

Sanshirō – Chapter 1

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

When he awoke, he saw that the woman had struck up a conversation with the old man seated next to her. This old man was a country fellow who had boarded several stations back. He'd come running on with a wild shout as the train was about to pull away. On board, he'd immediately loosened his kimono top to wipe off his sweat. Sanshirō remembered the moxibustion marks on his back. He'd watched attentively as the old man put his kimono back in place and then took a seat next to the woman.

Sanshirō and the woman had been riding together since Kyōto. Her dark complexion had caught his eye as soon as she boarded. Once he'd left Kyūshū and transferred to the Sanyō line, he'd noticed the women grow fairer in color as he approached the Kyōto-Ōsaka region. It drove home the feeling that he had really left home, and he felt a tinge of sadness. The woman's presence in the car was comforting, as though he'd found a compatriot of the opposite sex. Her skin tone was unmistakably southern.

She reminded him of Omitsu Miwata. Omitsu was a pesky girl, and he'd been quite happy to leave her behind. But he felt now, after leaving, that maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

In terms of appearance, this woman on the train was far superior, from the tightness of her mouth to the keenness in her eyes. And her forehead was not unduly wide like Omitsu's. All in all she had a pleasant air about her. Every five minutes or so he'd raise his eyes and glance in her direction. Occasionally their glances would meet. When the old man had sat down next to her, he'd taken the opportunity to study her appearance. She'd smiled as she invited the old man to share her bench. Shortly thereafter, Sanshirō had grown drowsy and dozed off.

It seemed that while he'd been sleeping, the woman and the old man had struck up an acquaintance. He listened in silence to their conversation. The woman was telling the old man her story.

Compared to Hiroshima, Kyōto had better children's toys at better prices. After attending to some business in Kyōto, she'd bought toys by the Tako Yakushi temple. She was returning to her home town after a long absence, and was looking forward to seeing her children, who were staying there. On the other hand, she was returning to live with her parents under some duress, as remittances from her husband had stopped arriving. He had worked for a long time as a mechanic in the Kure Naval Arsenal. During the war he'd gone to work in Ryojun, and he'd returned home after the war's conclusion. A short while later, he'd decided he could earn more abroad and had headed back to Dairen. Things went well at first, with regular letters and monthly remittances. Then, about six months ago, all communication ceased. He wasn't the type to be unfaithful, so she hoped for the best, but she couldn't subsist indefinitely without an income. She was returning to her parents' home to await further news of his status.

The old man hadn't heard of the Tako Yakushi temple, and he seemed to have little interest in children's toys. He merely nodded politely through the first part of her story. However, when she mentioned Ryojun he suddenly took notice and told her sympathetically that he was very sorry for her situation. His own child had been drafted as a soldier and had died fighting abroad. He couldn't understand the meaning of the war.

It would be one thing if victory had made life easier, but he'd lost a precious child, and life had only become harder. The whole thing was a fool's errand. When times were good, men didn't need to leave their families to earn a living. It was all on account of the war. At any rate, she must keep her faith. Her husband was surely alive and well. If she just persevered a little longer, he would certainly return. The old man thus sought to reassure her. The train stopped, and he told her to take care. He disembarked with vigor and went on his way.

Four others followed the old man off the train, and only one boarded in their place. The compartment, which hadn't been very full to begin with, suddenly seemed deserted. A station attendant could be heard walking the roof to drop in lighted lamps from above. As if remembering to do something, Sanshirō started in on the bentō box he'd bought at the last station.

Several minutes after the train had started again on its way, the woman quietly rose and passed by Sanshirō on her way out of the car. He caught sight of her kimono sash for the first time. Chewing on the head of a stewed ayu, he watched her from behind as she walked away. Thinking she probably went off to the restroom, he continued his meal.

