

I am a Cat – Chapter 4a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

As per habit, I steal into the Kaneda residence.

"As per habit," at this point, should require no explanation. Take "often" and square it, and you have "as per habit." Having done something once, one wants to do it again. Having given it two tries, one desires a third. Inquisitiveness is hardly unique to humans. Cats too, it must be acknowledged, are born into this world possessing this same psychological prerogative. Only after the third time does the term "habit" apply, and by that point, just as with humans, the deed is ingrained in one's routine. Before answering as to why I choose to frequent the Kaneda residence, let me pose a question. Why do humans draw in smoke through their mouths and expel it from their nostrils? It doesn't fill their bellies, and it does no favors to their circulatory systems, yet they continue, without hesitation or shame, to drink in and blow out. In light of this, no human should reprove my comings and goings at the Kaneda's. The Kaneda residence is my tobacco.

The term "steal into" might be misconstrued. It's a term applied to thieves, adulterers, and the like. I'm certainly not an invited guest of the Kaneda's. At the same time, I'm not there to pilfer bonito, nor am I there to conspire with the dog, that little thing with the spasmodic, crunched-up face. -- What then? Private eye? -- Absolutely out of the question. Of all the vile professions in this world, private eye and loanshark round out the bottom. I did on one occasion, on Kangetsu's behalf, show chivalry unbecoming of a cat and reconnoiter the Kaneda's. That was one time only though, and my actions since are firmly in keeping with feline integrity. -- Why, then, use "steal into," a dubious term? -- There's good reason. The heavens were formed, as I see it, to cover all things from above. Likewise, the land was formed to lift up all things from below. -- Even humans, who love quibbling to no end, cannot deny this truth.

How much effort did humans expend in the making of heaven and earth? None at all. How, then, do they presume to own what they didn't create? Let them presume what they will - they've no justification for excluding others. To parcel out this vast earth with fences and signposts, proclaiming who owns what, is akin to roping off the heavens, declaring this piece mine and that yours. If the ground can be cut into sections and sold, then the air we breathe can as well be carved into salable blocks. The air cannot be sold in blocks, and the heavens cannot be roped off. Is possessing the ground, then, any less absurd? As a believer in the Reality of Existence, and as an adherent to the Laws of Existence, I go where I please. I avoid, of course, those places I choose to avoid, but once I've set my sights on a place, be it north, south, east, or west, I proceed at my own deliberate pace, confident and composed. The Kaneda's and their like warrant no special deference. -- To a cat's chagrin, however, when push comes to shove we're no match for humans. In this transient realm, "might equals right," so to say, and a cat's rhetoric, no matter how sound, does not carry the day. Insistence and persistence, as Kurumaya no Kuro can readily attest, means risking

the wrath of the fishmonger's pole. When reason is on one's side one but power is not, one has two choices. The first is to bend one's logic and happily comply, and the second is to persist and evade. Of course I choose the latter. To avoid the fishmonger's pole, one must practice stealth. When others' premises entice, then there must one go. The Kaneda residence is mine to invade.

On stealing into the Kaneda's time and again, even with no intention of sleuthing, I've inevitably seen things I don't wish to see and learned things I don't wish to know. Madam Kaneda, for example, takes extra care in washing her face to wipe down her nose. Tomiko, the daughter, binges on Abekawa Mochi. Then there's Mr. Kaneda -- Mr. Kaneda, in sharp contrast to his wife, has a flat nose. It's not merely his nose, but his entire face, that's flat. It's so flat one has to wonder. Perhaps in his youth he took on the neighborhood bully, who subsequently collared him and pressed his mug into a wall. Fate took its course, and forty years hence he sports a flattened face. It's without doubt the calmest of faces, devoid of all severity, expressionless almost to a fault. No amount of anger can perturb it. -- Mr. Kaneda pats his own bald head while feasting on tuna sashimi. His height is low as his face is flat, so he clomps about in super high clogs and sports a super tall hat. The rickshaw driver finds this amusing and confides so with the houseboy. The houseboy compliments the driver on his keen observation. -- I could go on and on.

