

Kokoro – Sensei’s Testament – Parts 47 to 56

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

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I spent several days in this state. Needless to say, my breast was heavy the whole while with apprehension. I knew full well that I must, somehow, make amends with K. To make matters worse, Okusan’s manner and the daughter’s comportment were a constant prod at my conscience. There was no telling when Okusan, who lacked the reserve typical of women, might spill all to K at the dinner table. It was also quite possible that the daughter’s bearing and behavior, which now to me seemed noticeably changed, could serve to sow seeds of suspicion in his mind. I had to disclose to him, somehow, my new connection to this family. This struck me, however, in light of my own moral shortcomings, as the hardest thing in the world to do.

I thought about asking Okusan to find some occasion to tell him. This would, of course, be in my absence. The facts of the matter, though, even if conveyed indirectly rather than directly, were no less shameful. Furthermore, whatever rationalization I might scheme up, Okusan was unlikely to convey it to K without due explanation on my part. To come clean, in order to secure her assistance, would mean exposing my own shortcomings to the young lady of my affections, as well as to my future mother-in-law. In my mind, I saw this as an indelible stain on my future credibility. The prospect of losing even an iota of trust in the eyes of my bride, before we were yet wed, was utterly abhorrent.

In short, I was a wretch who’d set out on the narrow path of virtue, lost his footing, and fallen into the mire. Either that, or I was an underhanded schemer. This conundrum, though, to this point, was a secret shared by myself and heaven alone. I stood in predicament. The only way to regain my footing and retake the narrow path was through confession of my misdeeds to those around me. I was loath to confess. At the same time, I was loath to remain in the mire. I was paralyzed, wedged between a rock and a hard place.

Five or six days later, Okusan suddenly asked me if I’d informed K of the matter at hand. I told her I hadn’t. She then asked, rather scoldingly, why it was that I hadn’t. I tensed up as she queried me. Her next words were a shock. I remember them still to this day.

“That would explain his odd reaction when I mentioned it. The fault lies as much with you as with me. How could you leave him in the dark when you’ve always been so close?”

I asked her what he’d said when she told him. She replied that he hadn’t said much in particular. However, I couldn’t refrain from pressing her further. She saw no reason, of course, to keep anything from me. Still saying it was nothing of import, she related the scene in detail.

Based on all that she told me, K had managed to keep himself fully composed. This despite the fact that it must have been quite a blow to him. He’d given only a curt response on learning of the new relationship between myself and the daughter. However, when Okusan pointed out that he should be happy for us, he had allowed himself a smile and congratulated her. Then he’d risen to take his leave. Before pushing aside the hearth room shōji on his way out, he’d turned back to Okusan and asked when the wedding would be.

As she described it, he then added that he would like to offer us a congratulatory gift, but lacked the means to do so. As I sat before Okusan and heard this, an ache arose in my heart.

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By my reckoning, it had been two full days since Okusan's talk with K. During this time, K's behavior toward me had betrayed nothing, and I'd been utterly unaware. On the outside, at least, his emotions were fully in check, and I had to admire his forbearance. When I thought about K in comparison to myself, he was without doubt the superior man. I may have outmaneuvered him as a rival, but as a human being I was beaten. This feeling swelled in my breast. Thinking how K must despise me, my face flushed red for shame. My pride, however, prevented me still from throwing myself at his feet.

Torn between action and inaction, I decided, at any rate, to give it another day. This was Saturday evening. That very night, however, K died by his own hand. Even today, I shudder to recall the scene. I always slept with my head toward the east. On that night only, for whatever reason, I laid out my bedding with my head to the west. Perhaps there was some connection. I woke suddenly to a cold draft crossing my pillow. I looked and saw that the fusuma, partitioning K's room from mine, stood open, just as it had on that previous night. Unlike that night, though, K's silhouette did not fill the frame. Sensing something amiss, I propped myself onto my elbows and took a look into K's room. His lamp was burning dimly. His bedding had been laid out. However, his quilt had been pushed into a pile at the foot of it. K himself was lying prone with his face turned away.

I called out to him. There was no answer. I called again and asked if he wasn't well. There was no reaction. I immediately rose to my feet and advanced as far as the threshold. From there, I surveyed his room in the dim light of the lamp.

