

Sanshirō – Chapter 3

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

The new school year started on September 11th. Sanshirō went to the university at the appointed time, arriving around 10:30 a.m. He found the lecture schedule posted on the bulletin board, but he didn't see a single fellow student. He made note of the lectures he should attend and proceeded to the office. The office staff were dutifully at work. He asked when lectures started, and they answered matter-of-factly September 11th. As to why all the lecture halls were quiet, that was because the professors weren't there. Sanshirō couldn't find fault with this answer, so he left the office. He walked around back and gazed up into the clear sky from beneath a large keyaki tree. The sky that day had exceptional depth. He made his way down to the edge of the pond, passing through striped bamboo grasses, and crouched down again in his spot by the oak tree. He imagined that maybe the young lady would stroll by again. He looked up toward the top of the rise a number of times, but there was no sign of anyone. He didn't really expect to see her, but still he remained crouching. Finally the noon cannon sounded, startling him, and he headed back to his dormitory.

The next morning Sanshirō arrived at the university promptly at eight. As he entered through the main gate, he came out onto a broad avenue lined prominently on both sides with ginkgo trees. Up ahead, where the trees ended, the avenue sloped gradually downward. The college of science sat at the bottom of the hill, and from his vantage point by the gate only its rooftops were visible. Beyond those rooftops, the Ueno woods glistened in the distance as they received the morning sun, which rose from directly across the way. Sanshirō felt exhilarated by the rich perspective of the scene before him.

At the near end of the ginkgo row, on the right side, was the college of law and literature. On the left side, set back a bit, were the natural history classrooms. Both buildings were in the same architectural style, with gables accenting the roof over tall, narrow windows. The gables were finished with a thin line of stone that separated their red brick facings from the black rooftop. The stone had a blue tinge to it, imparting a touch of elegance to the bright red of the brick below. This theme of tall windows and sharp gables repeated itself numerous times. After listening to Nonomiya's remarks the other day, Sanshirō had quickly grown to appreciate the structures around him. This morning, he began to feel that he was not just echoing Nonomiya's sentiment, but was forming opinions that were entirely his own. He thought it particularly curious how the natural sciences building was set back relative to the law and literature building, breaking the symmetry. He looked forward to sharing these observations with Nonomiya at their next meeting.

Sanshirō was also impressed with the library, which was visible behind the right corner of the law and literature building and extended for fifty meters or so toward the main gate. He wasn't certain, but it seemed to reflect the same architectural style. He especially liked the palm trees that were planted along its red wall. The engineering building, away to his left, called to mind a Western castle from feudal times. The building was a perfect square, and its windows were square as well. Only the four corners and entryway were rounded, like castle turrets. It was solid as any castle, planted like a short, squat sumō wrestler. The law and literature building looked less than stable in comparison.

Sanshirō surveyed everything within his sight, knowing there were many more buildings not in view. He was struck with a sense of grandeur. “This is what it means to be a center of learning. These structures are the bedrock of academic pursuit. Awe-inspiring.” -- He pictured himself as an eminent scholar.

However, when he entered the classroom, and when the bell rang, there was no professor. On the other hand, there were no students either. The next hour was exactly the same. Sanshirō left the lecture hall greatly irritated. Then, just for good measure, he circled the pond twice on his way back to the dormitory.

After another ten days, lectures finally started. Sanshirō sat spellbound as he waited, for the first time in a classroom full of students, for the professor to appear. He likened his own thoughts at that moment to those of a Shintō priest who’s donned his vestments in preparation for a profoundly sacred rite. No doubt he was smitten with a reverence for the magic and majesty of higher education. Fifteen minutes after the bell, when the professor still hadn’t shown, it only heightened in him the sense of esteem that builds with anticipation. By and by, a dapper old Western gentleman entered the room and commenced lecturing in fluent English. Sanshirō learned that the word “answer” was derived from the Anglo-Saxon compound “and-swaru.” He also learned the name of the village in which Sir Walter Scott had attended primary school. He recorded this new information carefully in his notebook.

Sanshirō’s next lecture was on literary theory. The professor entered the classroom and surveyed the blackboard. He saw the words “Geschehen” and “Nachbild” written on it. “Ha, German!” he called as he wiped the words clean with a grin. Sanshirō’s respect for the German language diminished a notch as he witnessed this action. The professor then enumerated some twenty definitions of literature that had been put forth by great scholars through the ages. Sanshirō recorded these too with diligence in his notebook.

In the afternoon, Sanshirō entered a large hall where about eighty students were seated for the lecture. The professor spoke to this large group in an oratorical tone. His opening assertion, that a single cannon shot had shattered illusions at Uruga, was engaging, and Sanshirō listened with interest. By the end of the talk, however, a myriad of German philosophers had been cited, and Sanshirō was fully lost. He noticed on the table surface before him where someone had meticulously carved the word “failure.” Whoever it was had clearly invested great time and effort in the endeavor, engraving with a master’s touch in the hard oak. It was a remarkable piece of work. Sanshirō was also impressed by the student next to him taking copious notes. Then he glanced over and saw that they weren’t notes. From his distant vantage, he was sketching a “Punch” type caricature of the professor. As Sanshirō glanced his way, the student held out his notebook to show him. It was well drawn, but he could make no sense of the line next to it: “Cuckoo in the sky beyond the clouds.”

