

## Sanshirō – Chapter 7

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

Sanshirō circled round back and asked after Yojirō. The old woman answered in a quiet voice that he had not come home the previous evening. Sanshirō stood in the kitchen doorway, wondering what he should do. The old woman came to his aid by suggesting he come in anyway and see the professor, who was in his study. Even as she spoke, her hands were busily washing dishes. It seemed they had just finished dinner.

Sanshirō passed through the hearth room and followed the corridor to the study. The door was open. “Come here,” a voice called from within.

Sanshirō stepped over the threshold. The professor was at his desk. He was working on something, but the desktop was hidden by his curved back. Sanshirō sat down near the entrance and asked politely if he was engaged in his studies. The professor turned to look at him. His mustache was unkempt. It reminded Sanshirō of a portrait he’d seen in a photographic plate.

“Oh, it’s you. Pardon me. I thought it was Yojirō.” The professor rose from his chair. On his desk were brush and paper. He’d been writing. According to Yojirō, the professor would write sometimes, but his writings were abstruse to the point of meaninglessness. If, during his lifetime, he compiled it all into a grand treatise then that was fine. However, if he died first then his legacy would be nothing more than a stack of wastepaper. Yojirō had sighed in exasperation. Looking at the professor’s desk now, Sanshirō recalled Yojirō’s words.

“I don’t mean to disturb your work. I’m not here on any particular business.”

“Not at all. Please stay. This isn’t anything urgent. It’s not the sort of thing one does in an evening.”

Sanshirō was unsure how to respond. Deep down, however, he was wishing he could approach his own studies with such an easy temperament. After a bit he said, “I came over to see Yojirō, but since he’s not here ...”

“Yes, it seems he’s been missing since yesterday. He drifts sometimes, like a vagabond.”

“Do you suppose some urgent business came up?”

“That fellow knows nothing of business. All he knows is busywork. He’s a rare breed of fool.”

“He’s a carefree spirit.” Sanshirō could think of nothing better to add.

“Carefree would be fine. Yojirō’s not carefree, he’s freewheeling. -- For example, imagine a small stream that flows through a rice paddy. It’s shallow and narrow. At the same time, its water is constantly changing. That’s why nothing ever comes to fruition. We went to the temple festival once, just to browse. Suddenly, out of the blue, as if remembering something, he asks me to buy a dwarf pine. Before I can answer, he’s negotiated the price. To his credit, he’s good at bargaining down festival hawkers. If you want a deal, he’ll

get you one. But then the next summer, when we all go away for a while, he locks the house up tight with the tree in the darkened parlor. When we come back, it's bright red from moldering in the heat. It always turns out thus. I'm at my wits' end.

To tell the truth, Sanshirō had recently loaned Yojirō twenty yen. It was an advance until two weeks hence, when Yojirō was expecting a manuscript fee from the Literary Review people. On hearing why he needed it, Sanshirō had been sympathetic. He'd just received his latest remittance from home, so he kept five yen for himself and handed the rest to Yojirō. Though he wasn't expecting repayment yet, Professor Hirota's talk left him uneasy. However, he couldn't divulge this matter to the professor, so he said instead, "Yojirō seems to hold you in highest esteem. He's always applying himself on your behalf."

The professor became serious. "In what way is he applying himself?"

Sanshirō had been sworn to silence. The professor wasn't to know of Yojirō's doings. Neither Great Dark Void nor any others. Yojirō was certain he'd be scolded if the professor found out too soon. It was best to keep quiet now and tell him when the time was right. Yojirō had been clear on this point, so Sanshirō quickly changed the subject.

There were a number of reasons why Sanshirō frequented the professor's place. One was the professor's eccentricity. In some ways, the professor's disposition was entirely at odds with his own. Curious to explore this further, Sanshirō came for his own edification. He also felt at ease here. The stresses of the outside world disappeared. Nonomiya, like the professor, had an air of detachment. Nonomiya, it seemed though, detached himself from conventional life to pursue unconventional ambitions. Time with Nonomiya left Sanshirō with an overwhelming sense of urgency. He came away feeling he had to accomplish something soon, something significant. He had to make a mark in his field. He was always left frazzled. Professor Hirota, on the other hand, was tranquility incarnate. He was simply a foreign language instructor. -- It would be disrespectful to say he did nothing more, but he didn't publicize his personal work. He was content in his current station, and this, it seemed, was the secret behind his serenity.

