

## Sanshirō – Chapter 8

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

Sanshirō lent money to Yojirō. The circumstances were as follows.

Around nine o'clock on a recent evening, as rain was falling, Yojirō had shown up unexpectedly. He immediately confided that he was very much in a bad way. His complexion, to be sure, was unusually pale. Sanshirō assumed it was the cold rain and the autumn chill. As Yojirō settled himself, however, it became apparent that the problem went deeper. He was uncharacteristically reticent.

“Are you really unwell?” Sanshirō asked.

Yojirō fluttered the lids of his deer-like eyes. “Actually, I’ve lost some money. I’m in trouble.”

So stating, his face took on a worried expression as he expelled several columns of smoke from his nostrils. Sanshirō felt compelled to say something. He asked what kind of money it was and where Yojirō had lost it. The answer came readily forth. Yojirō had only refrained long enough to dispense with his smoke. After exhaling, he proceeded to relate the entire story in detail.

Yojirō had lost twenty yen. However, it wasn't his own money. The prior year, when Professor Hirota had moved into his previous house, he'd been unable to come up with the three months' security deposit. To cover the shortfall, he'd borrowed from Nonomiya. The money he'd borrowed, though, was money that Nonomiya had had his father send from the country so he could buy his younger sister a violin. While immediate repayment was not of the essence, the longer it was delayed the longer Yoshiko waited. To this day, in fact, the Professor had not returned the money, and Yoshiko was still without her violin. If the professor had the money, he no doubt would have settled. He barely scraped by on his monthly pay, though, and he was hardly the type to take a side job, so the debt remained. Then, over the summer, he'd agreed to grade high school applicants' examination papers. This task paid sixty yen, which he'd finally received. Able at last to fulfill his obligation, he'd assigned the errand to Yojirō.

“That, regrettably, was the money I lost,” explained Yojirō. The look on his face was indeed of sincere regret.

When asked whereabouts he might have dropped it, he replied that he hadn't dropped it anywhere. He'd lost it all at the horse track betting. This left Sanshirō flabbergasted. In the face of such folly, he found himself speechless. And Yojirō himself seemed crestfallen. One could hardly believe this was the real Yojirō, always brimming with boundless energy. The contrast was too profound. Sanshirō was struck by a mixture of both pity and incredulity. All he could do was laugh. Then Yojirō laughed too.

“Well anyway, I guess I'll manage somehow.”

“The professor doesn't know yet?”

“Not yet.”

“What about Nonomiya?”

“He doesn’t know either, of course.”

“When did you take charge of the money?”

“The first of the month, so it’s exactly two weeks now.”

“When did you go to the horse track?”

“The day after getting the money.”

“From that day to today you’ve let this fester?”

“I’ve done what I can, but I don’t have the money. Worst case, it’ll have to wait till the end of the month.”

“You think you’ll have it by the end of the month?”

“I should get enough from the Literary Review folks.”

Sanshirō rose and opened his desk drawer. He took out the letter that had arrived from his mother the day before and looked inside. “This will cover it. My remittance from home came early this month.”

Yojirō was instantly reenergized. “Thank you so kindly, oh dearest of friends,” his voice was vigorous as he artfully mimicked a professional storyteller.

It was past ten. The two of them braved the rain to venture onto Oiwake’s main thoroughfare and entered the soba shop on the corner. This was how Sanshirō learned to drink saké there. The two of them drank that night in high spirits. Yojirō took care of the check. He was never one to let others treat.

From that time to the present, Yojirō had not surfaced with the money. Sanshirō, being conscientious, worried about his room and board payment. He didn’t press the matter, but he wished Yojirō would somehow settle things. The days went by, and the end of the month drew near. Only several days remained. It didn’t occur to Sanshirō that he might ask for an extension. Yojirō would have to come through -- of course he had no such faith. He rightly expected, though, that Yojirō would at least be considerate enough to make his best effort. According to Professor Hirota, Yojirō’s thoughts were like water in a shoal, constantly shifting. But surely he wouldn’t forsake this obligation. He couldn’t be so fickle as that.