After lectures, Sanshirō felt fatigued. He rested his chin in his hands and gazed down at the main gate garden from a second floor window. The garden was nothing more than a wide gravel path among large pine and sakura trees, but its simple design had a calming effect. According to Nonomiya, this area was not so well maintained in former times. Once, when a certain professor of his had ridden the grounds on horseback in his student days, the ornery horse had paid him no heed and purposely passed beneath the trees near the main gate, where his riding cap became caught on a branch. His sandals were strapped into the stirrups, so

he found himself in quite a bind. There was a barber shop called Kitadoko in front of the gate, and, as the professor told it, the barbers had all run out to laugh heartily at his predicament.

In those days, a group of supporters had raised funds to erect a stable on the university grounds and provision it with three horses and a riding instructor. However, the instructor was terribly fond of drink, and he ended up selling the prized white horse to support his vice. It was an old horse, purportedly from the times of Napoleon III, though Sanshirō doubted this fact. Nevertheless, he imagined things were more carefree in earlier times. As he was thinking these thoughts, the caricature artist from the previous class approached.

“University lectures really are dull,” he remarked. Sanshirō responded in a vague manner. He wasn’t sure if they were dull or not. However, he was now on speaking terms with this fellow student.

Sanshirō felt rather down on this day. Having no enthusiasm for his usual walk around the pond, he decided to return straight home. After dinner he reviewed his notes, but doing so left him largely unmoved. He jotted a quick note to his mother. -- School has started. Classes every day from here on. The campus is expansive, is nicely landscaped, and the buildings are magnificent. There’s a pond in the middle, with a pleasant walking path around its perimeter. I’m finally comfortable riding the electric trains. I wanted to send you something, but I haven’t been able to decide what to send. Please think about what you’d like and let me know. Prices for this year’s rice crop are rising, so it may be best to wait a while before selling. Don’t get too attached to Omitsu Miwata. There are so many people in Tōkyō. Lots of men and lots of women. -- His note was a somewhat haphazard collection of such statements and sentiments.

After finishing his letter, Sanshirō read six or seven pages in English but soon grew tired. It occurred to him that the book was worthless, and even reading the whole thing would get him nowhere. He prepared his bedding and turned in, but he couldn’t sleep. If he was experiencing insomnia then he should go see a doctor right away. As he considered his options, he dozed off.

The next day he arrived punctually at the university and attended lectures. Between lectures he heard talk of the latest graduates - where they had gone and how much they were making. Someone talked of two who were still without employment and competing for the same position in a state school. Sanshirō felt vaguely that the weight of the future was bearing down on him from afar, but his thoughts soon shifted elsewhere. There was interesting talk about the latest exploits of Shōnosuke. Sanshirō asked a fellow classmate from Kumamoto and learned that Shōnosuke was a female theater performer in the Gidayū style. The classmate told him where she performed and how to recognize the marquee, and he even invited Sanshirō to accompany him the following Saturday. Sanshirō was greatly impressed, but the classmate confessed that he’d only made his first trip to the theater the prior evening. Sanshirō was eager to go and see Shōnosuke for himself.

Sanshirō was about to return to his dormitory for lunch when the caricature artist from the previous day’s lecture caught him. At the other’s insistence, Sanshirō went along to a place on the main road in Hongō called Yodomiken and was treated to curry rice. Yodomiken was a produce shop of newer construction with a restaurant on its back side. The caricature artist pointed out the building’s façade and told him it was of the art nouveaux style. Sanshirō had not been aware that there was an art nouveaux style in architecture too.

On the way back he was shown Aokidō, a store and café popular among the students. They entered the campus through the Red Gate entrance and walked past the pond. The caricature artist told him about a former professor named Yakumo Koizumi, now deceased, who had disliked the faculty lounge and preferred to stroll around the pond between lectures. He spoke as though he'd heard the story directly from Professor Koizumi himself. Sanshirō asked why the professor had disliked the lounge.

“That one's quite obvious. First of all, think about the faculty's lectures. Not a single one of them ever says anything of interest.” Sanshirō was surprised to hear such scathing criticism so casually delivered. This fellow's name was Yojirō Sasaki. He had graduated from a specialty college and was starting this year on a course of elective studies. He was living in the Hirota house at Number 5 Higashimachi, and he invited Sanshirō to come visit. Asked if it was a dormitory, he explained that it was the home of his college professor.

For the next while, Sanshirō went to the university each day and faithfully attended lectures. From time to time he also went to lectures outside his core curriculum. Even so, he felt that something was missing. He tried topics completely removed from his major, but he would lose interest in these after two or three lectures, and he never lasted even a full month. As it was, he averaged about forty hours of lecture each week. This was a bit much, even for a hard-working student like Sanshirō. Yet he constantly felt himself under some sort of pressure. Something was still lacking, and it was sapping his motivation.

One day he confided in Yojirō. When Yojirō heard he was attending forty hours of lecture each week, his eyes grew wide with astonishment. “You're a fool,” he said. Then he lambasted Sanshirō with the following. “Do you compensate for the lousy food at your dormitory by eating ten meals a day? Think about it.”

Sanshirō immediately acquiesced and sought Yojirō's counsel. “What should I do?”

“You should ride the trains,” Yojirō told him.

Sanshirō thought for a moment there might be some deeper implication in these words, but nothing came to mind. He asked anew, “Actual trains?”

Yojirō laughed out loud. “Ride the trains. After fifteen or so rounds through Tōkyō, you'll find yourself reinvigorated.”

“How?”

“I'll tell you how. Your mind is alive, but it's suffocating in those lifeless lectures. Get out and breathe new air. There are plenty of other ways to refresh yourself, but trains are the best convenient first step.”

That same evening, Yojirō fetched Sanshirō, and they boarded the train for Shinbashi at the Yonchōme stop. From Shinbashi they doubled back and got off at Nihonbashi.

“How 'bout it?” asked Yojirō?