Sanshirō, of late, was obsessing over a young lady. It would be wonderful to obsess over a sweetheart, but this obsession was different. It was complex and confused. He didn't know if he was loved or being mocked. He didn't know if he should be cautious or contemptuous. And he didn't know if he should proceed or desist. Sanshirō was utterly confounded, and Professor Hirota was his only recourse. Thirty minutes with the professor was sufficient to cool his head. Why get worked up so over a mere young lady or two? In truth, this need for grounding was largely what had led him to the professor on this particular evening.

The third reason for visiting was rife with inconsistency. Mineko was driving him crazy. Mineko, with Nonomiya in the picture, was even worse. The person closest to Nonomiya was the professor. If he frequented the professor's place then, as he imagined it, the relationship between Nonomiya and Mineko would naturally reveal itself as a matter of course. And once it was revealed, he would know where he himself stood. Nevertheless, he hadn't once, to this point, broached this subject with the professor. Tonight, he resolved, he would give it a try.

"I hear Nonomiya's taken up lodgings again."

“So it seems.”

“It must be tough, giving up one’s house to become a boarder. Nonomiya’s taking things ...”

“He is. It doesn’t faze him. Just look at his attire. He’s not the domestic type. On the other hand, he’s exceedingly meticulous when it comes to his research.”

“Then you think he’ll stay put for a while?”

“Hard to say. He might soon find another house.”

“Does he intend to marry?”

“Maybe. See if you can find him someone.”

Sanshirō forced a laugh, wondering if he’d probed too far.

“What about yourself?” the professor asked.

“Me?”

“I suppose it’s too soon. At your age, a wife would be a burden.”

“I’m being pressured from home.”

“By whom?”

“My mother.”

“Do you agree with her choice?”

“I’m not much inclined to.”

Professor Hirota laughed, exposing his teeth below his mustache. He had remarkably good teeth. Sanshirō suddenly felt a familiar kind of warmth. This warmth, however, had nothing to do with Mineko. It had nothing to do with Nonomiya. It was an endearing warmth that transcended his immediate concerns. He felt shame for having probed Nonomiya’s affairs, and he asked nothing further. Shortly, the professor began to speak. --

“If at all possible, you should respect your mother’s wishes. I’m afraid that today’s youth, compared to my generation, are too independent. When I was a student, everything one did was in some way connected to others. All was for sovereign, parents, country, or community. This was fundamental. Of course in this context all men of learning were, of necessity, hypocrites. When societal transformations rendered our hypocrisy untenable, we gradually installed individualism as a new banner over our ideologies and actions. At present, the emphasis on self has progressed too far. In contrast to the hypocrites of old, the modern era is teeming with self-professed deviants. Are you familiar with the term ‘self-professed deviant?’”

“No.”

“I just now made it up. You would number among these self-professed deviants -- or would you? Yes, I think so. Yojirō is the quintessential example. Then there’s Miss Satomi, with whom you’re familiar. She’s one too, as is Nonomiya’s younger sister, in her own intriguing way. In former times, figures of authority were the only self-professed deviants. In these modern times of equal rights, everyone wants to be one. There’s really nothing wrong with that. Open the lid of a stinking vessel and you’ll find manure, and it’s common knowledge that a splendid façade, if peeled away, exposes its ugly side. A splendid façade demands great effort, so everyone works in unfinished wood to economize. It’s exhilarating to embrace a candid ugliness. However, there comes a point, if taken too far, where self-professed deviants start to offend one another. This mutual distaste heightens to a climax, and altruism swings back into vogue. Altruism runs its course and becomes perfunctory, then yields again to egoism. And on it goes. This is a fair depiction of the way we live. And as we thus live, we progress. Take a look at England. From times long past she’s managed a careful balance. That’s why she’s mired in place. She produces no Ibsen, no Nietzsche. It’s unfortunate. She’s so self-satisfied. Yet seen from outside she’s a rigid fossil in the making. ...”

Though inwardly impressed, Sanshirō was also somewhat taken aback by how far the conversation had veered off course and how deep it had gone.

Professor Hirota finally caught himself. “What was it we were discussing?”

“Marriage.”

“Marriage?”