Sanshirō gazed on the street from his second-floor window. As he watched, Yojirō approached from the distance at a brisk pace. From below the window, he looked up and saw Sanshirō. “Hey, you there?”

Sanshirō looked down at him from above. “Yeah, I’m here.”

Following this exchange of nonsensical lines from below and above, Sanshirō ducked his head back into the room. Yojirō came clomping up the stairs.

“Were you watching for me? I figured you’d worry about your bill here, so I’ve been running around. Sheer idiocy.”

“Did you get your manuscript fee from the Literary Review people?”

“What fee? They’ve already paid what they owe me.”

“They have? Didn’t you say they’d pay you by the end of the month?”

“Did I say that? I don’t think so. They don’t owe me a single mon.”

“That’s odd. I could have sworn you said so.”

“Maybe I spoke of an advance. But they wouldn’t give me one. They think they won’t get it back. Lousy wretches. And it’s only twenty yen. I write Great Dark Void for them, and they still can’t trust me. Unbelievable. I despise those people.”

“Then you don’t have the money?”

“I had to go elsewhere for it. I couldn’t leave you hanging.”

“You needn’t have put yourself out so.”

“There’s one complication, though. The money’s not on me. You’ll have to go and get it.”

“From where?”

“Actually, after coming up empty at Literary Review I made the rounds to Haraguchi and several others, but they were all strapped for cash at the end of the month. Finally, I went to Satomi -- I don’t think you know him yet. His name’s Kyōsuke. He’s Mineko’s older brother, a graduate of the law school. I went over there, but to no avail, as Kyōsuke was away. By that time I was hungry and tired of walking, so I conferred with Mineko.”

“Nonomiya’s sister wasn’t there?”

“It was early afternoon. She was still at school. We talked in the parlor, so it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.”

“I see.”

“After we talked, Mineko agreed to help out by lending the money.”

“She has her own money?”

“I’m not sure. At any rate, everything will be fine. She agreed to help, so rest assured. Interestingly enough, she enjoys playing big sister, despite her youth. It’s part of her nature. There’s no need to worry. All it took was the asking. She told me she had the money, but then, at the last moment, she withheld it from me. I was

fully taken aback. I asked if she thought me untrustworthy, and she confirmed to my face, with a grin, that she did. I felt slighted. I suggested I could send you, and she said that that would be fine. She'll hand you the money personally. Whatever she likes. Can you go and get it?"

"Either that, or I'll wire home for it."

"Don't wire home, that's folly. You're perfectly capable of going over there for it."

"Alright, I'll go."

The problem of the twenty yen was now, finally, resolved. With that, Yojirō immediately related the latest happenings with regard to Professor Hirota.

His initiative was steadily gaining ground. Whenever he could find time, he made the rounds, visiting others in their lodgings to consult one on one. One on one was the only way. In a group setting, each would try to assert himself, and this could lead to internal strife. The other concern was that less assertive members might feel disregarded, even from the start, and never fully engage. One on one was absolutely the only way. That being said, it required time. And money too. One couldn't let that stand in the way. Throughout the entire process, Yojirō took care to mention Professor Hirota only sparingly. If it was perceived to be for the professor's sake, rather than for the students, then all would come to naught.

This was Yojirō's approach, and he believed it had served him well so far. His first argument was that a faculty strictly of Westerners was unacceptable. A Japanese national must be brought on board. Later on, they would sponsor another gathering to select a committee. The committee would communicate their wishes to the likes of the dean and the president. The gathering was a mere formality, not really essential. They already knew which students would be committee members. All were sympathetic to Professor Hirota, so any one of them might, depending on how the negotiation played out, nominate him to the university leadership ...

From the sound it, Yojirō had the world in the palms of his hands. Sanshirō was duly impressed. Yojirō spoke on about the night, a while back, when he'd brought Haraguchi to the professor's place.