The woman came back after a while, and this time Sanshirō watched her from the front. He was almost through eating. Looking down, he thrust his chopsticks in with vigor and stuffed his cheeks with two or three mouthfuls. The woman hadn't returned to her seat. Sensing a presence, he raised his eyes and saw she had stopped directly in front of him. As soon as he looked up at her she moved, but rather than passing by and returning to her own seat, she dropped onto the seat in front of his. She turned sideways, put her face to the open window, and gazed silently out. Sanshirō could see her side locks dancing in the wind. Finishing his bentō, he hurled the empty box out the open window behind him. Only one window separated his own from the woman's. When he saw the white lid fluttering back with the wind, he realized he'd been terribly careless. He turned quickly to look at the woman's face, which unfortunately was still at the window. She withdrew from the window silently and began to gently wipe her forehead with a printed cotton handkerchief. Sanshirō decided he had best apologize.

"I'm terribly sorry," he told her.

"Don't worry," she replied, and continued with her handkerchief. Sanshirō was at a loss and kept silent. The woman remained silent too. Then she returned to looking out the window. The weary faces of three or four other passengers were visible under the dim lamps. No one spoke. Only the roar of the engine sounded as the train continued on. Sanshirō closed his eyes.

After a while he heard the woman's voice ask, "Are we close to Nagoya?" Looking up, he was surprised to see that she had turned around and was leaning over with her face close to his own.

"I expect so," he replied. It was his first time traveling to Tōkyō, so in truth he had no idea.

"Do you think we'll arrive late?"

"Probably."

“You’re getting off in Nagoya too?”

“Yes.”

Their train was only going as far as Nagoya. There was nothing at all remarkable about their conversation. Except that the woman then sat down diagonally opposite to Sanshirō. They continued on for a while with only the sounds of the train.

When they were stopped at the next station, the woman addressed Sanshirō again. She didn’t want to inconvenience him, but she wondered if he would escort her to an inn when they arrived in Nagoya. She asked in earnest, adding that she was uneasy about going alone. Sanshirō felt her request was reasonable, but he found himself reluctant to accept. She was a complete stranger, so he hesitated considerably. However, he didn’t have the courage to refuse her decisively, so he indulged her with noncommittal answers. Presently, the train arrived in Nagoya.

His large baggage had been checked through to Shinbashi, so he didn’t need to tend to it here. He picked up his canvas hand bag and his umbrella and exited through the ticket gate. On his head was the summer hat from his high school, but to signify his graduation he’d torn off the school insignia. In the daylight, the color where the patch had been looked newer. The woman followed behind him. He was a little embarrassed now about the hat, but there was nothing he could do. To her, it must look like any other worn out old hat.

The train had arrived after ten, about forty minutes past its scheduled time of nine thirty. However, since it was the hot weather season, the streets were still bustling like early evening. They saw several inns directly in front of them, but to Sanshirō these looked rather expensive. He passed by the row of three-story buildings with electric lighting and strolled on. He was on unfamiliar turf and had no idea what he’d find, but he moved on toward darker quarters. The woman followed silently behind. On a relatively deserted side street, the second building from the corner had a sign advertising “Onyado Inn.” The modest sign seemed befitting to both Sanshirō and the woman. He turned to consult with her, and she said it looked fine, so it was settled and he walked in. He’d intended to explain on entering that they were not a couple, but they were barraged with a rapid string of greetings. “Welcome! Come in. Show them to a room! Ume (plum) number four.” Overwhelmed, the two of them said nothing as they were whisked off to their room.

They sat staring blankly at each other until the maid arrived with tea. When she brought the tea in and announced that the bath was ready, he couldn’t muster the courage to tell her that the woman wasn’t his wife. He excused himself, picked up his wash towel, and headed for the bathing room. It was at the end of the hallway, next to the toilet. The room was dimly lit and filthy. He took off his kimono, jumped into the tub, and thought things over. As he soaked himself and pondered the situation, he heard footsteps in the hallway. Someone was using the toilet. After the toilet, the sound of washing hands. Then the bathing room door was drawn open halfway with a creak. “Would you like me to scrub your back?” the woman asked from the doorway. Sanshirō called back in a loud voice, “No! No, I’m fine.” However, instead of withdrawing, the woman entered the room and began to loosen her sash. She intended to share his bath. She seemed not the least bit inhibited. Sanshirō immediately sprang from the tub. He dried himself hastily and

returned to the room, where he planted himself on a cushion and sought to regain his composure. The maid came in with the register.