Lately I've taken to scoping the grounds. I pass by the kitchen entrance and enter the garden. I circle round to the far side of the berm and poke my head over the top. Only after confirming the shōji are shut and all is quiet do I make my way in. If I hear voices, or if I fear I might be seen from within, then I circle the pond to the east, cut up past the lavatory, and quickly duck under the veranda. I've wronged no one, so I've no need to hide and nothing to fear. But then again, these humans are a lawless lot, and I know it won't end well if I'm seized. In a world of bandits like Kumasaka Chōhan, men of virtue would guard their movements just as I do mine. Mr. Kaneda is a prominent industrialist, so of course he doesn't wield a long sword like Kumasaka Chōhan, but they say he's prone to disdain for his fellow man. If he's prone to disdain for men, then more so still for cats, I expect. However virtuous, a cat within these grounds is well advised to stay on its toes. Staying on one's toes is somewhat enthralling, and perhaps it's this thrill that draws me back time and again. At some later date, when I've dwelt on this further, I'll publish a full analysis of the feline psyche.

Wondering what's up today, I press my chin into the grass atop the berm and survey the scene. The drawing room panels have been thrown open, welcoming the warmth of spring, and in the middle of the room the Kanedas converse with a single caller. Unfortunately, Hanako's nose is pointed directly at my forehead, scowling at me from across the pond. It's the first time, ever, I'm scowled upon by a nose. Mr. Kaneda, as luck has it, is turned toward the caller. His face is in profile, with half of its flatness hidden from view. It's not even clear where his nose lies. Graying whiskers sprout indiscriminately and grow in thick disarray, and one can only conclude that there must be two openings somewhere above them. Letting my thoughts drift for a moment, I imagine how easily the spring breeze could blow if all it encountered

were smooth, flat faces. Among the three of them, the caller alone is of ordinary appearance. So ordinary, in fact, that no special feature avails description. Ordinary is all well and good, but not in the extreme. A featureless hall, or an unremarkable room, is tinged somehow in melancholy, affecting all who enter. Who is this man then, born into these glorious days of Meiji yet fated to inconsequential appearance? There's only one way to find out. I slip under the veranda to listen.

"... and the missus even went out of her way to call and ask ..." Mr. Kaneda, as always, is arrogant in his choice of words. He's arrogant, but not in the least severe. Just like his face, his language is flat and expansive.

"I see, that fellow taught Kangetsu -- I see, excellent thinking -- yes, I see."

This caller, it seems, is all-seeing.

"However, the effort was all for naught."

"As it might be, knowing Kushami -- I remember our boarding days, he was always vague and elusive -- It must have been quite trying." The caller turns toward Hanako.

"Trying' is hardly the word. Never, in all my years, in all my callings, have I ever been so mistreated." Hanako's nostrils flare as she huffs and puffs in her signature manner.

"Was he terribly disrespectful? He's always been an obstinate one -- at any rate, for ten years now, if a day, he's taught nothing but English Readers. That alone speaks volumes." The caller tactfully piles on further rebuke.

"It was hardly an exchange. The missus asked her questions, and in return got nothing but brusque replies ..."

"Totally inexcusable -- Erudition, in small measure, breeds self-conceit. Worse yet, the ones who struggle by are prone to delusion -- There's a whole unruly lot out there. They can't face up to their own inefficacy, so they lash out at success -- Fools being foolish, they think they've been robbed of their rightful due. Ah ha ha ha!" The caller guffaws in delight.

"Indeed. A preposterous lot! At the end of the day, they're ignorance run amuck, blind to the workings of the world, and self-indulgent to boot. I thought it best to take him down a notch, so we've gone at him a bit."

"I see. I trust that had the intended effect. No doubt all for the best." The caller, details aside, is keen to endorse his host.

"The problem though, Suzuki, is he's obstinate to his core. Even at the school, from what I hear, he speaks not a word to Fukuchi or Tsuki. One might take his silence as humble deference, but the other day, with no particular provocation, he came after our houseboy with his walking stick -- can you imagine, a man of thirty carrying on so? He must have some screws loose."

"Indeed. What would trigger such recklessness ..." The caller seems somewhat incredulous.

"Well all the boy did, as he tells it, is make some remark in passing. That's when the man came rushing out, in bare feet no less, brandishing his stick. Whatever the boy may have said, he's still just a boy, is he not? The other party's a grown man, with whiskers on his face, and a teacher to boot."

"Indeed. For a teacher to act so," the caller concurs. "For a teacher to do that," Mr. Kaneda adds. The three of them, it seems, have landed on a common contention. A teacher, however affronted or offended, must grin and bear it.