"Remember how, on that evening, Haraguchi encouraged the professor to join his informal gathering of writers and artists?" Sanshirō, of course, remembered. According to Yojirō, he himself had orchestrated the affair. There were various motives for doing so, the most prominent and immediate of which was to acquaint the professor with an influential member of the literature department who would also be in attendance. Such a connection would benefit the professor greatly. The professor, as an eccentric, was not wont to socialize. However, if a suitable occasion were created he could keep respectable company, albeit in his own eccentric way ...

"So that's what all that's about. I had no idea. Then if you're the orchestrator, and when the time comes the invites go out in your name, can you really count on all those distinguished members attending?"

Yojirō looked Sanshirō straight in the face. Then he turned away with a wry smile.

“Don’t be an idiot. I’m the orchestrator, but behind the scenes. All I had to do was scheme up the event. Then I advised Haraguchi and arranged for him to coordinate everything.”

“You did?”

“Of course I did - are you stuck on the farm? You should attend too, by the way. It’ll happen any day now.”

“What could I do in company like that? I’ll pass.”

“That’s the farm boy talking again. Those men are renowned because they’ve been at it longer than others. That’s the only difference. Some have masters degrees and some have doctorates, but when you talk to them there’s nothing special. For one thing, they don’t see themselves as anything extraordinary. You really should attend. The experience will serve you well.”

“Where will it be?”

“Probably the Seiyōken in Ueno.”

“I’ve never been in a place like that. I imagine it’s expensive.”

“I’d guess about two yen. Don’t worry about paying. If you don’t have it, I’ll cover for you.”

Sanshirō immediately recalled the situation with the twenty yen. Strangely enough, though, nothing struck him as incongruous. By and by, Yojirō proposed that they head out to Ginza for tempura. His treat. Yojirō was quite a character. Sanshirō, the quintessential yes-man, this time declined. Instead, they went out walking together. On the way back, they stopped at Okano, where Yojirō bought a great quantity of chestnut manjū. Saying they were a treat for the professor, he set off for home clutching his bag.

That evening, Sanshirō pondered Yojirō’s disposition. He wondered if it was the natural product of life in Tōkyō. Next, he thought about going to Mineko for money. He was happy to have a reason to call on her. On the other hand, he didn’t like asking her for money. He had never in his life borrowed money from anyone, much less a young lady. And she was not of independent means. She might have money at her disposal, but if she lent it privately, without the consent of her older brother, it would reflect quite poorly on both of them, and especially on her. Then again, given her knack for handling matters, she may have acted already to preclude such trouble. Anyway, he would go and see her. On seeing her, if things didn’t feel right, he would decline. He could always defer his payment a bit and call for the money from home. -- At this, he left off on the business at hand. Visions of Mineko appeared in his mind’s eye. Her face, her hands, her neck, her kimonos and sashes, arranged by his fancy into myriad forms. He envisioned her manner, and what she would say, when they met the next day. Ten, twenty scenarios played out before him. Sanshirō always rehearsed thus. Whenever he approached an appointment, he focused intently on what the other party might do. He never thought of himself, of his own facial expressions, of what he should say and how. Only later did he consider these things, often in the midst of regret.

On this evening, in particular, he could spare no thoughts for himself. For a while now, he had doubted Mineko. Doubts alone, though, would yield no resolution. At the same time, there was nothing specific to be clarified through confrontation. There was, therefore, little prospect of settling the matter decisively. If Sanshirō, for the sake of his sanity, had to have resolution, then time spent with Mineko was crucial. He'd observe her manner and, finally, judge as best he could. The next day's audience was of utmost importance. All the scenarios he imagined, though, played out to his own favor. This in itself seemed dubious. It was like gazing at a lovely photograph of a bleak place. The photograph itself is no doubt authentic, while the place, in actuality, is undeniably bleak. Two perspectives, which should coincide, cannot be reconciled.