Sanshirō picked up the register and wrote “Fukuoka Prefecture, Miyako District, Masaki Village, Sanshirō Ogawa, student, 23.” This was his correct information, but he had no idea what to write for the woman. He wished he’d waited for her at the bathing room. Now he was stuck here with the maid waiting on his entry. Seeing no alternative, he wrote arbitrarily “same prefecture, same district, same village, Hana Ogawa, 23,” and returned the register to the maid. Then he picked up the fan to cool himself.

After a while the woman returned to the room. “Sorry for the intrusion.” Sanshirō told her not to worry about it.

He took out a notebook from his bag and started his journal entry. He couldn’t write, though he felt he had lots to write about. The woman’s presence broke his concentration. Then the woman said, “I’ll be back in a bit,” and left the room. Now he really couldn’t write. He was wondering where she had gone.

The maid arrived to prepare their bedding. She had brought only a single wide futon, so he told her they needed separate beds. She protested that the room was too small, and so was the mosquito netting. His appeals went nowhere, as she seemed unwilling to trouble herself on his behalf. Finally, she said that the desk clerk had stepped out for a bit, but she would talk to him when he returned. She stubbornly proceeded to spread the single futon under the mosquito netting and left.

The woman returned and apologized for her absence. Sanshirō heard a clanging sound as she organized her things in the shadow of the mosquito netting. No doubt it was one of the toys she had bought for her children. Finally, she wrapped her things up again into her bundle. From the far side of the netting, he heard her say goodnight. Sanshirō replied briefly and remained seated on the doorsill, still fanning himself. He thought to stay there all night, but mosquitos were starting to buzz round his head. Enduring a night in the open was out of the question. He stood up, took out a printed cotton shirt and pair of underpants from his bag, and slipped them on under his robe. Then he fastened a navy blue sash over the outside. Next he took two long towels with him into the netting. The woman was still fanning herself in the opposite corner.

“Excuse me, but I’m very particular. I can’t sleep on unfamiliar bedding. I’m going to rig up a flea barrier. Please don’t take offense.”

Thus saying, Sanshirō started at the loose edge and began rolling their sheet toward the woman. When he finished, there was a long, white partition down the center of the futon. On the other half, the woman rolled over to rest on her side. Sanshirō spread out the two towels, placed them end-to-end on his own half, and lined himself up on top. Throughout the night, his hands and feet remained securely within the confines of his towel span. The woman said not a word. She slept facing the opposite wall and never stirred.

Dawn finally broke. They washed their faces and sat down to their breakfast trays. The woman asked with a grin, “Did you survive the fleas last night?” Sanshirō answered, “Yes. Thank you for asking,” in all earnestness as he kept his head down and poked at a cup of sweet beans.

They settled their bill and left the inn. When they arrived at the station, the woman disclosed to Sanshirō for the first time that she would be taking the Kansai Line toward Yokkaichi. Sanshirō's train arrived shortly. The woman had some time yet, so she accompanied him as far as his ticket gate. "Sorry for imposing so ... safe travels and good luck." She bowed her head to him graciously. Sanshirō held his bag and umbrella in one hand, removed his cap with the other, and said simply, "Goodbye." The woman studied his face for a moment, then commented in a casual tone, "Not exactly a ladies' man, are you?" She smiled at him mischievously.