“Yes, and that I should listen to my mother ...”

“Ah, yes. You should do your best to respect your mother’s wishes,” he stated again with a grin, just as though speaking to a child. Sanshirō took no particular offense.

“I understood about my generation being self-professed deviants, but how is it that your generation are hypocrites?”

“When people treat you kindly, do you find it agreeable?”

“Yes, I guess I do.”

“Really? I don’t. Too much kindness makes me uncomfortable.”

“In what way?”

“When it’s superficial, masking some ulterior motive.”

“Is that often the case?”

“When someone wishes you Happy New Year, do you feel any happier?”

“That’s ...”

“I should think not. In the same vein, consider those fellows who grab their bellies or roll on the floor with laughter. Not one of them is truly laughing. Kindness is the same. Folks are kind from a mere sense of duty. I call myself an instructor, but perhaps I’m really just there to feed and clothe myself. To the students, this is no doubt hard to accept. Now take a fellow like Yojirō, the ringleader of the deviants. He’s incorrigible, and he causes me trouble from time to time, but he means well. He has an endearing side. It’s the same with Americans and their flagrant pursuit of wealth. It’s honestly what they’re after. There’s nothing more candid than pursuing one’s desires, and there’s nothing more refreshing than candor. My generation, trained to shun candor in any form, are uniformly pretentious.”

Sanshirō could follow his line of reasoning. Sanshirō’s immediate and pressing dilemma, however, was not going to yield to generalized reason. He needed to know if a particular someone, with whom he interacted, was in fact sincere or not. He reflected once more on Mineko’s bearing toward him. He still had no idea whether she was pretentious or not. He began to wonder if his powers of perception weren’t duller than most.

Just then, the professor seemed to remember something. “Oh, there’s one thing more. Something odd has taken root since we’ve entered this twentieth century. It’s an intricate maneuver that furthers egoism through application of altruistic principles. Does anyone like that come to mind?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Put another way, it’s the practice of blatant hypocrisy. That’s probably still not clear. Let me see if I can explain it better. -- The hypocrites of old sought first and foremost the praise of others. The opposite approach, then, would be wielding hypocrisy to deliberately offend another’s sensibilities. However it’s viewed, from the side or straight on, the other party can’t fail to recognize it as hypocrisy. And, of course, it’s offensive, so the wielder’s objective is met. This honest application of hypocrisy for hypocrisy’s sake is the mark of a self-professed deviant. Furthermore, the words and deeds applied are, at least superficially, benevolent, so it’s almost like some Holy Duality. There are more and more these days who deftly apply this method. It’s the method of choice for cultured and sensitive types. They can join the ranks of self-professed deviants while retaining their elegance. You have to spill blood to kill someone outright, and such barbarism is less and less in vogue.”

Professor Hirota spoke like a guide describing an ancient battlefield. He placed himself apart from reality, where he could afford to be sanguine. To his typical listener, it felt like a classroom lecture. To Sanshirō, though, the words hit home. He was preoccupied with Mineko, and he could apply these ideas immediately. In his mind, he set all that she’d said or done against this standard. However, there were myriad instances that defied reckoning. Through his nostrils, the professor quietly expelled his signature “philosophical smoke.”

At this point, footsteps sounded from the entry hall. Without ceremony they proceeded along the corridor. Suddenly, Yojirō appeared in the study doorway and kneeled on the threshold to announce a visitor.

“Haraguchi’s here,” he said simply, dispensing with the usual salutations. Perhaps wishing to avoid the professor, he gave just a rough nod to Sanshirō and quickly disappeared.

Brushing by Yojirō at the threshold, Haraguchi entered. He sported a French-style mustache, had close-cropped hair, and was of portly build. Judging from his appearance, he was several years older than Nonomiya. He was attired in Japanese dress, much nicer than Professor Hirota’s.

“It’s been a while. Sasaki stopped by. We ate dinner together and killed time -- afterward he dragged me out ...” Haraguchi spoke in a highly upbeat manner. It was the kind of voice that naturally brightens one’s spirits.

As soon as he’d heard the name Haraguchi, Sanshirō had surmised that it must be the painter people talked of. Yojirō was quite the society man. Sanshirō was impressed by his numerous alumni associations. Sanshirō himself showed reserve. He was always, by nature, reserved before his elders. He attributed this to his Kyūshū upbringing.