"Then there's that Meitei, a complete and utter kook, spouting out copious lies. Oddest man I've ever met."

"Meitei, huh? Still talking it up, is he? I take it he was there at Kushami's. Don't believe a word he says. He was part of our group, back in the day, who shared kitchen duty. His antics were too much, and we often butted heads."

"Who wouldn't butt heads with a fellow like that? Granted we all fib on occasion. When we've done wrong by someone, or when necessary to maintain appearances -- Who hasn't been deceitful at times? But that fellow's another thing altogether. He fibs for the sake of fibbing. He's not even after anything -- He's utterly brazen and seems to know no shame."

"Right you are. The worst of it is it's all for his own amusement."

"I go over there in all sincerity to inquire about Mizushima, and it all descends into chaos. I'm met with obstinance and offense -- Even so, I wasn't un beholden. I never impose without recompense, so I sent the driver back with a dozen bottles of beer. Can you imagine what happened? The man refused them outright, telling the driver to take them and be gone. The driver persisted, saying it was the least we could do. -- 'I take a little jam each day, but I never touch this bitter stuff,' he says, and disappears inside. Spiteful man! And such a lame excuse! Have you ever heard of such insolence?"

"How awful!" By now the caller is in fullest sympathy.

"That's why we've asked you here today." Mr. Kaneda is heard after a moment's pause. "We can rile this goon from the shadows, but that's hardly ideal ..." Mr. Kaneda pats his own bald head again, just as he does when feasting on tuna sashimi. Of course since I'm under the veranda, I don't actually see him pat his

head. The sound, however, has become sufficiently familiar. A Buddhist nun discerns in an instant the ring of the temple block. Likewise, I immediately tie this patting sound, even from under the veranda, to the bald head that produced it. "We'd like to impose on you if we may ..."

"If there's anything I can do for you, just name it -- My assignment to Tōkyō was entirely on account of your good graces." The caller happily accepts his charge. Judging from the manner of their exchange, it would seem Mr. Kaneda has the caller firmly in his pocket. The intrigue thickens. My outing this day was motivated by fine weather, with no anticipation whatsoever of stumbling on juicy intelligence. This is like making one's equinoctial pilgrimage to the temple and chancing to end up in the priest's chamber, feasting on botamochi. Under the veranda, my ears are perked, and I listen to hear what Kaneda wants of his caller.

"That crank Kushami, for whatever reason, has been putting bugs in Mizushima's ear. He's intimidated, it seems, that the Kaneda daughter is no worthy bride. -- Isn't that right, Hanako dear?"

"'Intimidated' is hardly the word. 'Who on earth would be dumb enough to marry that thing's daughter?' is what he said."

"What's he mean by 'that thing?' The insolence! Is he really so crass?"

"'Crass' is hardly the word. The cartman's wife heard it firsthand and rushed over to tell me."

"There you have it, Suzuki. Not a good situation, I'm sure you'd agree."

"Quite troubling indeed. This isn't the kind of thing to meddle in lightly, especially as a complete outsider. Even Kushami should know as much. I can't imagine what's got into his head."

"That's just it. I don't know how things are now, but I'm turning to you because you and Kushami were fellow boarders and close in your school days. Could you go and try to counsel him? He may still be brooding, but if he is it's his own fault. If he's willing to come around then I'll let up on him and do what I can to make it worth his while. On the other hand, if it's a fight he's after it's a fight he'll get. -- In short, he'd best understand whom he's messing with."

"I have to agree. Engaging in silly feuds will get him nowhere. He'll only diminish his own standing. I'll give him a good talking to."

"Keep in mind that our daughter has many suitors. We can't offer Mizushima any assurance with respect to his overtures. On the other hand, I hear good things about both his scholarship and character. You might suggest that if he were to earn a doctorate in the near future, or even show progress toward earning one, it would work in his favor."

"I'd be happy to encourage him. It might be just the motivation he needs."

"One more thing. I find it curious, and somewhat troubling, that Mizushima should look up to a crank like Kushami and let himself be influenced so. Of course, we have other options besides Mizushima, so if Kushami wants to pour cold water on things then it's no skin off my back ..."

"But it would be most unfortunate for Mizushima," added Madam Hanako.