From the main road, they turned into a side street. They entered a restaurant called Hiranoya, where they ate dinner and drank saké. The waitresses all spoke in the Kyōto dialect, and the service they provided was

warm and courteous. Yojirō's face was flushed red when they stepped back outside. "How 'bout it?" he asked again.

For their next stop, Yojirō promised to take Sanshirō to an authentic storytellers' theater. Traversing narrow alleys, they entered a theater called Kiharadana, where they heard a storyteller named Kosan perform. They reemerged onto the street after ten o'clock and Yojirō asked, "How 'bout it?" again.

Sanshirō couldn't say he was reinvigorated, but he no longer felt entirely dissatisfied. At this point, Yojirō entered into a lengthy discourse on Kosan. "Kosan is a genius. One rarely meets an artist of his caliber. Unfortunately, people take him for granted, since they can go and hear him any time. We're really lucky we live in this present age. If we'd been born earlier we couldn't hear Kosan. Or if we were born later. -- En'yū is also talented, but his style differs from Kosan's. When En'yū plays the jester, it's entertaining because it's En'yū playing the jester. When Kosan plays the jester, it's fascinating because there's no sign of Kosan. If you delete En'yū from the characters he portrays, they collapse away to nothing. If you delete Kosan from his characters, they remain animated and teem with life all the more. That's greatness."

Yojirō concluded and asked, "How 'bout it?" again.

Sanshirō, to be honest, did not know how to appreciate Kosan's art. And he'd never before heard of En'yū, so he could neither agree nor disagree with Yojirō's observations. However, he was impressed with the almost literary manner in which Yojirō had set forth his critical comparison.

When they parted ways in front of the high school, Sanshirō said, "Thank you. I do feel better."

Yojirō told him, "Use the library to get yourself on track," and with that he turned off toward Katamachi. This remark started Sanshirō on frequenting the library.

Starting the next day, Sanshirō cut his forty hours of weekly lecture time by nearly half. He also ventured into the library. The building was vast and expansive from end to end, with a high ceiling and rows of windows down both walls. Only the entryway of the stack room was visible. Peeking in from out front, it appeared as though endless volumes were housed in its depths. As Sanshirō stood watching, a man emerged with several thick books and turned toward his left, entering the faculty reading room. Sanshirō envied him. He imagined entering the stacks, climbing to the second floor, climbing to the third floor, high above the buildings of Hongō, and isolating himself from the world to swim in the smell of paper -- He wanted to read. However, he didn't have any clear idea of what it was he should read. He would have to learn through experience. There seemed to be so much in there.

As a first-year student, Sanshirō was not allowed into the stack room. He had to use the card catalogue, so he bent over the boxes and began flipping cards one by one. No matter how many he flipped, there was always a next card with the name of another book. Finally, his shoulders began to ache. He lifted his gaze to give himself a break, and he surveyed the inside of the library. It was quiet, as one would expect, even though there were many users present. The heads at the far end looked like dark dots. He couldn't make out their facial features. Trees were visible through some of the high windows, backed by patches of sky. Sounds

of the city carried from afar. Standing there, Sanshirō considered how still and deep was the life of a scholar. He called it quits for the day and returned home.

The next day, Sanshirō dispensed with his idle dreaming and immediately borrowed a book. However, he wasn't happy with his choice and soon returned it. The next one he borrowed was too difficult, and again he returned it. In this same manner, he borrowed eight or nine books each day without fail. He did in fact read some of these books in part. He was surprised to discover that no matter what book he borrowed, there were clear signs of prior use. Pencil markings within the pages attested to the fact that at least one person had already perused them. Once, on a whim, he borrowed a novel by Aphra Behn. Expecting this time to see pristine pages, he instead found careful pencil markings. This unsettled him. A marching band passed outside the windows, and he decided to go out for a walk. He emerged onto the street and made his way to Aokidō.

Inside were two groups of students and a lone gentleman drinking tea in the far corner. Sanshirō saw the gentleman's face in profile and recognized him as the man on the train to Tōkyō who'd eaten all those peaches. The man had taken no notice of Sanshirō. He sipped his tea and smoked in an entirely unhurried manner. This day he wore a suit instead of a white summer kimono. However, it was not a well-tailored suit. Compared to Nonomiya, who researched light beam pressures in the basement, only the white shirt was of superior quality. As he observed further, Sanshirō became certain he'd found the peach eater. Since attending university lectures, the things this man had told him on the train had started to take on significance. Sanshirō wanted to approach him, but the man kept his gaze fixed straight ahead. He sipped his tea and smoked, and smoked and sipped his tea. There was no opening for engagement.

Sanshirō watched the man's face in profile for a while, then abruptly downed the remainder of his wine and quickly departed. He went back to the library.

That day, with the effects of the wine and a certain mental excitement, Sanshirō immersed himself in study like never before. He found it highly satisfying. After two hours absorbed in his books, he realized it was time to head home. As he was gathering his things, he casually flipped open the one book in his batch that he hadn't yet touched. On the inside cover, someone had filled the empty spaces with hastily penciled words.

“When Hegel lectured on philosophy at the University of Berlin, he was by no means there to peddle ideas. More than a man lecturing on truth, he was rather a man of truth lecturing. He lectured not from his tongue, but from his heart. When a man becomes one with the purity of truth, his words are not lectures for their own sake, but lectures that illuminate the way. Philosophy lectures of this caliber are truly worth hearing. Lesser speakers, who pay only lip service to truth, leave nothing but empty writings of dead ink on lifeless paper. Their work is of no significance. ... I swallow bitter tears while reading this book for the sake of examinations, or more honestly stated, to earn my daily bread. I declare with an aching head - let the examination system be hereby cursed forevermore.”

