more focused on his studies than on the two women. Our second year exams, of course, were just around the corner, and between the two of us, as any objective observer could readily have concluded, K was the serious student. He duly impressed me with references to Emanuel Swedberg and such, of whom I knew very little.

When our exams were successfully behind us, Okusan congratulated us and noted that we both had just one more year to go. For Okusan's part, the graduation of her daughter, in whom she placed great pride, was just around the corner. K remarked to me how women finish their schooling yet still don't know anything. The daughter's extracurricular activities, her lessons in needlework, koto, flower arrangement and such, were entirely lost on K. I chided him for his oversight. I repeated to him my prior argument that he was looking in the wrong place and his critique of women was misguided. He didn't refute my words, but he didn't embrace them either. I was happy to see this. Judging from his manner, he still viewed women with contempt. And he seemed to take little interest in the daughter of the house, who to me exemplified the female gender. I can say looking back now that, at that time, I was already jealous of K.

I suggested to K that we travel together over the summer. His response was unenthusiastic. He was, of course, in no position to travel of his own accord. On the other hand, there was nothing to prevent him from accompanying me at my request. I asked him why he was reluctant to go. He replied that there was no deep reason. He just preferred to stay home and read. When I contended that it was better to escape the heat and study somewhere cool, he replied that I was welcome to do so alone. I had no intention of leaving that house without K. I was uneasy with how close he had grown to the family. You may object that I was uncomfortable now with the very outcome I'd desired from the start. I'll concede I was acting the fool. Okusan, seeing our discussion go nowhere, felt compelled to intervene. It was finally settled that the two of us would travel to Bōshū.