"I've not yet met Mizushima, but he must know that marriage into our family would mean a leg up in the world."

"Mizushima seems to want this, but those two oddballs, Kushami and Meitei, are packing his head full of doubts."

"Unacceptable. That's no way for learned men to conduct themselves. I'll go over and see what I can do."

"I appreciate you taking the trouble. Also, Kushami knows Mizushima better than anyone, and the missus, as you've heard, was not at all satisfied by the exchange that took place when she called there the other day. So if you would, find out what you can about Mizushima's personal conduct, scholastic talents, and what not."

"Certainly. Today's Saturday, so if I stop there next he should be home. I'm not sure, though, where he's living these days."

"Take a right out of our place and follow the lane to its end. Then turn to the left and walk for a couple of blocks. You'll see a tumbledown black fence. That's the one," Hanako offers.

"It's close by then. Should be easy enough. I'll try dropping in on my way home. If in doubt I can always look for a nameplate."

"You may or may not find one. He uses sticky-rice to tack a calling card to the gate. Then the rain comes and washes it off. When the weather clears he tacks up a new one. You can never count on finding it there. You'd think he could just hang a wooden plate and spare himself the effort. Who knows what he's thinking."

"Well I'll be. At any rate, I'll keep my eyes open for the tumbledown black fence."

"No other place in the neighborhood is so squalid. You'll know it when you see it. If not, here's another good check. Look for weeds growing out of the roof."

"Sounds like quite the house. Ha ha ha ha."

If Suzuki's coming to call, then I'd best get there before him. I've heard enough here already. Following the underside of the veranda, I circle the lavatory to the west, round the far side of the berm, and emerge onto the lane. From there I hurry home, to the house with weeds sprouting from its roof, make my way to the veranda, and settle in as though nothing's up.

The master has spread a white blanket out on the veranda, plopped himself down on his belly, and is basking in the bright spring sun. The sun's rays are remarkably evenhanded, imparting the same radiant warmth to this humble abode with weeds sprouting from its roof as they do the Kaneda's fine drawing room. The blanket, though, is woefully ill-matched to the day at hand. It was woven as white, shipped and sold as white, and the master even went and bought it for its fair white color. -- However, that was twelve or thirteen years prior, and its time of whiteness is long past. It's now well into its discoloration phase, ashen-gray in hue. Whether there's enough life in it to go darker yet is an open question. It's thoroughly frayed and threadbare, and to call it a "blanket" anymore is downright presumptuous. The shorter word "blank" better describes it. In the master's mind, though, if it's lasted a year, or two, or five, or even ten, then it's good for a lifetime. He plays things day by day. And what is it he's doing, lying on his belly on his cherished blanket? His chin is propped in both hands, and a cigarette is wedged between the fingers of his right hand. That's it. Of course, there may be profound cosmic truths racing through his dandruff-covered head like chariots of fire, but I have to say, as the objective observer, I think it most unlikely.

His cigarette burns slowly toward his mouth. His attention is fixed on the smoke that rises from its tip. He follows the wisps with his gaze, oblivious to the growing column of ash that crumbles away and drops onto his blanket. The smoke floats and sinks on the spring breeze, drifting round in myriad layers and grazing the dark roots of the wife's freshly washed hair. -- Ah yes, did I neglect to mention the wife?

The wife's rear is facing the master -- What's this? Disrespect? There's no particular disrespect here. Etiquette, or lack thereof, is the subjective call of the parties involved. The master thinks nothing of lying there, chin propped in his hands, facing his wife's rear. The wife, for her part, thinks nothing of planting her rear end, in all its grandeur, directly in front of the master's face. There's no impropriety whatsoever. The two of them, within a year of their marriage, had thrown aside convention and discarded the constraints of matrimonial protocol. -- So what is the wife, with her rear end toward the master, up to? Taking advantage of the day's fine weather, she's scrubbed her long straight hair with funori and raw egg, draped it over her shoulders and down her backside, and is quietly at work with her needle, sewing a child's vest-shirt. In fact, she's brought her mousseline cushion and sewing box out onto the veranda to dry her hair, orienting her rear end toward the master in all due respect. Or it may be that the master came out after and set his face in proximity to her rear end. To continue where I left off, an abundance of black hair flutters loosely, and tobacco smoke weaves through its midst. The master gazes intently as the chance interaction sends shimmers through a heated haze. Smoke, however, does not linger in place but naturally rises upward. The master's eyes, fixated on the spectacle of smoke mingling with hair, are forced to follow