Needless to say, there was no signature. Sanshirō could not suppress a grin. However, he also felt himself edified. The writer's thoughts were as applicable to literature as they were to philosophy. Thus thinking, he flipped the page and saw more. “Hegel's ...” It seemed this fellow had been quite taken with Hegel.

“Hegel’s students who gathered in Berlin to hear him lecture had no ambitions of furthering their own careers through his teachings. Their assembly was nothing more than the consequence of men pure in heart, striving earnestly for enlightenment and desiring to overcome their own inner doubts, who had heard that a philosopher named Hegel professed an ultimate truth from his lectern. They were thus able, on hearing Hegel, to chart their own futures and change their own destinies. It would be the utmost of vanities to imagine yourselves, Japanese students who attend lectures with blank minds and graduate with blank minds, as peers of Hegel’s disciples. You are nothing but typewriters, avaricious typewriters. Your thoughts, words, and actions contribute nothing to the dynamic forces that move our society forward. You pass through this world with blank minds. You pass through this world with blank minds.”

The closing passage on “blank minds” was repeated twice. Sanshirō sat there silently, absorbed in thought. Just then, someone tapped his shoulder lightly from behind. It was, of all people, Yojirō making a rare appearance. Yojirō was the fellow who touted library time as the smarter alternative to useless lectures. However, contrary to his own advice, he seldom set foot in the library.

“Hey, Nonomiya Sōhachi was looking for you.” Sanshirō had never expected that Yojirō knew Nonomiya, so he asked back if it was Nonomiya from the college of science. Yojirō told him it was. Sanshirō immediately put down his book and went out to the newspaper hall by the entrance. He didn’t see Nonomiya, so he proceeded out into the vestibule. Next he descended the stone steps and craned his neck to survey the surrounding area. There was no sign of Nonomiya. Having exhausted his options, he gave up and went back inside.

When he returned to his seat, Yojirō pointed to the Hegel discourse and said in a low voice, “An impassioned piece of work. No doubt a graduate from long ago. They were wild in those days, but they were also creative thinkers. What he wrote is spot on.” Yojirō was grinning his approval.

“I didn’t find Nonomiya.”

“He was at the entrance just a while ago.”

“Did he seem to need me for something?”

“I expect he did.”

The two of them left the library together. Yojirō told Sanshirō that Nonomiya was a former pupil of Professor Hirota, in whose home Yojirō was currently lodging. Nonomiya, who still visited the professor often, was a prolific researcher, and within his field his name was known even among his Western contemporaries.

Sanshirō recalled Nonomiya’s story of his professor’s mishap with the horse by the main gate in earlier times. He began to wonder if that wasn’t this same Professor Hirota. When he told Yojirō the story, Yojirō laughed and said he could well imagine his professor caught up in such a bind.

The next day was Sunday, so there would be no chance to see Nonomiya at the university. However, Sanshirō was still concerned that Nonomiya had failed to find him the day before. He hadn't yet called on Nonomiya in his new home, so he decided to pay a visit and at the same time ask what Nonomiya had wanted him for.

He decided this in the morning, but after some leisurely time with the newspaper it was already noon. After lunch, as he prepared to depart, a friend from Kumamoto dropped by. He hadn't seen this friend in a long while, and they talked until past four. It was a bit late, but Sanshirō still set out as planned.

Nonomiya had moved to Ōkubo four or five days prior, and it was a long distance to his house. However, it was only a short ride by train. He had heard that the place was near the station, so it shouldn't be hard to find. Then again, Sanshirō had a poor track record since his initial outing to the Hiranoya restaurant with Yojirō. On one trip to a business college in Kanda, he'd boarded at Yonchōme in Hongō, missed his station, and ended up in Kudan. At Iidabashi he'd finally managed to transfer to the Sotobori Line, which he'd ridden from Ochanomizu to Kandabashi. Still disoriented after disembarking, he'd hurried off through Kamakuragashi in the wrong direction toward Sukiyabashi. Ever since, he'd felt a certain trepidation when it came to trains. His ride today, though, was a straight shot on the Kōbu Line, and this put him at ease as he boarded.

Coming out of Ōkubo Station, Sanshirō found the main road through Nakahyakunin that led to the Toyama Academy. However, instead of following it toward the Academy, he turned off after crossing the tracks and proceeded down a narrow lane barely a meter wide. At the top of a gradual rise was a loose stand of bamboo, with one dwelling before it and another beyond. The near one was Nonomiya's house. A small gate stood off at an odd angle, as if erected with no regard for the lane. The house too was curiously positioned, as though the gate and approach had been an afterthought.

A thick hedge skirted the kitchen, while the yard stood open to the world. A single bush clover plant, grown taller than a man's height, provided just a touch of privacy to the veranda off the main room. Nonomiya had placed a chair on the veranda, where he sat reading a Western journal.

He saw Sanshirō arrive and called out, "Over here," in the same manner as he'd first greeted Sanshirō in the basement of the science college. Sanshirō hesitated, unsure whether he should enter through the yard or go around to the front. Nonomiya called, "Over here," again, so Sanshirō dispensed with formality and entered directly through the yard.

The main room was eight mats in size and functioned as a library, with many of its books imported from abroad. Nonomiya left his chair and joined Sanshirō on the floor. Sanshirō remarked how quiet the place was, and how conveniently one could get from here to Ochanomizu. -- After passing some time in idle conversation, he finally said, "I heard you were looking for me yesterday. Did you need something?"