The initial sensation I received was much like that of the moment of his confession. With one sweep of his room, my eyes turned to glass and lost their capacity for movement. I stood there frozen. Paralysis gripped and then released me, like a gust of passing wind. As it swept on its way, I knew that all was lost. A dark shadow, never to be lifted, spilled across my future days. In an instant it cast its pall, with terrifying force, over the entirety of my existence. My body began to tremble.

Even so, I couldn't forget my own preservation. A letter on the desk immediately caught my eye. As expected, it bore my name. Feverishly, I removed the seal. Inside, however, were none of the words I'd anticipated. What I'd anticipated were stinging words of censure, expounding on my sins. Such words, I'd feared, would utterly damn me in Okusan's or her daughter's eyes. On quick inspection, I knew I'd been spared. (I'd been spared, of course, only in the eyes of society, but the eyes of society, in this circumstance, dominated my thoughts.)

The contents of the letter were simple. They tended toward the abstract. K, by weakness of character, saw no hope of realizing his ambitions, and was therefore ending his life. After that, he'd added his thanks to me, in very plain language, for the assistance I'd provided. As one last act of assistance, he asked that I handle his affairs after his passing. The distress he would be causing Okusan was unpardonable, and I should by all means apologize on his behalf. He requested that I notify his kin back home. He touched briefly on

all he needed to touch on, but there was no mention of the daughter. It occurred to me, after reading the letter through, that he'd purposefully avoided her. What pained me most of all, though, was the final phrase. He'd appended it, it appeared, to exhaust the ink in his pen. He should have, he wrote, died sooner. To what avail, he wondered, had he lived so long.

With trembling hands I rerolled and resealed the letter. I made a point of placing it back on the desk for all to see. I turned then, and for the first time noticed the splash of blood on the fusuma.

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Impulsively, I cupped K's head in both hands and lifted it a little. I sought to regard his face in death. He was lying prone, and after one quick look at his face from below, I immediately withdrew my hands. It was more than just fear. I was shocked by the weight of his head. From above, I gazed for some time at the cold ears I'd just touched, and at the thick, close-cropped hair that appeared no different than usual. I felt no urge to weep. I felt only terror. The terror I felt, though, was more than the simple terror of my senses reacting to the scene before me. It was a profound terror, a terror of the Fates, embodied here in this friend so suddenly cold.

Lacking the wit to do otherwise, I returned to my own room. I began to pace its length and breadth. My mind commanded me to keep moving, even if for naught. I thought that I must, somehow, do something. At the same time, I knew there was nothing to be done. I couldn't refrain from circling the room. I paced like a bear in a cage.

More than once, I thought to go in and wake Okusan. I was restrained, though, by the thought that the scene was too dreadful for her. A firm desire to spare the ladies, particularly the daughter, from the shock of this all, held me in check. So reasoning, I thus resumed my pacing.

During this time, I lit my lamp. Then, occasionally, I would glance at the clock. Never have I seen anything move with such reluctance as the hands of that clock. I don't know exactly when I woke, but I know it was close to daybreak. As I continued to pace, anxiously awaiting the dawn, my thoughts were plagued by illusions and fears of endless night.

We typically rose before seven. Classes often started at eight, and if we woke any later we wouldn't make it on time. With this in mind, the maidservant was always up around six. On that day, however, it was not yet six when I went to wake her. As I did so, Okusan reminded me it was Sunday. She'd woken to the sound of my steps. I asked Okusan, since she was already up, if she couldn't come to my room for a moment. She threw her half coat on over her nightgown and followed me back. As soon as we were in the room, I immediately slid shut the fusuma that stood open in the partition between K's room and mine. I then informed Okusan, in a hushed voice, that something terrible had happened. She asked what it was. With my chin I gestured toward the next room. "Please brace yourself," I started. The color drained from her face. "Okusan, K has taken his own life," I continued. She froze in place and gazed at my face in silence. In that moment, I suddenly put my hands to the floor, lowered my head, and apologized. "I'm so sorry. This is my fault. I've brought this all on you and your daughter." Until I'd seen her reaction, I'd had no intention of voicing such words. However, the look on her face had made me forget myself. This was the apology I

could never now make to K, delivered instead, of necessity, to Okusan and her daughter. In short, my better nature overcame me, broke through my façade, and brought forth words of repentance. Fortunately for my sake, Okusan did not read these words so deeply. “No one could have known. You mustn’t blame yourself,” she spoke to console me. Her face was still without color. Shock and fear had seized its sinews and pulled them taught, etching deep lines.

