

I am a Cat – Chapter 5a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

To write out all that happens in a day, without omission, and then to check it over, in itself requires a day. Much as I espouse the merits of descriptive writing, I have to confess that this is all too much for a cat. Accordingly, while the master's madcap words and eccentric behavior are nonstop and noteworthy, I must accept, with the greatest of regret, that I lack the faculty and perseverance to communicate everything in full detail to the reader. Regrettable though it is, it can't be helped. A cat, too, requires his rest.

As on a cold and blustery evening, when the wintry wind suddenly stops and a soft snow starts to fall, all fell still with Suzuki and Meitei's departure. The master, as usual, retreated to his study. The children settled down to sleep, pillows side-by-side, in the six-mat room. Separated by the fusuma, in the south-facing room, the wife nursed Menko, who was three by the old manner of reckoning. The sun had hurriedly set through the hazy spring sky and was long gone. The clogs of passersby resounded clearly, carrying into the living room, sounds so close one could touch them. The muted notes of a minteki, rising and falling from the boarding house down the way, tickled in one's ears from time to time. The outside world was largely shrouded in dusk. My belly, full from the evening meal, an abalone shell's worth of fishcake and broth, compelled me to take my rest.

I've heard it said there's a poetic movement afoot, where they write of "cat's romance" and such. I've also heard that on certain nights, in early spring, my fellow cats gallivant about, disturbing the peace. I've yet to feel any such stirrings myself. That being said, love's allure is universal. It's the way of all creatures, from the god Jupiter who sits on high to the earthworm and mole cricket who twitch in the ground, to surrender themselves. Is it unreasonable then, that we cats too would lose ourselves to romance and its rapture. I myself, as I think back on it now, was strongly drawn to Mikeko. They say even Tomiko, daughter of three-pronged-principle Kaneda and partaker of Abekawa Mochi, is in love with Kangetsu. With that in mind, who am I to dismiss the ravings of the world's male and female cats, their heads in the clouds on these loveliest of spring evenings, as mere obsessions of the flesh? Much as I might like, though, I can't be moved to join in. In my present state, all I desire is rest. Fatigue trumps romance. Ploddingly, I make my way round to the skirt of the children's bedding, set myself down, and pleasantly drift off.

When I open my eyes, the master has made his way, at some point, from his study to the bedroom, and he's already crawled into the futon laid out next to the wife's. It's the master's habit to always bring with him from the study, when it's time to sleep, a foreign text. However, once in bed he never reads even a page. Sometimes he merely carries his books in and sets them by his pillow, never to touch them. If he's not going to read a single line, then there's no sense in bringing them in, but try telling the master that. The wife laughs and chides him, but to no effect. Night after night, he goes to lengths to carry in books he

doesn't read. Sometimes he goes all out, coming in with an armload. There were successive nights, just a while back, where it was Webster's unabridged dictionary. I view it as an affliction of sorts. There are indulgent folk who only sleep with the soothing sound of steam swirling through a Ryūbundō kettle. Likewise, the master only sleeps with books at his pillowside. Such being the case, the master's books are not for reading, but rather a device for enticing slumber. Type-set sleeping aids.

Wondering what it might be tonight, I look over and see a thin red book lying half-open, just beyond the tip of the master's mustache. The master's left thumb is still wedged in its pages. This night it seems, in a rare outburst of exertion, he's made it through five or six lines. Next to the book lies his signature nickel pocket watch, casting a cool glow that clashes in tone with the coming of spring.

The wife has set the infant aside, let her head roll off of her pillow, and is snoring through a wide open mouth. When it comes to unsightly behavior, I can think of nothing worse than a human asleep with mouth open wide. We cats and our like, long though we live, are never known to disgrace ourselves so. Fundamentally, the mouth is for producing sound, and the nose is the instrument for breathing. Then again, there are indolent men in northern climes who open their mouths only sparingly and, as a consequence, speak in nasal tones. Closing off the nose and breathing solely through the mouth, though, is worse by far than nasal tones. For one thing, it puts one at risk should rat droppings, or similar such matter, fall from the rafters.

I look toward the children, and I find them asleep in disarray, no less so than the parents. The older sister Tonko, as if asserting her authority as the eldest, has extended her right hand and rests it on her younger sister's ear. Sunko, the younger one, has a leg draped across her older sister's belly in retaliation. The two of them have turned by ninety degrees since crawling into their bedding. Nevertheless, their awkward positions faze them not in the least, and both are sleeping soundly.

The light of spring is somehow special. Somewhere in this artless and most mundane of scenes lies an exhortation, in the form of a soft glimmer, to cherish moonlit nights. Wondering what hour it is, I survey the room. All around is quiet. The only sounds are the ticking of the wall clock, the wife's snoring, and further off the grinding of the maidservant's teeth. This maidservant, when told she grinds her teeth, will firmly deny it. Insisting that she can't recall, ever in her life, having done so, she neither seeks remedy nor offers apology. She simply persists in denial. Since the act is done in her sleep, there's no doubt, of course, that she doesn't recall it. However, absence of recollection does not negate the issue. There are some in this world who perpetuate misdeeds, all the while convinced of their own virtue. They believe themselves without fault, and one can only laud their innocence, but their impact on others is real, and no amount of innocence can wipe it away. This maidservant, I expect, is descended from gentlemen and gentlewomen of such mettle. -- The hour has grown quite late.