Nonomiya answered with a slightly apologetic look. "Oh that. It was really nothing." Sanshirō merely nodded in return.

"Did you come all this way just on that account?"

“Well, no. Not really.”

“Actually, your mother sent me a nice gift from the country for helping you to get oriented here. I just wanted to say a word of thanks to you as well.”

“Ah, I see. She sent you something?”

“Yes, it’s a red fish pickled in saké lees.”

“Must be himeichi.”

Sanshirō thought this was a poor gift. However, Nonomiya was eager to know more about it. Sanshirō gave detailed information, especially on how to prepare it. He explained that it should be broiled in the lees, but when the time came to serve it, the lees should be discarded. Otherwise they would rob the fish of its flavor.

As the two of them were discussing himeichi, it grew dark outside. Sanshirō thought he should be going and was preparing to take his leave when a telegram arrived. Nonomiya broke the seal and read it. Then he muttered, “Darn,” to himself.

Sanshirō couldn’t ignore Nonomiya’s reaction, but he was also reluctant to pry into the other’s business. He asked dryly, “Has something happened?”

“No, nothing serious.” Nonomiya held out the paper for him to see. It said “come at once.”

“You have to go somewhere?”

“My younger sister is ill. She’s in the hospital at the university, and she wants me to come at once.” So saying, there was not the least hint of urgency in his voice. Sanshirō was the more flustered of the two. Nonomiya had a younger sister, who was ill, who was in the university hospital. These new facts, jumbled with thoughts of the young lady he’d encountered by the pond, put his mind in a whirl.

“It sounds serious.”

“It’s not so serious. My mother’s there with her. -- If this were serious then she would have come right away to fetch me by train. -- This is just my sister pestering me. The foolish girl pulls this all the time. I haven’t gone to see her since my move, and because it’s Sunday she expected me today. That’s why.” As he spoke, Nonomiya tilted his head to the side and considered what to do.

“You should probably go. Just in case.”

“I suppose. Her condition can’t have changed much in just four or five days, but I guess I should go see her.”

“It’s probably best that you do.”

Nonomiya decided to go. Once decided, he asked Sanshirō to do him a favor. In the off chance that it really was serious, he wouldn't be back home that night, and his maidservant would be by herself. This maidservant was terribly faint of heart, and the neighborhood was not as safe as it seemed. Sanshirō's visit was fortuitous, and if it didn't interfere with his lessons, could he stay over for the night? Of course, if there were nothing to the telegram then Nonomiya would return soon. If he'd known earlier he could have asked Sasaki, but it was too late to do so now. It was only for one night, and he was sorry to impose such inconvenience on a new acquaintance, but he couldn't know at present if he'd be spending the night at the hospital or not. It was a selfish request, and he had no right to press the matter, but if possible ... Of course Nonomiya didn't state his request quite so elaborately, but elaboration was not required with a fellow like Sanshirō, who readily agreed to help.

The maidservant asked about dinner, and Nonomiya told her he wouldn't be eating. He apologized for leaving Sanshirō to eat alone, and then departed on an empty stomach.

After Nonomiya was out of sight, he called back in a loud voice from the darkness beyond the bush clover, "Help yourself to any of the books in the study. There's nothing much of interest, but give them a look. There are even a few novels." And with that he was gone.

Sanshirō, who had seen him off from the veranda, called out his thanks. The small stand of bamboo was still just visible, and it grew so sparsely that the individual stalks could still be discerned.

A short while later, Sanshirō sat down to a dining tray in the middle of the eight-mat library. Included on the tray, per Nonomiya's orders, was a serving of himeichi. The aroma brought back fond memories of home, but the rest of the meal was disappointing. The facial features of the maidservant, who tended to him as he ate, suggested a timid disposition, just as Nonomiya had described.

After dinner the maidservant withdrew to the kitchen. Sanshirō was left alone. As he settled in by himself, he suddenly grew anxious over Nonomiya's sister. He had a sense that her illness had taken a turn for the worse. He also felt that Nonomiya had been too casual in heading off to see her. And he had a nagging suspicion that this sister might be the young lady he'd encountered the other day. He recalled in his mind the young lady's eyes and facial features, and what she'd been wearing. Then he placed her in a hospital bed, and he stood Nonomiya at her bedside. They exchanged words for a while, but her older brother failed to comfort her. Then Sanshirō saw himself taking Nonomiya's place, caring for the girl with great compassion. At this point a train roared by under the stand of bamboo. Whether on account of the joists or on account of the foundation, the room seemed to shake a little.

Sanshirō ceased his "care giving" and surveyed the room. It was a fine old house, as evidenced by the patinated shine of the pillars. On the other hand, the papered shōji fit poorly and the ceiling was pitch black. Only the lamp had a modern air as it cast its glow. The lamp and Nonomiya, a new-age scholar who ventured to rent an old house and look out on ancient bamboo, were two of a kind. If he were here by his own inclination then that was one thing, but if he'd exiled himself to these outskirts from necessity then his situation was most unfortunate. According to rumor, even a scholar of Nonomiya's caliber received only fifty five yen per month from the university. That explained why he also taught at a private academy. With

all that, his younger sister's hospitalization presented an added burden. Economic circumstances might well be the reason for his move out to Ōkubo.

It was early in the evening, but the neighborhood was already settled for the night. Insects chirped from the edges of the yard. Sanshirō sat alone in the quiet stillness of early autumn. Then he heard a voice in the distance.

“Okay ... just a little longer.”