along. Starting at the wife's haunches, he slowly follows it up her back, over her shoulders, and along the nape of her neck. When it finally clears her neck and arrives at the crown of her head, an astonished gasp escapes his lips. -- There on the crown of her head, the head of his sworn partner for life, dead in the center, is a large round bald spot. Furthermore, the time of day is just such that the sun's warm rays bounce off the bald surface and hit him full on. Caught in the glare and taken aback by this unexpected discovery, the master stares blankly, oblivious to the blinding rays that stream through his open pupils. The first thought to enter his mind is of a candle tray, the one that adorned his family's Buddhist altar, an altar that had been passed down over generations. His family belonged to the Pure Land sect, whose adherents had long been known to lay out extravagant sums for their household altars. Among his childhood memories is an image of their double-doored shrine, overlaid in thick gold leaf, rising in the dim light of the valuables room. Suspended within was the candle tray, with its faintly burning flame visible even in daylight, contrasting clearly with its dark surroundings. The wife's bald spot immediately evokes the memory of this tray, seen so often as a child and indelibly impressed on his subconscious mind. Within a minute, though, the tray has faded away, replaced by recollections of Kannon's pigeons. Kannon's pigeons and the wife's bald spot would seem to bear nothing in common, but the master draws an intimate connection. Again going back to his youth, he would always buy peas for the pigeons on visits to Asakusa. It was two copper coins for a dish of peas, and the dish was of red earthenware. That earthenware, both in color and size, closely matched the wife's bald spot.

"It does look just like it," the master gives voice to his musings.

"What does?" the wife continues at her work.

"What I'm referring to is the big bald spot on your head. You're aware of it?"

"I am." The work of her hands doesn't miss a beat. She registers no particular concern over the matter. The quintessential unflappable wife.

"Was it there when we married, or has it come about since?" the master enquires. If it was there when they married, he can make the case for deception. He doesn't say as much, but he's thinking as much.

"I really don't remember. What's a little bare patch anyway?" The wife now is fully engaged.

"What is it? It's your own head, that's what it is." In the master's reply are tinges of irritation.

"What about my head, then?" the wife asks in return. All the same, she seems a bit concerned. She brings her right hand to her head and gives it a pat. "Oh my. It's grown. It's much larger than I thought." She's realized, it seems, that the spot is excessive in relation to her years.

"When a woman ties up her hair, it pulls here. Anyone develops a bare patch." She becomes a bit defensive.

"At that rate, all women'd be bald as kettles by forty. There's something wrong there, and it could be communicable. Have Amaki look at it, and don't delay." The master rubs his hand over his own head.

"What about you and your gray nose hairs? If balding is communicable then so is graying." The wife is cross now.

"There's no harm in gray nose hairs that no one notices. But the crown of the head -- especially for a woman in her youth. That much hair loss on the crown of the head is downright unsightly. You're defective."

"If I'm defective then why'd you marry me? To choose me as your bride then call me defective ..."

"I didn't know. Until this day, I had no idea. If you're so sure of yourself, why didn't you show me your head up front?"

"What nonsense! Tell me, where on this earth does the bride's head undergo a marriage inspection?"

"I can live with your hair loss, but I wish you were taller. You're shamefully short."

"You knew my height full well at first glance. Did you not accept it when you took me?"

"I did indeed. I accepted it, but I was thinking you'd grow. That's why I took you."

"I was twenty years old -- You think I'm going to put up with this?" The wife tosses aside her needlework and twists round to face him. The look on her face says he'd best start guarding his words.

"There's no law against growing after twenty. I figured I'd take you, feed you well, and you'd grow a bit." The master, in all seriousness, lays out his crackpot logic. Just then the bell sounds out vigorously from the front gate, followed by a vocal greeting. Suzuki has finally made his way, with weeds as his guide, to the humble abode of the eminent, yet still obscure, master Kushami.

The wife, setting aside their quarrel till later, picks up her sewing box and garment and retreats in haste to the living room. The master balls up his gray blanket and tosses it into his study. The maidservant, after some delay, comes in with a calling card. The master, on examining it, seems a bit unsettled. He instructs the maidservant to see the caller in, even as he marches off to the toilet, calling card in hand. I've no idea why he suddenly headed for the toilet. More curious still is that he would carry the calling card of one Suzuki Tōjūrō into the toilet with him. At any rate, my sympathy goes out to this calling card, compelled to follow him into the stink.