Sanshirō was finally introduced to Haraguchi. Sanshirō bowed respectfully, and the other man responded with a light nod. Sanshirō then listened quietly as the other two conversed.

Stating that he had a matter of business to discuss first, Haraguchi requested the professor’s presence at a gathering he would hold soon. It wasn’t to be any elaborate affair with renowned guests. He would invite just a select number of writers, artists, and professors for a casual evening. Most were mutually acquainted, so there would be no need for formalities. The only objectives were to gather a group for dinner and to promote a productive exchange on arts and literature. That was it.

“I’ll be there,” the professor readily replied. That was Haraguchi’s matter of business, and it was now concluded. The discussion that followed between Haraguchi and the professor proved to be of great interest to Sanshirō.

“What have you been doing lately?” the professor inquired.

“I’m still working on Itchūbushi. I have five or so down now. Some of the pieces, like ‘Flowers and Fall Colors - Eight Yoshiwara Scenes’ and ‘Lovers Suicide of Koina and Hanbei at Karasaki’ are quite intriguing. You should give it a try. They say that Itchūbushi are not meant to be sung loudly. Historically, they were performed only in small rooms. Regrettably, this voice of mine is too loud. Then there are the intricate intonations I’m struggling with. One of these times I’ll perform one, if you don’t mind taking a listen.”

Professor Hirota smiled.

Encouraged, Haraguchi continued. “Even at that I do alright. Kyōsuke Satomi, though, he butchers them. I’m not sure why, especially when his younger sister is so talented. The other day he finally threw in the

towel and quit his singing. Then, when he suggested he might take up an instrument instead, someone told him he should play festival rhythms. We all had a great laugh.”

“Someone really said that?”

“They sure did. In fact, Satomi even said to me that he’d try it if I did too. They say there are eight styles of festival rhythms in all.”

“Why don’t you try? It seems like something any ordinary person could manage.”

“No, I’m afraid Festival rhythms aren’t my thing. What I really want is to drum on the tsuzumi. The wonderful thing about the tsuzumi is that somehow, when I hear that sound, it carries me away from this twentieth century. Its sound is so unpretentious, entirely distinct from the rhythms of this current age, and that in itself is tremendously soothing. Easygoing as I am, my art can never emulate that sound.”

“Do you really try to emulate it?”

“It’s futile. Who in today’s Tōkyō can put serenity to a canvas? And the problem’s not limited to painting. -- Speaking of painting, I was at the university athletic meet the other day. I’d hoped to sketch a caricature of Satomi’s and Nonomiya’s younger sisters, but they slipped away. Sometime soon I hope to paint a full-fledged portrait and put it up for exhibition.”

“Who’s portrait?”

“Satomi’s younger sister’s. Most Japanese women have Utamaro-type faces or similar such looks, unfit for the Western canvas. But that young lady, or the Nonomiya girl for that matter, is different. I could paint either one of them. I’m thinking to do her in life size, with a stand of trees as the backdrop, holding up her round fan and turned toward the light. A folded Western fan would be garish, but a simple Japanese fan will be fresh and alluring. Anyway, I’ll need to act soon. If she goes off as someone’s bride then I won’t get my chance with her.”

Sanshirō listened to Haraguchi with extreme interest. The thought of Mineko, and especially of Mineko holding her fan, tugged at his deepest emotions. He wondered, even, if there wasn’t some mystical bond between the two of them.

At this point, Professor Hirota interjected his blunt opinion. “Don’t you think such a scene might not be rather dull?”

“Actually, it’s at her suggestion. She asked what I thought of her posing with her fan, and I agreed wholeheartedly. It’s not a bad idea, provided I can do it justice.”

“Don’t make her too attractive. She’ll be hounded by suitors.”

“Ha ha. I’ll tone her down to ‘medium’ appeal. Speaking of marriage, she’s about that age, isn’t she? What do you think? Know of any good prospects? Her brother’s been asking.”

“Why not take her for yourself?”

“Me? I’d take her if she’d have me, but I’m afraid she’s soured on me.”

“Why?”

“She’s quite a handful. She even teases me about my time in Paris. How I made a point before leaving of stocking up on katsuobushi, telling everyone I intended to hole up in my lodgings the whole time. Then of how I immediately changed my tune once I got there. No doubt she heard all this from her brother or his cohorts.”