It seemed to come from behind the house, but it was a ways off, so he couldn't be sure. And the voice fell quiet before he could pinpoint it further. However, the words sounded truly solitary in nature, as if the speaker were utterly alone in the world and expected no response. Sanshirō began to feel uneasy. At this point, the roar of another train became audible in the distance. The roar grew gradually louder until the train passed the stand of bamboo. Then the roar turned to a shriek, much higher in pitch than the sound of the previous train, before moving away. Sanshirō's mind, momentarily stupefied by the shaking of the room, sprang back to life as he connected the sounds of the train with the words from the distance. He sat bolt upright, terrified by the implications.

Sanshirō found himself unable to sit still. A wave of apprehension pulsed down his spine till it tingled the soles of his feet. He rose and went to the toilet. Through the window he saw a starlit sky. Beneath it, and below the embankment, the train tracks were deathly quiet. Nevertheless, he pressed his face to the bamboo lattice and stared into the darkness.

As he stood looking out, men with lanterns came walking the tracks from the station. Judging from their voices, there were three or four of them. The light of their lanterns disappeared as they crossed the road and moved behind the embankment. As they passed below the bamboo, only their voices could be heard. However, the voices sounded close enough to touch.

“Up a little further.”

The sounds of their footsteps continued down the tracks. Sanshirō circled back to the garden side and hastily slipped on his sandals. Rounding the stand of bamboo, he scrambled down the embankment and followed after the lanterns.

Before he'd gone ten meters, another man made his way down the embankment and joined him. --

“Do you think someone was hit?”

Sanshirō wanted to answer, but he found himself unable to speak. In the meantime, the dark figure proceeded up the tracks. Following after, Sanshirō realized he must be the owner of the other house that was up the lane from Nonomiya's. About fifty meters further on, the lanterns had stopped. The men were stopped too. They stood in silence with their lights held high. Without a word, Sanshirō looked on. In the light of the lanterns was half of a body. The train had torn it from the right shoulder, under the breasts, to just above the waist, leaving behind an obliquely severed torso. The face was undamaged. It was a young woman.

Sanshirō never forgot the sensations of that moment. He wanted to move away at once, and he turned his heels to do so, but his knees were so weak he could barely move. When he finally climbed the embankment and was back in the living room, his pulse was still throbbing. He called to the maidservant for some water, and was relieved to see she knew nothing of the matter. After a while, some commotion was heard from the house down the lane. Sanshirō knew that its owner must have returned. Next, the area below the embankment buzzed with activity, after which all fell silent again. It was an almost unbearable silence.

The face of the dead woman appeared vividly before Sanshirō's eyes. That face, and the words she'd uttered so despondently, hinted at some bitter fate she'd left behind. It occurred to Sanshirō that a life, the anchor of physical existence, could unravel in an instant, shed its illusion of resilience, and float away into the void. A sense of terror grabbed hold of his thoughts. It had all happened in the roar of a single instant. Until that instant, she had certainly been alive.

Sanshirō suddenly recalled the words of the man on the train who had shared his peaches. "There's danger out there. You have to stay vigilant. Dangers lurk." While speaking of dangers, the man himself had seemed enviably confident. Sanshirō concluded that only such a man, comfortable with his own position in the world, could speak so easily of its dangers. It must be fascinating to observe society through an objective eye while living in its midst. From the way he'd eaten those peaches, and from the way he'd smoked and sipped his tea in Aokidō with his gaze fixed straight ahead, he was surely such an observer. -- He was a critic. -- Sanshirō applied this word with a twist in its nuance and was quite satisfied with his choice. He even imagined himself in the future living life as a critic. Such sentiments arise when one's seen the face of death.

Sanshirō looked across the room at the table in the corner, the chair in front of the table, the bookcase beside the chair, and the Western books carefully arranged within the bookcase. It occurred to him that the master of this quiet study was just like his critic, secure and content in the world. -- Measuring the pressure of light beams would never lead to the death of a young woman on the tracks. His younger sister was unwell, but her illness was not of his doing. She'd contracted her illness on her own. As Sanshirō's mind raced from one thought to the next, the clock struck eleven. There would be no more trains coming. He began to worry again that the illness had taken a bad turn. Maybe that was what was keeping Nonomiya. Then a telegram arrived. "Sister is OK. Back tomorrow morning."

Reassured, Sanshirō turned in. However, his dreams that night were terribly disturbed. -- The woman on the tracks was connected to Nonomiya. Nonomiya knew what had happened and purposely stayed away. He'd only sent the telegram for Sanshirō's sake; it wasn't true that his sister was okay. This very night, at the moment of impact on the tracks, Nonomiya's sister had died too. And his sister was that same young lady that Sanshirō had encountered at the edge of the pond.

The next day Sanshirō was up especially early. He smoked a cigarette as he looked down on the unfamiliar bedding in which he'd slept. The events of the prior evening were like a dream. He went to the veranda and looked past the low-hanging eaves at the sky. The weather was fair, and the color of the sky told him all was now well in the world. After breakfast and tea, he brought a chair out onto the veranda to read the paper, and Nonomiya returned as promised.

“They say someone died on the tracks last night,” he remarked. He’d heard the news at the station, or perhaps elsewhere on his way. Sanshirō told him everything of what he’d seen.

“Remarkable. One rarely ever sees such a thing. I wish I’d been here. They’ve probably cleared the remains. I don’t suppose there’s anything left to see.”

“Probably not.” Sanshirō gave a brief reply, but he was taken aback by Nonomiya’s carefree manner. He finally attributed this indifference to hearing the news in the light of day. He failed to recognize the disposition of a man who measures light beam pressure, a disposition that would manifest itself in this situation just as in any other. Sanshirō lacked the experience to discern such things.