Finally, a happy thought crossed his mind. Mineko had agreed to lend Yojirō money. However, she had refused to place it in his hands. This could be, in truth, because Yojirō was untrustworthy with money. But was that really Mineko's reason? If not, then his own situation seemed infinitely brighter. Even her willingness to lend him money was a positive sign. Adding to that her desire to see him in person -- Sanshirō indulged himself to this point before snapping back to reality.

"But more likely she's mocking me." Thus thinking, he suddenly felt flushed. If one had asked him why she might be mocking him, Sanshirō would have been hard pressed for an answer. If forced to respond, he might even have suggested she found pleasure in mockery. It would never have occurred to him that she might be punishing his vanity. -- Sanshirō believed his vanity to be entirely of Mineko's making.

The next day, fortuitously, two instructors were absent, and their afternoon classes were canceled. To save the trip to his lodgings, Sanshirō headed directly to Mineko's house, stopping for a bite on the way. He'd been by her house many times, but never inside. There was a gate with a tiled roof, and on one of its pillars a nameplate reading Kyōsuke Satomi. Whenever he'd passed this house, he'd wondered what kind of person this Kyōsuke was. They still hadn't met. The main gate was latched, so he ducked through the side gate. The distance to the entry hall was less than he'd expected. The path was paved with granite stepping stones, rectangular in shape. The front entry door, of fine latticework construction, was closed. Sanshirō rang the bell. A maidservant came to answer, and Sanshirō asked if Mineko was at home. As he did so, he couldn't help feeling self-conscious. It was the first time he'd approached a house to inquire after a young lady. He felt reluctant even to ask. The maidservant, for her part, responded matter-of-factly. Her manner was respectful as well. She withdrew once, then reappeared, bowing politely. She invited him in and directed him to the parlor. It was a Western-style room, dimmed by heavy curtains.

Asking him to make himself comfortable, the maidservant withdrew again. Sanshirō took a seat in the middle of the quiet room. Before him was a small fireplace, recessed into the wall. A long mirror hung horizontally above it, and two candle holders stood before the mirror. Sanshirō looked at his face reflected in the mirror, framed by a candle holder on either side, then sat back down.

A violin sounded from another room. As soon as it started, it stopped, as though a breeze had carried it in and away. It seemed a shame. Sanshirō leaned back in the thickly upholstered chair and listened carefully, hoping to catch more, but none followed. A minute later, he had forgotten the violin. He was gazing at the mirror and candle holders on the opposite wall. They seemed curiously occidental, even suggesting Catholicism. Sanshirō had no idea why Catholicism. At that moment, the violin sounded again. This time,

a series of high and low notes reverberated in succession. Then they abruptly stopped. Sanshirō was not familiar with classical music. However, he was certain that these notes were not part a larger work. They had simply been floated out. In his present mood, Sanshirō felt an affinity for these indecorous notes, sounded only for their own sake, like errant hailstones dropping inexplicably from a blue sky.

Sanshirō shifted his half-dreaming eyes to the mirror and there, reflected, stood Mineko. The door, which he thought the maidservant had closed, was open. Mineko, with one hand pushing aside the curtain that hung behind the door, was clearly visible from the chest up. Mineko looked at Sanshirō in the mirror. Sanshirō looked at Mineko's reflection. Mineko smiled.

“Welcome.”

Her voice came from behind. Sanshirō had to turn round. They faced each other directly. She tipped her head, with hair done up in voluminous curves, ever so slightly in salutation. Her subtle movement, barely qualifying as a greeting, expressed intimacy. Sanshirō, for his part, rose from his chair and bowed. Disregarding his formality, she circled round and took a seat directly facing him, her back to the mirror.

“You're finally here.”

She spoke in the same intimate tone. Her words were music to Sanshirō's ears. Her outfit was of shiny silk. Given how long he'd waited, she may have changed into something elegant to receive him. She sat upright on her chair. She surveyed him in silence, with the hint of a smile in her eyes and on her lips, driving him to a state of sweet distress. From the moment she'd seated herself, he'd struggled under her steady gaze. Compelled to say something, he opened his mouth. He was on the verge of panic.