“That young lady won’t go anywhere she’s doesn’t want to. Brokering is of no use. Best leave her alone till she falls for someone.”

“Just like in the West. They’ll all be like that in time. It’s not such a bad thing, though.”

From there, the two of them talked at length about painting. Sanshirō was surprised that Professor Hirota knew the names of so many Western artists. When time came for Sanshirō to take his leave, and he was searching for his clogs by the kitchen door, the professor came to the bottom of the stairs and called Yojirō down.

The outside air was cold. The sky overhead was clear to its depths, and Sanshirō wondered from where such a sky dropped its dew. His hands, when they touched his kimono, felt cold on contact. Winding his way through deserted side streets, he suddenly encountered a fortune vendor. The man held a large round papered lantern that bathed his lower body in a vivid red glow. Sanshirō was tempted to buy a fortune, but ultimately he refrained. He gave the man and his lantern a wide berth in passing, so much so that his shoulder brushed against a cedar hedge. After a while, he cut across a dark lot and emerged onto Oiwake’s main thoroughfare. There was a soba shop on the corner. He ducked resolutely through the shop curtain. He needed a drink.

Inside were three high school students. They were talking about how more and more professors ordered soba for lunch. As soon as the noon cannon sounded, the shop carriers would hurry through the school gate with bowls and baskets piled high on their shoulders. This particular shop did brisk business. They wondered why professor so-and-so ordered pot-boiled udon even through the summer. Most likely he suffered some stomach ailment. Their talk touched on various other subjects. They referred to their professors on a simple family name basis, and someone brought up the name Hirota. That triggered a discussion as to why he was still unmarried. When one called at the professor’s house, one saw female nudes among the paintings on his walls, so it wasn’t that he disliked women. Then again, those portraits depicted Western women. Perhaps he didn’t care for Japanese women. One of them surmised that someone had broken his heart. Another asked if heartbreak could cause such eccentricity. On the other hand, it was rumored that a young beauty frequented his place. Was there any truth to it?

As he listened to all this, it became clear that the speakers were intrigued by Professor Hirota. Sanshirō didn’t know why they took such interest, but at any rate all three had read Yojirō’s Great Dark Void composition. In fact, they disclosed that their reading of this piece had caused them to see the professor in



a new light. They occasionally quoted Great Dark Void witticisms, and they heaped praise on Yojirō's splendid prose. They wondered who Reiyoshi could be. All three agreed that whoever he was, he was someone who knew the professor intimately.

Seated close by, things clicked in Sanshirō's mind. This was why Yojirō wrote Great Dark Void. Even Yojirō had confessed that Literary Review sold few copies, and Sanshirō had questioned whether Yojirō's pride of authorship served any other purpose than to satisfy his own vanity. Now he saw the force of the printed word. It was just as Yojirō had said. Even a single word or simple phrase, not put to paper, was an opportunity squandered. The power of the pen, which could make or break a man's reputation, was frightening. Sanshirō left the soba shop.

By the time he returned home, the effect of the saké was gone. He felt a keen sense of discontent. As he sat at his desk, idling time, the maidservant arrived with a fresh kettle of hot water, and she also left him a newly-arrived letter. It was another correspondence from his mother. Sanshirō immediately broke the seal. On this day, the sight of her handwriting was most welcome.

It was a long letter, but in it was nothing of much import. He was greatly relieved to find no mention of Omitsu Miwata. However, he did find within an odd piece of advice.

“From childhood, your nerves have been frail. Weak nerves are a terrible handicap, and I can only imagine how difficult exam times must be. Taka Okitsu, despite his scholarship and his teaching position at the middle school, gets the shakes when he sits for certification testing. His examination papers show it, and the poor man has never received a promotion. He had a friend, who's a doctor of medicine, procure pills to settle him, and he took some before testing, but to no avail. Your condition is not so severe. See a Tōkyō doctor and get some nerve medicine that you can take on a regular basis. Surely there must be something that can help.”

Sanshirō thought this was nonsense. However, wrapped within the nonsense was sentiment worthy of appreciation. He was impressed anew by the depth of a mother's kindness. That evening, he stayed up till one in the morning, composing a long reply. In it, he included a comment that he didn't much care for Tōkyō.