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Though I hated to do it, I rose again and re-opened the door I’d just closed. K’s lamp, it seems, had exhausted its oil, and his room lay in total darkness. I went back for my own lamp, advanced to the threshold, then turned round to Okusan. From behind me, remaining in my shadow, she peered into the small room. She made no move to enter. From where she stood, she asked that I open the storm shutters.

From there on, Okusan showed the mettle of an army widow, taking command of the situation. I made the rounds, first to the doctor and then to the police. However, I did so under Okusan’s instruction. Until all such formalities were concluded, she allowed no one into the room.

K had cut his carotid artery with a small knife and died instantly. Apart from this, his body bore no wound. I learned that the blood I’d seen on the shōji, in that dim light of a dream, had gushed forth from his neck. In the full light of day, I looked again and saw clearly the stains it had left. In so doing, I was struck by the force with which blood courses through the body.

Okusan and I did our best to clean K’s room. Fortunately, most of his blood had been captured by his bedding. The tatami mats were only lightly soiled and easily washed. We moved his body into my room and laid it out in a natural sleeping position. I then went out to wire his family.

When I returned, incense was burning at K’s bedside. The room hung heavy with spiritual vapors, and I saw the two women seated in their midst. This was the first time since the prior evening that I’d seen the daughter. She was weeping. Okusan’s eyes, too, were red with traces of tears. I’d held back my own tears thus far, but finally, in that moment, I indulged myself in sadness. Melancholy welled in my breast, and I can’t overstate the comfort it brought. My heart, which had been gripped so tightly by anguish and fear, received in that moment a first drop of cool relief.

Without speaking, I seated myself next to the ladies. Okusan suggested I offer a stick of incense. I offered my incense and remained seated, still saying nothing. The daughter did not address me. She occasionally exchanged a word or two with her mother, but only concerning tasks at hand. She was not yet, it seemed, ready to talk of K and the times we had had. Inwardly, I was relieved to have spared her the frightful scene of the night prior. To show such horror to one so young and so beautiful, I’d feared, would only risk marring her grace. Even at the height of my own terror, when my hair had stood on end, this thought had governed my actions. The idea of exposing her to the same terror was, to me, no less unsavory than the thought of thrashing a blameless flower to shreds.

K’s father and brother arrived from the country, and I shared with them my recommendation regarding his remains. K and I had often strolled Zōshigaya. K was very much taken with the place. I remembered telling

him, half in jest, that if he liked it so much then I'd see he was buried there. I wondered if there was really any virtue now in doing as I'd promised. I did desire, though, to kneel each month at his grave, for as long as I might live, and express anew my regret. Perhaps out of obligation to me, as I'd looked after K while they had not, his father and brother readily acquiesced.

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I was asked by one of K's friends, as we made our way back from the funeral, why I thought he had killed himself. Since that fateful night, I'd been tormented repeatedly by this question. From Okusan, to her daughter, to K's father and brother arriving from the country, to acquaintances who were notified, to newspaper reporters with no connection whatsoever to K, none failed to pose this question. And each time it was posed, the question stung at my conscience. I could hear behind the question a voice, hounding me, telling me to confess my wrongdoing.

The answer I gave to all was the same. I simply related what K had written in the letter he'd left me. I offered up nothing more. K's friend, who on the way back from the funeral had posed the same question and received my standard answer, took a newspaper from his pocket to show me. He pointed out a passage and, still walking, I read where directed. It reported how K, estranged from his family, had fallen into misanthropic despair and ended his life. Without comment, I refolded the paper and returned it to the friend. According to other papers, he informed me, it was mental instability that led to K's suicide. I'd been too busy to read the papers and had no idea what had been reported. However, there wasn't a moment when it didn't weigh on my mind. What I feared most of all was anything enmeshing the other members of the household. Even the mention of the daughter's name, in my mind, was unbearable. I asked the friend if anything else had been reported. Other than those two story lines, he replied, he hadn't seen anything else.