“Sasaki ...”

“I presume Sasaki talked to you,” she stated, her white teeth visible. Behind her, the candle holders were arrayed on both ends of the mantelpiece. They were crafted of gold, in a curious style. Sanshirō had supposed they were candle holders, but on second thought he wasn't sure. Behind these enigmatic holders was the plain mirror. Due to the thick curtains, the light was poor. On top of that, the sky outside was overcast. Sanshirō had been glancing at Mineko's white teeth.

“Sasaki came by.”

“And what did he tell you?”

“He told me to come and see you.”

“I expect he did. -- And that's why you're here?” She pressed this point.

“Yes,” he said, then hesitated. After a short pause he added, “I guess so.”

Mineko concealed her teeth. She rose from her chair, went to the window, and gazed out.

“It’s clouded up. It must be cold out.”

“It’s actually quite mild. There’s no wind.”

“Really?” She returned to her seat.

“Sasaki sent me to ...”

“I know.” She cut him short. Sanshirō fell silent. Mineko continued. “How was the money lost?” she asked.

“It was lost at the horse track.”

“Oh my,” she replied, though she didn’t look as surprised as she sounded. On the contrary, she was grinning. Then, after a short pause she added, “Impulsive, don’t you think?”

Sanshirō didn’t answer.

“They say that horses are even harder to read than people. You’re the carefree type. If a person’s heart were ordered and indexed, you still wouldn’t trouble to read it.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Really? Who was it then?”

“Sasaki.”

Mineko suddenly laughed. Sanshirō, too, felt the absurdity of it all.

“Then it’s not really you who needs the money, is it? Seems silly.”

“I’m the one who needs it.”

“Honestly?”

“Honest.”

“This is all quite odd.”

“I don’t have to borrow it, you know.”

“Why? It bothers you?”

“It’s not that it bothers me. But I shouldn’t borrow from you behind your brother’s back.”

“And why not? Anyway, my brother is aware of this.”



“He is? Then I guess it’s okay. -- On the other hand, I don’t have to borrow it. If I wired home, I could have it within the week.”

“If it bothers you so, I don’t want to force it ...”

Mineko seemed suddenly detached, as though she’d left him and drifted away. Sanshirō wished he’d just borrowed the money, but now it was too late. He fixed his gaze on the candle holders. He was never one to curry favor. Mineko, for her part, remained distant and did not reengage. After a moment she rose again and looked through the window.

“It looks like the rain is holding off.”

Sanshirō echoed her tone in his answer. “Looks like it’s holding off.”

“If it’s not going to rain, I think I’ll go out for a bit,” she continued as she stood at the window. Sanshirō took this as a cue for him to go. It was not for his sake that she’d dressed in fine silk.

“I should be going,” he said as he rose. Mineko accompanied him to the entry hall. As he stepped down to retrieve his shoes, she asked from above if she could walk part way with him.

“Yes, if you’d like,” he replied.

Before he knew it she had stepped down to join him. In stepping down, she drew her mouth to his ear and whispered, “Are you angry?” At that point, the maidservant came hurrying out to see them off.

They walked together in silence a short way. The entire time, Sanshirō thought about Mineko. No doubt she’d had a privileged upbringing. In her family life, she enjoyed more freedom than most young ladies. She seemed at leisure to do as she pleased. The fact that she was walking beside him now, with no supervisory consent, was evidence enough of this. Without parents, and with her brother disposed to give her free reign, she could conduct herself so. In the country, such conduct would be scandalous. How would this young lady cope in Omitsu Miwata’s shoes? Tōkyō was different from the country, far more open, and women here were generally less restrained. Even so, from Sanshirō’s vantage they all seemed a little more old school than Mineko. Sanshirō understood, at last, Yojirō’s reading of Mineko as an Ibsen type. He wasn’t sure, though, if it was merely disregard for social convention, or if it went as far as deep-seated ideology.