Someone, or something, makes two light taps on the kitchen shutter. Who would be calling at this hour? Probably the mice. Catching mice, I've decided, is not my thing. Let them scurry about as they please. -- Two more taps. Perhaps it's not the mice. For the mice it's much too guarded. The master's mice, just like the students at the master's school, are a rambunctious lot. It's their divine mission, they believe, to tear about at all hours of the day and night, leaving the poor man hardly a moment's peace. They've never been known to exercise any restraint. This can't be the mice. Just the other day, one of them stole into the master's bedroom, nibbled at the tip of his flat nose, pranced triumphantly, and retreated. Why should such critters be timid now? It can't be the mice. Next there's a scraping sound. The shutter's been raised, and at the same time the paneled shōji's been gently slid in its track. Absolutely not the mice. Someone's come. Neither Meitei nor Suzuki would call at this late hour without notice. Nor would they breach a locked door to gain entry. Could it be the cat burglar, that master of stealth who's said to be making the rounds? If it is the burglar, then I'm eager to see his face. It seems he's planted his muddy feet on the kitchen floor and proceeded two steps forward. In lieu of a third step, he stumbles over a loose floorboard and kicks up a din that resounds through the dark. I feel as though someone took a shoeshine brush and rubbed it the wrong way up my back. For a while, there are no further steps. I look at the wife. Her mouth is still open, and she's dreaming away as she breathes in and expels air. The master's thumb is still wedged in his red book, and he seems to be off in la-la land. Finally, I hear the sound of a match struck in the kitchen. Even a burglar, it seems, can't see in the dark like I can. That must be a terrible handicap.

All the while I crouch and think. Will the burglar proceed from the kitchen to the living room, I wonder, or will he take a left, cutting through the entryway, and enter the study? -- The footsteps, accompanied by the sliding of the fusuma, make their way to the veranda. He's circled round to the study. No further sounds reach my ears.

During this time, it finally dawns on me that I'd better wake the master and his wife without delay. But how to do it is another matter. Thoughts swirl in my head, but insight eludes me. Thinking I might bite onto the skirt of the bedding and shake it, I try several times. To no avail. Thinking I could rub my cold nose on the master's cheek, I draw near to his face. Still in his sleep, though, he extends his hand and gives me a sharp muzzle shove. The nose, for us cats, is a tender spot. It smarts keenly. There's no option left but to wake them with cries. I try to mew, but on this occasion, of all times, my throat is constricted, and the desired sounds never arise. What finally comes out, after concerted effort, is a disappointingly soft, low-pitched grunt. My all-important master shows no signs of waking. The sound of the burglar's steps suddenly resumes. They creak along the veranda, drawing nearer. They're finally here. All is lost. Abandoning my efforts, I quickly hide myself between the fusuma and wicker trunk, eyes peeled to see what might come next.

I hear the burglar's footsteps approach the bedroom shōji, where they stop dead. I hold my breath, wondering frantically what he intends to do. It occurred to me later that in this frame of mind, with all

one's spirit ready to burst through one's eyes, to catch a mouse would be no great chore. Owing to the burglar, my mind was newly expanded. I really should thank him. In the next moment, though, the center of a square in the shōji, just above the third crosspiece, begins to change color, as though wetted by the rain. A light red color appears, gradually deepening until the paper tears and a red tongue wags in the gap. Then the tongue disappears into the dark. In its place an eye, glimmering frightfully, appears on the other side of the hole. The burglar's eye, no doubt. Oddly enough, though, the eye seems not to survey the room, but instead to be trained directly on me in my hiding place behind the wicker trunk. To be glowered at so, even for less than a minute, surely shortens one's days. Just when I can no longer take it, when I'd resolved to make my break, the bedroom shōji glides open. The burglar, finally, after much anticipation, is right before my eyes.