Shortly thereafter we moved to our present home. Both Okusan and her daughter were averse to remaining, and reliving the memory of that evening, night after night, was more than I could face. We talked it over and decided to leave.

Two months after we moved, I graduated from the university as anticipated. Half a year after my graduation, the daughter and I were finally wed. From the outside, all was progressing as hoped, and one would have to conclude that these were happy times. Okusan and her daughter seemed duly content. And I too was content. However, to my contentment was tethered a dark shadow. I saw my contentment as a powder train, burning its way toward some final, sorrowful fate.

After we were married, the daughter -- we were married now, so I should rather say my wife -- my wife, for whatever reason, suggested that we visit K's gravesite together. My immediate reaction was visceral aversion. Why, I asked, had she suddenly thought to do so. To have us both visit together, she replied, would surely be pleasing to K. I gazed back intently at her face. She had no idea why, and she asked me what was wrong. Only then was I aware of what I was doing.

I took my wife to Zōshigaya as she wished. I ladled water onto K's gravestone to cleanse it. She set out incense and flowers. The two of us inclined our heads and pressed our hands together in prayer. My wife, I

expect, was telling K of our life together, thinking how pleased he would be. In my own heart, all I could do was reproach myself over and over.

My wife ran her hand over K's gravestone and noted how splendid it was. It wasn't much of a stone, but I'd gone to the stone seller and picked it out myself, so for this reason, I expect, she made a point of praising it. Conjuring in my mind this new gravestone, my new wife, and the newly interred bones lying under the earth, I couldn't but feel mocked by the Fates. After that day, I decided I would never again visit K's grave with my wife.

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My sentiments regarding my deceased friend were never to change. Truth be told, I had feared such an outcome. It's fair to say that even at my wedding, which I'd looked forward to for so long, I was riddled with anxiety. As humans, however, we're not blessed with the luxury of foresight, and I had hoped that, perhaps, marriage would serve as a turning point, renewing my spirit and setting my life on a new course. As a husband, though, looking daily on his wife, my hopes were short-lived, easily broken by harsh realities. During our times together, K would appear without warning and haunt my mind. My wife, as I came to see things, was the bond between K and myself, securely grasping both of our fates. I could find no fault with her otherwise, but this one facet was enough to push me away. A woman soon senses such things. But what she sensed, she could not explain. She pressed me at times for an answer. She wanted to know why I felt as I did, if there was something she'd done to displease me. At times I was able to disarm her with a smile. At other times, though, her patience reached its limit. In the end, I would suffer her reproaches. "Why do you hate me so?" she would say, or "There has to be something you're hiding."

There were many times I resolved to confide in her, to tell her all. However, whenever I found myself on the verge of doing so, other forces would intervene and hold me back. You know me well, so I believe this goes without saying, but I state it here for the sake of completeness. I was never one to put on airs with my wife. Had I approached her in good faith with words of penitence, the same way I approached my deceased friend, I know that she would have embraced me, shedding tears of joy, and forgiven my indiscretions. It was certainly not a calculated self-interest that kept me from doing so. It was rather the thought of tarnishing her past, of smearing it with a dark stain, that I couldn't accept. Please understand how loath I was to let something so pure be defiled with stains of black.

A year passed, and thoughts of K continued to grip my soul, fueling a constant anxiety. To dispel this anxiety, I immersed myself in my books. With great intensity of purpose, I applied myself to my studies. I looked toward a future where I would share the fruits of my work with the world. As it turned out, however, my concocted goals, and my visions of renown, were nothing but hollow façades. Dissatisfied, I lost my drive and turned away from my work. I sat with folded arms, watching the world go by.