By and by they reached the main Hongō thoroughfare. The two of them were walking together, yet each had no idea where the other was going. To this point they’d traversed three lanes. Without words, their feet had taken each turn in the same direction, as if their movements were coordinated in advance. As they approached the Yonchōme corner of the Hongō thoroughfare, Mineko asked, “Where are you going?”

“Where are you going?”

The two of them looked at each other. Sanshirō was all seriousness. Mineko could no longer suppress a smile, again revealing her white teeth.

“Come with me.”

They turned at Yonchōme toward the roadcut. Fifty meters on was a large Western-style building on their right. Mineko stopped in front of it. From the folds of her sash, she produced an account book and seal. “Please,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Take these in and make a withdrawal.”

Sanshirō held out his hand and received the account book. Its center was labeled “Private Account Book,” and down the edge was printed “Mineko Satomi.” Account book and seal in hand, Sanshirō remained in place and looked at Mineko.

“Thirty yen,” she instructed him. She spoke as though withdrawing money was routine. Fortunately, back in Kumamoto, Sanshirō had frequently gone to Toyotsu on a similar errand with a similar account book. He proceeded up the stone steps, opened the door, and went inside. He handed the account book and seal to the clerk and received the requested amount. When he came back out, he didn’t find Mineko waiting. She had already started walking toward the roadcut. He hurried to catch up with her. He immediately put his hand in his pocket to return what was hers.

“Have you seen the Tanseikai exhibition?” she asked.

“I haven’t.”

“I was given two tickets, but I haven’t found the time. Shall we go and see?”

“I suppose I could.”

“Let’s go. It will end soon, and I owe it to Haraguchi to attend.”

“Haraguchi gave you the tickets?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“I met him once at Professor Hirota’s place.”

“He’s an interesting man. Says he’s going to learn festival rhythms.”

“He was saying he wanted to learn the tsuzumi. And also ...”

“And also?”

“He also said he was going to paint you. Is that true?”

“Yes. I’m his high-grade model,” she replied.

Sanshirō, true to his nature, could think of no tactful response and simply fell silent. Mineko seemed to be hoping for a comment.

Sanshirō put his hand back in his pocket, produced the account book and seal, and handed them back to her. He had placed the bank notes within the account book. She asked him, however, about the notes, and he saw that they weren't there. He searched his pocket again and fished out the worn notes. She made no move to receive them. "Please, hold on to them," she said.

Sanshirō felt a bit burdened, but he was not wont to risk a quarrel, especially out in public. He took the notes he'd produced and returned them to his pocket, thinking to himself how peculiar she was.

Many students were about. On passing, they invariably glanced at the couple. There were some who took notice from afar and watched as they approached. To Sanshirō, the walk to Ikenohata seemed endless. Nevertheless, he felt no inclination to hop on the train. The two of them strolled at a leisurely pace. It was nearly three by the time they arrived at the exhibition. Out front was a curious placard. The characters for Tanseikai, as well as the accompanying graphics, struck Sanshirō as exceedingly novel. They were novel with respect to anything seen in Kumamoto, imparting a sense of eccentricity. Within was novelty galore. To Sanshirō's eye, though, the only defining feature was oil versus watercolor.

Nevertheless, he did discover likes and dislikes. There were works he might even consider buying. However, he had no eye for the quality of a piece. Realizing from the start that he was out of his element, he offered no comment on the works.

When Mineko asked his opinion, he would answer only vaguely. When she asked if a work was interesting, he would echo back that it seemed so. He appeared to be not the least bit engaged. Either he was too uninformed to express an opinion, or he was too conceited to converse on her level. If he were uninformed, then there was a charm in his lack of pretension. If he were conceited, then his reluctance to engage was quite odious.

There were numerous works from a brother and sister who'd traveled extensively in foreign lands. They shared the same surname, and their works were arranged in the same gallery. Mineko stopped in front of one.

"This must be Venice."