Sanshirō felt as though he'd been hurled out onto the platform. When he entered the train car, both his ears were still burning. He hunkered in place for a time and made himself inconspicuous. Finally, the conductor's shrill whistle echoed down the length of the train, and they began to move. Sanshirō carefully looked out the window. The woman was long gone, and only the large clocks caught his eye. He sank quietly back into his seat. There were a good number of fellow travelers in the car, but none took any notice of him. However, a man diagonally across from him had glanced his way as he sat back down.

The man's glance somehow made Sanshirō self-conscious. He decided to read to distract himself. The towels from the previous night were stuffed into the top part of his bag, so he pushed them aside and fished out the first book from the bottom that his hand caught hold of. It was a collection of essays by Bacon that were entirely over his head. The volume was in paperback and bound so poorly that one felt bad for the author. It wasn't the kind of material one reads on a train, but he'd forgotten to pack it in his large trunk, so he'd thrown it into his carrying bag with a couple of other books. Now, by mis-luck of the draw, here it was in front of him. He opened it to page 23, but he was in no mood to study anything, much less Bacon. He gave page 23 a respectful perusal, but rather than grapple with Bacon's words, his mind was intent on rehashing the events of the previous evening.

What kind of woman was that? Were there more out there like her? Were all women so composed and confident by nature? Or was it ignorance, or daring, or simply innocence? He hadn't pushed the boundaries, so he couldn't know. He should have been decisive and taken things a little further, but he'd been terrified. And he was floored then when she stated in parting that he was no ladies' man. He felt as though she'd laid bare all the shortcomings of his twenty three years. Even his own parents had never hit the mark so squarely.

Sanshirō's thinking to this point had thoroughly dampened his spirits. He felt as though a stranger had approached him from out of the blue and drubbed him into submission. He was also feeling bad for Bacon page 23 and the disservice he was rendering it.

He shouldn't have let himself be flustered so. This wasn't about scholarship or gaining admission to the university, it was about character. He should have carried himself better. However, as an educated man, what else can one do when the other party comes at one like that? If there's no better prospect, then best to avoid women altogether. But that seemed cowardly. And it would restrict his activities, as though he were saddled with some kind of handicap. Then again ...

As if remembering something, Sanshirō suddenly shifted his thoughts to a separate world. -- He was on his way to Tōkyō. He would enter the university. He would study under renowned scholars. His fellow students

would be men of refinement and character. He would read in the library. He would publish to great acclaim. His mother would be happy for him. Indulging himself with thoughts of a brilliant future restored his spirits considerably, and he no longer felt compelled to hide his face in page 23. He slightly lifted his head. As he did so, the man seated diagonally across from him glanced his way again. This time Sanshirō returned the glance.

The man had a thick mustache. He was oval-faced and slender, looking somehow like a Shinto priest, except that the bridge of his nose was straight, like that of a Westerner. To Sanshirō, who was immersed in academia, a man like this fit his image of an educator. The man wore a white kimono with a splashed pattern, layered over a formal white undergarment. On his feet were navy blue sandal socks. Judging by his dress, Sanshirō took him for a middle school teacher. In light of his own eminent future, this man was rather trifling. He must be at least forty, already well past his prime.

The man smoked incessantly. He seemed quite at ease, folding his arms in front of him and expelling long trails of smoke through his nostrils. On the other hand, he rose numerous times for the toilet or for some other purpose. Sometimes he would stretch his back on rising. He seemed restless. The traveler next to him had finished a newspaper and set it on the seat, but he made no move to borrow it. Taking some interest in the man, Sanshirō laid down his collection of Bacon's essays. He'd thought of digging out a different book to read in earnest but decided it wasn't worth the effort. He was more interested in the newspaper of the man in front of him. Unfortunately, this man was now dozing soundly. Sanshirō reached out for the paper and asked the man with the mustache, "Do you mind?"

"No one's reading it. Help yourself." The man replied with a look of indifference. Sanshirō took the paper, but he felt a little unsure of himself.

On closer inspection, there was nothing much worth reading in the newspaper. After several minutes he'd flipped through its pages and was done. Folding it carefully and returning it to its original spot, he addressed the man with a subtle nod. The man nodded in return and asked him, "Are you a high school student?"