Sanshirō changed the subject by asking after Nonomiya’s sister. He replied that, as he’d expected, there was no change in her condition. It had been five or six days since his last visit, and she’d grown restless. She’d simply summoned him to alleviate her own boredom. He related how he’d received a sound scolding for not taking the time to visit her on a Sunday. Then he added that his sister was an idiot. He seemed to seriously regard her as such. It was foolish of her to waste his precious time when he was so busy. Sanshirō struggled to sympathize with Nonomiya’s complaints. If his sister valued his company enough to summon him by telegram, then he shouldn’t begrudge her a Sunday evening or two. Hours spent visiting with family were time well invested. On the other hand, days spent observing light beams in a cellar, far removed from real life, were just days of self-imposed isolation. Sanshirō felt that if he were Nonomiya he’d welcome the interruption in his studies for the sake of a younger sister. Occupied with these thoughts, he forgot for the moment the death on the tracks.

Nonomiya said he was worn out from lack of sleep. Fortunately, he was teaching at a school in Waseda in the afternoon and didn’t need to go to the university that day, so he could get some rest during the morning.

“Were you up late last night?” Sanshirō asked.

“Actually, professor Hirota, my former high school teacher, stopped by to see how my sister was doing. We all got to talking, and by the time we finished the trains had stopped running. I should have spent the night at professor Hirota’s house, but my sister insisted I stay with her in the hospital, so I ended up sleeping in cramped quarters. It was so uncomfortable. I hardly slept a wink. My sister’s an imbecile.”

Sanshirō winced as Nonomiya maligned his sister again. He thought of arguing in her defense, but doing so would be awkward, so he held off.

Instead, he asked about Hirota. Sanshirō had heard this name several times now, and in his mind he’d assigned it to the man with the peaches and the man in Aokidō. He’d also assigned it to the student on the ill-tempered horse, in trouble near the main gate, whom the Kitadoko barbers had made sport of. He learned now that Professor Hirota had indeed been the student on the horse. Unlikely though it seemed, he was convinced that the man with the peaches had to be this same professor.

As Sanshirō took his leave, Nonomiya asked if he could deliver a kimono to the hospital on his way back. It had to be there by noon. Sanshirō was delighted to accept. He was wearing his new four-cornered hat, and he could walk proudly into the hospital and show it off. He set out from Nonomiya's house in high spirits.

Sanshirō took the train to Ochanomizu and from there hired a rickshaw. This was a departure from his usual modesty. As his driver dashed through the Red Gate, the bell was chiming in the law and literature building. Normally, he would be heading into Classroom Number 8 just now with notebook and ink jar in hand. He decided that today he could afford to miss a couple of hours of lecture, and he rode straight on to the entrance of the Aoyama Institute for Internal Medicine.

Once inside, he proceeded as directed. He turned right down the second corridor from the entrance, then turned left where the corridor ended. The room was there on the east side, just as described. On the door was a card on which was written, in black ink, "Yoshiko Nonomiya." He stood before the door for a while, looking at the name. With his country ways, it didn't occur to him that he should knock. As he stood there he thought, "The person in this room is Nonomiya's sister, and her name is Yoshiko." He was eager to open the door and see her face, but at the same time he was hesitant. It worried him that the young lady in his thoughts bore no resemblance to Sōhachi Nonomiya.

Hearing the sandaled footsteps of a nurse approaching from behind, Sanshirō mustered his resolve and cracked the door. As he did so, his glance met that of the young lady within. (His hand still clutched the handle of the door.)

She had large eyes, a delicate nose, thin lips, and a broad forehead and long jaw that gave her face a wide, flat appearance. These were her facial features, but from these features flashed a countenance that was unique in Sanshirō's experience. Behind her pale face, thick black hair tumbled naturally and disappeared behind her shoulders. Rays of morning light from the eastern window shone from behind her, creating a violet glow at the interface between hair and sunlight, as if she were sporting a halo. At the same time, her face and forehead were in shadow. They were pale within the shadow, and her eyes held a distant look. High clouds in the depths of the sky never move quickly. At the same time, they never stay still. They slide by imperceptibly. This was the feeling her eyes conveyed.

Sanshirō perceived in her demeanor both a languid melancholy and an irrepressible optimism. To Sanshirō, the coexistence of these impressions was a wondrous discovery - a most precious expression of humanity. Still clutching the handle, looking in from behind the door, he indulged himself in the feelings of the moment.

"Come in."

She spoke as though she'd been expecting him. Her voice had a comfortable tone to it, not the tone of a young lady meeting a stranger for the first time. Only an innocent child, or an older woman experienced with young men, could be so much at ease. She didn't come across as overly familiar. She felt from the outset like an old acquaintance. As she spoke, she worked her thin cheeks into a smile. From the pale complexion a familiar warmth appeared. Sanshirō felt himself drawn into the room. At that moment, thoughts of his mother, far away in his home town, flickered across his youthful mind.

As he stepped around the door and fully entered the room, Sanshirō was greeted by an older lady of about fifty. It appeared that she had risen from her seat as soon as he'd cracked the door and was waiting to greet him.

"Mr. Ogawa?" she asked him. Her face resembled both Nonomiya's and that of her daughter, but was otherwise unremarkable. Sanshirō presented the wrapped bundle with which he'd been entrusted. She thanked him and offered her chair, taking a new place for herself around by the bed.

The mattress on the bed was pure white, as were the sheets and top covers. The covers had been folded back halfway at an angle, creating a thick edge on the far side. To avoid this thick edge, the young lady was sitting up on the near edge with her back to the window. Her feet did not reach the floor. She held knitting needles. Her ball of yarn had rolled under the bed, and a long red line extended downward from her hands. Sanshirō thought to retrieve the yarn from under the bed for her, but she seemed unconcerned about it, so he refrained.