Sanshirō thought so too. It looked somehow like Venice. He wished he could float through it in a gondola. Sanshirō had learned the word gondola at his high school, and it had become one of his favorites. When he imagined riding in one, it was always with a woman. He gazed silently at the blue water, the tall houses on either side, the inverted houses reflected in the water, and the speckles of red that dotted those reflections.

"The brother's a much better painter," Mineko commented. Her meaning was entirely lost on Sanshirō.

"The brother?"

“This one’s by the brother, isn’t it?”

“Whose brother?”

Mineko gave him a puzzled look. “Those are by the sister, and these are by the brother, right?”

Sanshirō took a step back and re-examined the works they’d been viewing. They were all of a similar style, depicting scenes of foreign lands.

“There are two artists?”

“You thought there was only one?”

“Yes,” he replied blankly.

Finally, the two of them looked at each other. They both laughed. Mineko widened her eyes in feigned surprise. Then she dropped her voice and whispered, “Really now.”

She hurried a few steps ahead. Sanshirō remained in place and gazed again at the Venetian canal. From further on, Mineko glanced back. Sanshirō wasn’t looking her way. She stopped where she was and studied his profile.

“Satomi!”

Someone called to her, unexpectedly, in a loud voice.

Mineko and Sanshirō both turned to look. Near a door marked “office” stood Haraguchi. Partially visible behind Haraguchi was Nonomiya. Rather than toward Haraguchi, who had called her, Mineko’s gaze was fixed on Nonomiya, who stood further back. As soon as she saw him, she returned a few paces to Sanshirō’s side. With a subtle movement, she drew her mouth close to Sanshirō’s ear and whispered something. Sanshirō couldn’t make out what she said. Before he could inquire, she was off again toward the other two, giving them her greeting.

Nonomiya turned toward Sanshirō. “Keeping curious company,” he stated.

Before Sanshirō could say anything, Mineko responded. “A smart couple, don’t you think?”

Nonomiya made no reply. He turned around. Behind him was a large painting, the size of a tatami mat. It was a portrait, dark across its surface. The clothing and hat were indistinguishable from the dimly lit background. Only the face was white. It was a gaunt face with sunken cheeks.

“A copy, isn’t it?” Nonomiya inquired of Haraguchi.

Haraguchi was eagerly conversing with Mineko. -- The exhibition was nearing its end. There were few visitors anymore. In the early days, he’d come regularly to the office, but recently he seldom bothered. He’d

had some business to attend to today, for the first time in a while, and had dragged Nonomiya here with him. It was lucky they'd seen each other. Once this exhibition ended, he'd have to prepare for the next year's. He was exceedingly busy. Most years, the opening date coincided with cherry blossom season, but this year they were moving it up in accordance with several members' wishes. It was just like running two of them back to back. He'd have to work frantically. And he wanted to complete Mineko's portrait in time. He realized it was an imposition, but he had to paint her, even if they worked through New Year's.

"In return, you'll be displayed right here."

At this point, Haraguchi turned toward the dark portrait behind him. Nonomiya, all the while, was gazing blankly at this same work.

"What do you think of our Velázquez? Of course, it's a reproduction. And not a very good one, at that," he explained.

"Who did it?" asked Mineko.

"Mitsui. Mitsui's actually a talented painter. This isn't one of his better efforts." Haraguchi took several steps back and surveyed the work further. "The original was by a true master, at the peak of his art. Hard to imitate."

Haraguchi tilted his head. Sanshirō took note of his gesture.

"Have you seen the whole collection?" he asked Mineko. All of Haraguchi's words were directed toward Mineko.

"Not yet."

"What are your plans? How about breaking off and coming with us? I'll treat you to tea at Seiyōken. I have to stop there anyway to tend to some business. -- It's about a gathering. I need to consult with the manager, who's a friend of mine. -- Now would be the right time for tea. If we delay, then it'll be too late for tea and too early for dinner. How about it? Will you join us?"

Mineko looked at Sanshirō. Sanshirō seemed indifferent either way. Nonomiya remained where he was and expressed no interest.

"Since we're here, I think we should see the rest of the exhibition. Don't you think so?"