Sanshirō was glad that someone had noticed the missing insignia on his worn hat.

"Yes," he answered.

"From Tōkyō?" the man inquired further.

"No, Kumamoto. But ..." He started to explain, then fell silent. He wanted to tell how he was headed for the university, but he decided there was no need to, so he refrained. The man replied briefly to acknowledge Sanshirō's response and puffed at his cigarette. He didn't ask why a student from Kumamoto would be heading toward Tōkyō at this time of the year. He seemed to take no interest in students from Kumamoto.

At this point the man dozing in front of Sanshirō said, "Yes, I see." Even so, he was clearly still asleep. He was certainly not awake and talking to himself. The man with the mustache looked at Sanshirō and grinned.

Sanshirō took the opportunity to ask the man where he was going.

“Tōkyō,” the man said slowly and stopped there. Maybe he wasn’t a middle school teacher after all. However, since he was traveling in third class he was obviously not a man of any great importance. Sanshirō refrained from further dialog. The man with the mustache folded his arms and occasionally tapped on the floor with the front support of his wooden clog. He looked bored, but at the same time he seemed not to desire conversation.

When they stopped in Toyohashi, the man who’d been dozing abruptly woke and got off the train, still rubbing his eyes. Sanshirō was impressed that the man could wake himself like that at just the right moment. It occurred to him that maybe the man, still drunk with fatigue, had confused his stations. He looked out the window and confirmed that that wasn’t the case. The man passed through the ticket gate without incident and went on his way in an ordinary manner. Reassured, Sanshirō re-seated himself, this time on the opposite bench, next to the man with the mustache.

The man with the mustache in turn went to the window. He leaned out and bought some peaches. He placed the peaches between the two of them and invited Sanshirō to help himself.

Sanshirō thanked him and ate one. The man with the mustache appeared fond of peaches, and proceeded to eat one after another. “Have some more.” Sanshirō ate one more. Eating peaches together broke the ice, and they began conversing amiably on various subjects.

According to the man with the mustache, the peach was the ascetic among fruit. It had an indescribable flavor that set it apart from the rest. Then there was that ungainly pit, curiously perforated with holes across its surface. Sanshirō had never thought of peaches in this way, and it struck him that the man was expounding on details of little import.

The man continued talking. “The poet Masaoka Shiki loved fruit. And he was a man of insatiable appetite. He once ate sixteen large sweetened persimmons, and it didn’t faze him in the least.” He himself, he added, was of course no equal to Shiki. Sanshirō smiled at this story. He felt himself less interested in fruit and more interested in Shiki. He hoped the man would say more about him, but instead his subject shifted further.

“One naturally reaches out for what one desires. There’s no stopping it. Pigs don’t have hands like people, so they reach out with their snouts. They say that if you take a pig, tie it firmly in place, and set a delicacy before it, its snout will gradually extend. It will keep extending until it reaches the object of its desire. There’s nothing more frightful than burning desire.” The man related this with a grin. However, from his manner of speaking, it was unclear whether he was serious or tongue-in-cheek.

“Well, lucky for us that we aren’t pigs. If our noses grew toward everything we desired, then no doubt they’d be so long by now that we couldn’t board this train.”

Sanshirō laughed out loud, but the other man was unexpectedly subdued.

“There’s danger out there. Leonardo da Vinci once injected arsenic into the trunk of a peach tree to see if the poison would spread to the fruit. Someone ate one of the peaches and died. You have to stay vigilant.

Dangers lurk.” As he was talking, the man gathered up his mess of pits and peels, wrapped them up in a piece of newspaper, and tossed them out the window.

This time it was Sanshirō who felt subdued. The mention of Leonardo da Vinci had somehow made him anxious. He remembered the woman from the previous evening and the discomfort she’d caused him. He drifted into a humble silence. The man seemed to take no notice whatsoever of his change in mood. “Where in Tōkyō are you headed?”