The maidservant arranges a cotton print seating cushion in front of the alcove and offers it to Suzuki. After she takes her leave, he pauses to survey the room. A replica of Mokuan's calligraphy hangs in the alcove. "Flowers blossom as spring covers the land," it reads. Higan cherry blossoms are arranged in a common greenware bowl of Kyōto make. He examines these and other items, one by one, as he makes his way round the room. Then suddenly, when he glances back at the cushion the maidservant offered, there upon it sits a cat. Needless to say, said cat is none other than yours truly. In this moment Suzuki experiences, deep down, so deep that it barely shows on his face, a ripple of distress. The cushion, without a doubt, was set in place for his use. This cushion, set in place for his use, has now been preempted by an odd creature that squats there as if it owns the place. This is the first thing that serves to rattle his nerves. Had the cushion remained as offered, unoccupied and open to the fancies of the spring breeze, he might well have seated himself on the stiff tatami, in show of deference, and waited for the master to intervene. Who is this, though, who without word takes a cushion meant for another. He might be inclined to yield to a fellow human, but to a cat, never! The loss of his cushion to a cat makes it all the more offensive. This is the second thing that serves to rattle his nerves. Finally, what bothers him most is the attitude of said cat. Far from showing even an inkling of sympathy, it crouches haughtily there on the cushion, a cushion to which it has no right, blinks its unfriendly round eyes from time to time, and gives him a look that all but says, "Who the hell are you?" This is the third thing that serves to rattle his nerves. If Suzuki is so annoyed then he should simply grab said cat by the scruff of the neck and resolve the matter. Instead, he just looks on in silence. There's no reason a full-grown human should fear to engage with a cat. What holds Suzuki back and keeps him from acting, I believe, is his sense of self-respect. He's determined to preserve his status as a dignified member of the human race. When push comes to shove, even a small child can fling me about, but bring preservation of dignity into the equation and even Suzuki Tōjūrō, right-hand man of Kaneda, is powerless against this great and hallowed cat, enshrined in the center of a small square of cushion. Unobserved though he is, to tussle with a cat over cushion rights is demeaning. To fight to secure one's seat, when the other party is a cat, is downright childish. It's all most amusing. To avoid dishonor, he suffers agitation. However, the more agitation he suffers the greater his enmity toward yours truly. From time to time he turns a sour face my way. For my part, I delight in his discontent. It's all I can do to keep a straight face.

As this silent drama is playing out between yours truly and Suzuki, the master comes back from the toilet still straightening his clothes. "Hey there!" he calls as he seats himself. There's no trace of the calling card he'd held in his hand. The name of Suzuki Tōjūrō, it appeared, had been condemned to stew out its days in eternal stink. Before I can reflect further on the terrible misfortune that befell that calling card, however, the master seizes me by the scruff of the neck and flings me onto the veranda, cursing me to boot.

"Please have a seat. It's been a while. What brings you to Tōkyō?" The master turns to his old friend and offers the cushion. Suzuki seats himself on it, but not before flipping it over.

"I've been busy and haven't found time to call, but I'm in Tōkyō at the main office now. I've actually been back for some time ..."

"Excellent. How long has it been? I don't believe I've seen you since you left for the countryside."

"Yes, it's been ten years already. Of course, I've made it to Tōkyō from time to time, but always on a hectic schedule. Never had time to stop and pay my respects. Please don't think badly of me. Company life is different from your line of work. They keep us running day and night."

"Ten years makes a different man." The master looks Suzuki up and down. His hair is neatly parted. His jacket is English tweed, accented with and a bright necktie. A gold chain, dangling from his breast pocket, sparkles. Based on his appearance, it's hard to picture him an old friend of master Kushami's.

"Indeed. Nowadays, I can't go out without tethered accoutrements." Suzuki seems overly conscious of his gold chain.

"Is that real?" the master asks, blunt and to the point.

"18-karat," Suzuki replies with a grin. "The years have changed you too. I hear you're a family man now. One child?"

"Nope."

"Two?"

"Nope."

"More still? Three then?"

"Three so far. Perhaps with more to follow."