Sanshirō agreed.

"Let's do this then. There's a special gallery in back with works by the late Fukami. Go see those, and then come by Seiyōken on your way home. We'll go on ahead and wait for you there."

"That sounds good. Thank you."

“Fukami’s watercolors are different from others. You mustn’t view them with the same eye. Works by Fukami, of course, are quintessential Fukami. If you don’t focus on his subjects, but rather the refinement in his style, then you’ll find them intriguing.” Thus advising, Haraguchi left with Nonomiya. Mineko expressed her thanks and watched them go. They didn’t look back as they went.

Mineko turned on her heels and headed toward the special gallery. Sanshirō followed close behind. It was a poorly-lit room. In a single row on a long, low wall hung works by the master Fukami. As Haraguchi had said, they were predominantly watercolors. What struck Sanshirō most was the sparsity of color. What colors were used were attenuated and lacking in contrast. They were painted with such subtlety that only direct sunlight could have revealed them in full. At the same time, there was no sense of deliberate brushwork. Each work appeared as though finished in a single flourish. Pencil lines, visible beneath the colors, lent a candidness to the style. Human figures were slender, like threshing rods. Among these works, too, was a depiction of Venice.

Mineko approached it. “This one must be Venice too.”

“Yes,” Sanshirō replied. Hearing the word Venice brought a question to his mind.

“What did you say back there?”

“Back where?” she asked in return.

“Back there. When I was standing in front of the other Venice.”

She revealed her white teeth again, but she made no move to reply.

“If it wasn’t of importance, then you don’t have to tell me.”

“It wasn’t of importance.”

Sanshirō still seemed unconvinced. The time, on this overcast autumn day, was already past four. The light in the room was fading. Few visitors were about, and in this gallery it was just the two of them. Mineko moved away from the painting to face Sanshirō directly.

“It was Nonomiya. You know.”

“Nonomiya ...”

“You know how it is.”

Mineko’s meaning hit Sanshirō all at once, like a big wave swamping his emotions. “You were teasing Nonomiya?”

“Why would I do that?”

Her tone was pure innocence. Sanshirō, suddenly unnerved, stepped away in silence. Mineko followed closely.

“I wasn’t teasing you.”

Sanshirō stopped again. He was tall enough to look down on Mineko.

“Let’s drop it.”

“Was it really so wrong?”

“Please, just drop it.”

She diverted her gaze. They both walked toward the door. As they passed through, their shoulders brushed together. Sanshirō suddenly recalled the woman on the train. Brushing against Mineko evoked an acute sensation, as though from some dream.

“Are you really okay?” Mineko asked in a quiet voice. A small group of visitors approached from the other direction.

“Anyway, let’s go,” Sanshirō replied. They retrieved their shoes and stepped outside. Rain was falling.

“Are you going to Seiyōken?”

Mineko didn’t answer. They stood in the rain on the open field that fronted the museum. Fortunately, the rain had just started and was not falling hard. Mineko looked around and pointed out some trees in the distance.

“Let’s wait it out under those trees.”

It looked as though the rain would soon let up. The two of them ducked beneath a large cedar. It wasn’t the best tree for sheltering from rain. However, neither moved. They stood there, getting wetter as the rain continued. Both felt the chill. Mineko said his name. He’d been surveying the sky with knitted brows. He turned to look at her.

“Was it so bad, what I did?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But ...” she started, and drew nearer. “I couldn’t help myself, somehow. I didn’t really mean to slight Nonomiya.”

She fixed her gaze on Sanshirō. He recognized in her eyes a deeper appeal than her words conveyed. -- Behind her handsome eyelids, something seemed to say that, after all, she had done it on his account.

“Please, just drop it,” Sanshirō answered again.

The rain fell harder. Water dripped down on all sides. The two of them, retreating from the drops, huddled so close that their shoulders were all but touching.

Through the sound of the rain, Mineko said, “That money, it’s for you to use.”

“I’ll borrow what I need.”

“Please take it all.”