My wife attributed my let-down to lack of immediate necessity. Her family was well enough off that she and her mother could get along without outside income, and my own circumstances did not compel me to seek an occupation, so it was only natural she should see things so. I do have a tendency to indulge myself. However, the real reason behind my withdrawal lay entirely elsewhere. After my uncle deceived me, I'd

lost my faith in the world. While deeming the world flawed, I'd declared myself to be true. I'd held the conviction that, be the world as it may, I could hone in myself a shining example of humanity. That conviction was laid waste by K. The sudden realization that I was no better than my uncle was devastating. My disenchantment with others extended now to myself, rendering all effort futile.

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Having failed to lose myself in my books, I tried for a time to forget myself by drowning my soul in saké. I can't say I'm given to drink. However, I can drink when I want to, and with enough drink, I thought, I could quell the ache in my heart. Such shallow expedient, over time, only furthered my sense of misanthropy. In the height of drunken stupor, I would suddenly come to myself. I would feel a fool, going to lengths to delude myself so. With a shudder, my eyes and my heart would both snap to sobriety. There were also times when no amount of drink could push the world away, when all I did was depress myself. Furthermore, every pleasurable moment I finessed from the bottle was paid back in full with subsequent gloom. The people I cherished most, my wife and her mother, bore witness to this. They could only judge me, of course, on the basis of that which they knew.

My wife's mother, it seems, sometimes voiced her disapproval. My wife kept this from me. However, she couldn't always refrain from reproaching me of her own accord. Even when she reproached me, she was not harsh. Only rarely did her words ever rile me. She would often entreat me to tell her honestly what she'd done to displease me. She would caution me, for the sake of my own future, to not drink so. Sometimes she would weep and tell me I'd changed. That was fair, but then she would add, "You wouldn't be like this if K were alive." At times I acknowledged that perhaps this was so. However, the meaning in my acknowledgement and the meaning she took from it were a world apart. Inwardly, this saddened me. Even so, I was not inclined to explain myself.

I did, at times, apologize to my wife. This would be in the morning, after a night of drinking heavily and arriving home late. She would sometimes respond with a smile. At other times I was met with silence. Once in a while she'd break down and cry. In any case, I was left with a hollow feeling. My apologies, you could say, were as much to myself as my wife. In the end, I eased up on the drink. Truth be told, it was my own sense of revulsion, more than my wife's admonishments, that finally led me to do so.

I eased up on the drink but still felt no desire to work. With nothing else to do, I turned back to my books. Whatever I read, however, I would lay aside and forget. My wife asked me, on multiple occasions, to what end I studied. I would force a smile in return. Deep down, though, it pained me greatly to think that the one person in this world whom I knew and trusted did not understand me. Worse yet, the solution was close at hand. Only my courage to invoke it was lacking. I was utterly alone. I often felt I'd been cut adrift, apart from the world, fated to solitude.

All during this time, my thoughts returned, again and again, to K and his death. For some time, based on simple and direct observation, the single word "love" had been fixed in my head. K must have certainly, I'd concluded, died of a broken heart. However, with the gradual passage of time and the clarity of steadier thought, I began to see it wasn't so simple. The clash of reality and ideals -- that too was inadequate. I finally

began to suspect that K, just like myself, had felt himself utterly alone in the world and, with no other recourse, had acted. A shudder ran down my spine. From this point on, a foreboding that I was following in K's footsteps would occasionally chill my breast, sweeping through like a draft of cold of air.

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Time went by, and my mother-in-law fell ill. The doctor examined her and told us there was nothing he could do. I spared no effort in providing for her care. I did this for her sake and for the sake of the wife whom I loved. But more than that, I did it for the sake of humanity. Up to that point I had longed greatly to engage with the world. It was only lack of capacity to do so, I believe, that left me an idler. I'd become isolated, and this was the first time I found myself taking initiative, albeit in small measure, for the greater good. I can't deny that I was possessed, in some sense, by a desire for atonement.

My mother-in-law passed away. My wife and I were left alone, just the two of us. My wife turned to me and told me I was now the only person in this world on whom she could depend. I couldn't even depend on myself, and when she looked at me so, I lost my composure. My mind was overcome with pity. I told her she was a terribly unfortunate woman. She asked me why. She didn't understand me, and I couldn't explain myself. She started to weep. She reproached me, telling me it was only my distorted notions of her that led me to say such things.