“It’s actually my first time, and I don’t know anything about the place, so for now I’m planning to room in the dorm with others from Kyūshū.”

“Then you’re not going back to Kumamoto?”

“No. I’ve graduated.”

“Ah. I see.” That was all he said. No “congratulations” or “well done” followed. Only, “Then you’ll be starting your graduate studies.” He spoke as though it were an everyday occurrence.

Sanshirō was somewhat dissatisfied, so he limited his response to a brief affirmation.

“Which college?” The man pressed further.

“First Division.”

“Law?”

“No. Liberal Arts.”

“Ah. I see,” the man said again. Sanshirō was puzzled by this response. He was either talking to a man of great achievement or to someone dismissive of others’ accomplishments. Or else the man was utterly apathetic toward higher education. Having no idea which was the case, he was unsure how best to engage him.

As if by prior agreement, they both bought lunch boxes at Hamamatsu. When they finished eating, the train was still in the station. Outside the window, a number of Westerners passed by. One pair, who appeared to be husband and wife, were holding hands despite the hot weather. The woman was beautiful, dressed in white from head to toe. Sanshirō had seen only five or six Westerners in his entire life. Two were instructors at his high school in Kumamoto, one of which suffered from rickets. He knew only one female, a missionary, with a pointed face akin to a barracuda’s. In contrast, these elegant Westerners struck him as not only unusual, but somehow vastly superior. He gazed intently, drinking in the sight. It was no wonder they carried themselves so proudly. He imagined how diffident he would feel if traveling to the Occident and interacting in such society. He strained to catch the couple’s conversation as they passed in front of his window, but he couldn’t make out what they said. Their intonation seemed markedly different from that of his instructors in Kumamoto.

The man joined him at the window. “I wonder if we’ll be moving soon.” He glanced at the couple who had passed. “Lovely,” he murmured faintly, then yawned lightly. Sanshirō realized how provincial he must appear. He quickly drew his head in and sat back down. The man, in turn, retook his seat.

“Aren’t Westerners a splendid sight?” he remarked. Sanshirō had no good answer to give, so he merely smiled and nodded in agreement.

“We’re a sorry lot,” the man began, “with these faces of ours and our small stature. Our defeat of the Russians, marking our debut on the world stage, does nothing for us. Our houses and our yards are befitting of, and no better than, our faces. -- If this is your first trip to Tōkyō, then I take it you’ve never seen Mt Fuji. Take a look as we pass. It’s Japan’s premier attraction. There’s nothing else we can boast of. And Fuji is nature’s work. It’s stood there forever. We didn’t create it.” The man was grinning as he concluded.

Sanshirō had never expected to hear such talk after Japan’s victory over Russia. This man struck him as more foreign than Japanese.

Sanshirō couldn’t let the man go unchallenged. “Japan is marching toward eminence.”

“Japan is headed for ruin,” the man stated calmly. -- Such a statement would be met with blows in Kumamoto. Or worse yet, with charges of treason. Sanshirō had grown up in a world with no tolerance for such thinking. It occurred to him that this man, taking advantage of his youth, might well be playing him for a fool. The man displayed his signature grin, but his words were calm and deliberate. Sanshirō didn’t know what to make of him, so he retreated into silence.

The man continued. “Tōkyō is larger than Kumamoto. Japan is larger than Tōkyō. But larger than all ...” The man paused and looked at Sanshirō to see that he was following. “Larger than all are the thoughts in your head. Don’t ever make them subservient. Blind devotion to Japan won’t serve her, it will only lead to her downfall.”

When he heard these words, Sanshirō felt how distant he was from Kumamoto. At the same time, it dawned on him how docile he’d been in his life there.

That evening Sanshirō arrived in Tōkyō. The man with the mustache went his way, having never offered his name. Sanshirō, assuming such men were commonplace in Tōkyō, hadn’t bothered to ask.