From her place on the other side of the bed, the mother thanked him repeatedly for the previous evening when he was so busy. Sanshirō replied that it was nothing, as he had plenty of time on his hands.

Yoshiko remained silent as the two of them talked. When their conversation ended she asked abruptly, "Did you see the death on the tracks last night?" Sanshirō noticed a newspaper in the corner of the room.

"I did," he replied.

"It must have been dreadful." As she spoke, she tilted her head to the side and looked at Sanshirō. She had a long neck like her brother. Sanshirō didn't say whether it was dreadful or not, but was focused rather on the way she tilted her head. Part of it was that her comment didn't require a response, and part of it was the distraction of her gesture. She noted his reaction and immediately straightened her neck. Within her pale cheeks, a mild blush arose. Sanshirō decided he should take his leave.

Bidding the ladies farewell, he exited the room. When he came to the main hallway, at its far end was the young lady from the pond. She was standing in the square of light, tinted with the green from outside, that fell through the entryway glass. Startled to see her, Sanshirō lost the rhythm in his gait. The silhouette of the young lady, painted darkly on a floating canvas of air, took a step forward. Sanshirō moved forward too, as if being beckoned. The two figures approached each other, destined to pass within the confines of the corridor. At this point, the young lady turned to look back. In the brightness of the entrance there was nothing but the green tint of early autumn. Nothing appeared in the lighted square to answer her gaze, and nothing was waiting to receive it. Sanshirō used the opportunity to take mental note of her posture and appearance.

He couldn't find a word for the color of her kimono. It evoked the image of the evergreens, on an overcast day, reflected in the surface of the university pond. Two colorful stripes traversed its length from top to bottom. The stripes traced ripples as they went, approaching each other and drawing away, doubling up and thickening, then splitting back into two. They were irregular, but not disordered. A third of the way down, they were interrupted by a wide sash. The sash imparted a feeling of warmth, probably due to its yellow hues.

As the young lady turned, her right shoulder moved back and her left hand moved forward, following the rotation of her hips. The handkerchief that she held fell open softly where it extended from her hand. Perhaps because it was silk. -- Her legs and feet were still facing forward.

After a moment she turned again and took several steps toward Sanshirō with her eyes lowered. As she drew near, she suddenly lifted her gaze and looked at him directly. Her soft eyes were gently tapered under contoured lids. Her prominent black eyelashes brought them to life. At the same time, her straight white teeth were visible. The contrast between her teeth and the color of her skin impressed itself into Sanshirō's memory.

Today she had powdered her face lightly. However, she hadn't overdone it to where it masked her natural color. Her fine skin, which was just dark enough to hold its own against the sun's strong rays, was dusted with the finest trace of white. It was not a face that shone lustrously.

Her flesh, both on her cheeks and her jaw, was perfectly taut. There was little on her bones in excess, yet there was a softness to her overall countenance. More than a softness of the flesh, it seemed as though the bones themselves were soft. Her face impressed the observer as having great depth.

The young lady bent forward in a bow. Sanshirō was surprised to be greeted by a stranger, but it was the artful nature of her greeting that most attracted his interest. Her upper body dropped lightly forward like fine paper floating on a breeze. And it was a quick motion. At a certain angle, she stopped herself precisely, without effort. This was not a learned movement.

"I beg your pardon ..." Her voice flowed past white teeth. It was a crisp voice, but generous in its tone. It was hard to imagine it inquiring after acorns on an oak tree in the height of summer. Sanshirō was in no state to take notice of this point.

"Yes." He replied, coming to a stop.

"Do you know where I might find room 15?"

15 was the room from which Sanshirō had just departed.

"Miss Nonomiya's room?"

This time the young lady, in turn, said "Yes."

"For Miss Nonomiya's room, turn at that corner then take a left at the end of the hall. It's the second room on the right."

"That corner ..." The young lady pointed with a slender finger as she spoke.

"Yes, that corner just ahead there."

"Thank you."

The young lady proceeded on her way. Sanshirō stayed where he was and watched as she went. When she came to the corner, and was about to turn, she looked back. Sanshirō felt himself panic, and his cheeks flushed red. The young lady smiled and asked through her expression if she had the right corner. Sanshirō reflexively nodded a confirmation. She turned to the right and disappeared behind the white walls.

Sanshirō strolled out through the entryway. Thinking that she must have mistaken him for a medical student when she asked about the room number, he continued on for several paces before a new thought suddenly entered his mind. When the young lady had asked about room number 15, he should have gone back again and shown her the way. He regretted not having done so.

Sanshirō didn't have the courage to run back after her. Letting it go, he continued on for several more paces before stopping abruptly. In his mind's eye was the ribbon with which the young lady had tied up her hair. He realized that its color and texture matched the ribbon Nonomiya had bought in Kaneyasu, and his feet turned to lead. He moved ploddingly past the library toward the main gate. Suddenly, Yojirō appeared out of nowhere and called his name.

“Why'd you skip lecture? An Italian came today and explained how to eat macaroni.” While talking, he drew alongside and clapped Sanshirō on the shoulder.

The two of them walked together for a way. When they were near the main gate, Sanshirō said, “Tell me, do young ladies still wear fine ribbons in their hair? Aren't those only worn during the height of the summer heat?”

Yojirō grinned in response and sidestepped the question. “You should ask Professor so-and-so. He knows just about everything.”

At the gate, Sanshirō announced that he was not feeling well and was going to skip classes for the day. Yojirō saw no more point in walking together and turned back toward the classrooms.