After the loss of her mother, I treated my wife with utmost kindness. I did this not only out of love. There was a broader context to my kindness, transcending the individual. Just as in caring for her mother, my heart again was stirred. My wife seemed content. Cast across her contentment, though, was the faintest of shadows, testimony to the distance between us. Even had I opened my heart to her, though, I'm not sure I could have vanquished this shadow. I believe that women, more so than men, when affections come their way are wont to find pleasure in romance, in intrigue. Affections born of obligation, or service to some greater good, are less alluring.

On one occasion, my wife wondered aloud whether a man's heart and a woman's heart could never truly join together as one. I answered vaguely that perhaps, in the case of young lovers, it was possible. She seemed to be reflecting on her past. Finally, she allowed from her lips the faintest of sighs.

Starting in those days, a dreadful shadow would sometimes flicker across my breast. At first it was something external, assailing me from without. It caught me by surprise. It horrified me. However, with the passing of time my heart grew to accept these flickers of dread. In the end, I came to regard them as part of myself, with me from the moment of my birth and dormant till now in the depths of my soul. This feeling, whenever it struck, made me wonder if I wasn't losing my mind. I had no intention, though, of having my head checked. Neither by a doctor, nor by anyone else.

I felt profoundly the flaws of humankind. It was this feeling that led me monthly to K's grave. It was this feeling too that compelled me to care so for my wife's ailing mother. And it was this feeling that commanded me to approach my wife with tenderness. Because of this feeling, there were even moments I wished for passersby, people unknown to me, to take up the whip and scourge me. As my thoughts progressed further, I felt that it was I, not others, who should take up the whip and scourge myself. Next came the notion that

scourging would never do. I had to destroy myself. Having no other recourse, I resolved going forward to live as though I were dead.

How many years have passed since that time? My wife and I have continued on quietly together. By no measure have we been unhappy. We've found our contentment. However, this one part of me, the one part I can never change, has always darkened her world. When I think on this, I can't help but feel I've wronged her.

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This heart of mine, resolved to live as though dead, was sometimes stirred to life by outside influences. However, at the slightest thought of any initiative on my part, a dreadful force, appearing from who knows where, would seize my heart and pin it in place. This force, holding me tightly in its grasp, would berate me, telling me I was fit for nothing. Its rebuke was enough to instantly sap my will. In time, I would again try to rise, only to again be suppressed. I yelled in anger through clenched teeth, demanding to know by what right it held me in check. I was mocked in return by a chilling voice, reminding me that I already knew full well. My will again deserted me.

You should understand that even as we continued on in our quiet life, free from vicissitudes and complications, a bitter battle raged within me. For every time I upset my wife by letting it surface, I'd already upset myself a hundred times over. I realized, when I could no longer endure my personal prison, and when I knew I could never break out, that of the options before me, ending my life was the only practicable choice. Don't let this shock you. That mysterious force, the force that gripped my heart and blocked my every endeavor, held open to me the path to my death. I could remain still, but if I chose to move, even a little, there was only this single path.

Living till now, I've been tempted multiple times to follow this path of least resistance, this path which fate has laid out before me. On each such occasion, though, it was consideration for my wife that held me back. And I lack the temerity, of course, to take her with me. To one like myself, afraid to even open his heart, the mere thought of sacrificing my wife to my own fate, of cutting short her life by violent means, was enough to leave me shuddering. Just as my fate is my own, my wife too has a life that is hers. I couldn't but conclude that to feed the two of us, bundled together, to the same fire, would be tragically unjust.

At the same time, the thought of my wife left alone after my passing was equally unacceptable. She'd turned to me after her mother's death and told me I was the only one in the world now on whom she could depend. This memory was ingrained in the depths of my being. I thus remained ever indecisive. There were times when, seeing my wife's face, I was grateful not to have acted. I would pull back from the edge for a while. Then I would sense my wife regarding me, from time to time, with an unfulfilled look in her eyes.

Please understand that this is the way I lived. From our first meeting in Kamakura, to that day we strolled the outskirts of town, my sentiments were by and large the same. A dark shadow has stalked me all of my days. Only for the sake of my wife have I walked so long through this world. It was the same when you graduated and departed for home. When I promised I'd see you again in September, I was not insincere. I

fully intended to see you. If autumn passed and winter came, and even if winter passed, I was certain I'd see you again.

Then, at the height of summer, His Majesty, the Meiji Emperor, passed away. I sensed that my time, along with this emperor, had come and gone. A feeling struck me that men like myself, having passed our days in the reign of Meiji, had no business living beyond it. We'd become, as it were, obsolete. I said as much to my wife. She smiled, brushing away my words. Then suddenly, for whatever reason, she added in jest that I could always honor my lord through ritual suicide, accompanying him to the grave.

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I'd hardly remembered there was such a term as "ritual suicide." It's not something one hears with any frequency anymore, and I seemed to have left it to decay from disuse in the bottom of my mind. When my wife's jest brought it back to the surface, I turned to her and replied that if I were to commit ritual suicide, it would be in honor of the era of Meiji, in honor of the spirit of a bygone age. My reply, of course, was likewise in jest, but I also felt that I'd gleaned new meaning from an archaic and disused term.

Another month went by. On the night of the Imperial Funeral, sitting in my study as usual, I listened to the sounding of the cannon. It seemed to say, with resounding finality, that the days of Meiji were forever gone. It was telling us too, as I thought on it later, that General Nogi had left us forever. When the extra edition of the paper arrived and I read of events, I instinctively repeated the words "ritual suicide" to my wife.

I read in the paper what General Nogi had written before his death. Since losing his banner in the Satsuma Rebellion, he'd wished to die by way of atonement. When I read these words, I reflexively put my fingers to work, counting out the years he'd lived with this wish. The Satsuma Rebellion had occurred during the tenth year of the Meiji reign, so thirty five years had passed from then until now. General Nogi, it seems, had for thirty five years waited for the right time to die. I wondered, for such a man, which was the greater anguish, those thirty five years of life or the instant of death when the dagger pierced his flesh.

It was several days later that I finally resolved to end my own life. Just as General Nogi's motives for dying were not fully known to me, my own reasons for dying may well be unclear to you. If that is the case, I expect it can't be helped. The passing of time puts distance between us. Or perhaps it's better said that we each enter this world with our own unique dispositions. I've tried through this narrative, to the best of my ability, to reveal to you my own peculiar self.

I'll be leaving my wife behind. It comforts me to know that I'm leaving her financially secure. I have no desire to expose her to anything horrific. I intend in dying to spare her the sight of blood. Unbeknownst to her, I'll slip silently from this world. After I'm dead, I'd like her to imagine I simply passed on without warning. If she believes I lost my senses, then that too is acceptable.

Ten days have passed since I decided to end my life. Please appreciate that the greater part of that time has gone into laying out my past for you on these pages. My initial thought was to talk with you face to face. However, once I started writing, I was soon satisfied that this is the better way to candidly set forth my life. I didn't approach this task lightly. My past, the events that made me who I am, is part of the human story,

and a part that no one else can tell. I believe that these efforts, to leave for posterity an honest accounting of my life, will not be in vain, but will serve both you and others in shedding light on the human condition. I was told the other day how Watanabe Kazan pushed off the hour of his death by a week in order to finish his painting “Kantan.” Some might dismiss this as vain effort, but there’s no doubt the man had his reasons, some pull on his heart that allowed him to do no less. My own efforts are motivated by much more than just my promise to you. It’s largely my own longing that spurs me on.

That longing, however, has now been duly quenched. I’ve done what I needed to do. By the time this letter reaches you, I’ll be gone from this world. I’ll have already passed away. My wife left ten days ago for her aunt’s residence in Shibuya. Her aunt is ill and in need of assistance, and I encouraged her to go. I’ve written the greater part of this in her absence. On the occasions she’s returned home, I’ve concealed it from her.

I offer this past of mine, unadulterated, to all who might seek to know it. However, you must accept that my wife is the sole exception. She’s never to know these things. My sole request is for her memories of me to remain as they are, largely untarnished. Even after my death, for as long as she lives, you’re to seal these revelations in your heart, as secrets of mine entrusted to you alone.