It's at this point, in the flow of the narrative, that I'm favored with the honor of introducing this curious and unanticipated burglar to my dear readers. Before doing so, however, there's a matter on which I'd like to proffer an opinion for my your due consideration. The gods of old are revered as omniscient and omnipotent. The Christian God, in particular, has carried this mantle all the way to today's twentieth century. What the ordinary man views as omniscience and omnipotence, though, can also, as occasion may have it, be taken for ignorance and impotence. Such a situation is clearly paradoxical, and when I think that I'm the first, since the heavens and earth were formed, to have unearthed said paradox, I can't but blush with pride. I'm no common cat, if I may say so myself. Allow me a moment to expound, and to also, I hope, impress upon arrogant human minds the majesty of feline intellect. They say that God created all things. It follows then that man, too, is God's creation. In fact, as I understand it, the scriptures clearly note this. Concerning man, it's indeed the case that man himself, after millennia of self study, wonders ever more at the mystery of his own existence, and at the same time acknowledges more and more the omniscience and omnipotence of God. Let me call to your attention, then, the fact that even as mankind proliferates, no two human faces are the same. Facial implements are of course limited. Sizewise, all faces are more or less the same. Put another way, the ingredients are identical. In spite of this, no two faces emerge alike. In light of the fantastic variety of faces formed from such basic ingredients, one can't but stand in awe of the Creator. Such diversity could only arise from immense creative power. The greatest human artists, exhausting themselves in their craft, produce no more than a dozen or so memorable faces. That being the case, one can't but acknowledge the deftness of God, who has undertaken, single-handedly, the creation of all mankind. Nowhere among men is such ability to be seen, and it therefore warrants the label of omnipotence. Human beings, on this point, stand greatly humbled in the presence of their Creator. And such humility, from the vantage of men, is entirely reasonable.

However, from the vantage of a cat, the same facts can be viewed, conversely, as proof of God's incompetence. If God is not utterly incompetent, then certainly, I'm inclined to conclude, He's no more competent than man. Men credit God with creating as many faces as there are men, but was such variation, from the outset, part of the plan? Or was the intent that every man have the same face, and try as

He might, face after face, the operation faltered into disarray? It's not clear. The construction of men's faces may be seen as testimony to God's success, but can it not also be regarded as the vestiges of God's failure? It can just as readily be assessed as omnipotence or impotence. Regrettably for humans, their eyes lie together on a single flat surface. They can't look left and right at the same time, so they only ever see half of the world. It could even be said that, as they stand in self-conceited awe of their Creator, they're blind to this simple truth of their everyday existence. While diversity of creation may be challenging, exhaustive replication is harder still. If commissioned to paint two identical portraits of the Madonna, Raphael would struggle just as much as if he were asked to produce two entirely dissimilar works. In fact, he would likely struggle more with the replication. If you tasked Kōbō-Daishi with writing the characters for "kūkai" today with the same brushwork he applied the day prior, he might well find it more arduous than if tasked with originating a unique script. Human language is learned by imitation. To acquire the words they use, humans do nothing more than repeat the sounds of those around them, be they mothers or nurses. They imitate as best they can. The pronunciation of their words, passed down through imitation in this manner, will naturally exhibit changes over the course of ten or twenty years. Flawless imitation, it's clear to see, is beyond their capabilities. Pure imitation is indeed demanding. Accordingly, indistinguishable humans, all stamped out like porcelain dolls, would strongly suggest an omnipotent God. On the other hand, what we see before us today, a bewildering sea of varied human faces wandering under the sun, better suggests an impotent God.

I can't recall now how I ended up on this tangent. Even humans are prone to losing their train of thought, so there's no reason to hold a cat to higher standards. At any rate, when I glimpsed the face of this burglar, who had slid aside the bedroom shōji and was now before me on the threshold, the above thoughts naturally arose in my mind. Why did such thoughts arise? -- If asked why, I may need a moment to reflect. -- What was it now? Ah yes, here it is.

When I looked on the face of this burglar, standing quietly before me now, his face -- where usually I'd expect to count its execution as a mark against the competence of its Creator, the features of this face, in an instant, flipped my expectations on their head. It all hinged, indeed, on these features. His face was, in all truth, the spitting image of our fine and beloved Mizushima Kangetsu. My familiarity with burglars is of course quite limited, but I did have an image in my mind, in line with their shady deeds, of what they should look like. Their eyes, fanning out from either side of flared nostrils, were beady like copper coins, and their hair was close-cropped. Or so I had decided. What I saw now, though, was the polar opposite, which just goes to show that one mustn't give rein to one's fancy. This burglar was tall and slim, with dark, straight eyebrows that rendered his countenance smart and imposing. He looked to be in his late twenties, the same as Kangetsu. If God is capable of creating two such identical faces, then who am I to question His competence? In fact, so identical were they that I even wondered if Kangetsu hadn't lost his mind and unleashed himself into the thick of the night. Only the absence of dark whiskers below his nose cued me in that they were not one and the same person. Kangetsu cuts a striking figure. He's a well-crafted piece of

work, more than adequate to captivate one Kaneda Tomiko, whom Meitei equates to a living and breathing merchandise voucher. This burglar, however, when it comes to looks, and no doubt when it comes to attracting the ladies, is every bit Kangetsu's equal. If the Kaneda daughter finds favor in Kangetsu's facial features, then it's only just that she find favor, likewise, in the features of this burglar. Just or unjust aside, it's elementary logic. She's sharp of mind and quick to learn, so doubtless she can grasp as much on her own. Such being the case, if offered this burglar in Kangetsu's place, there's no reason she couldn't embrace him wholeheartedly and build with him a happy and harmonious union. Should Kangetsu somehow succumb to Meitei's sermonizing, laying asunder a romance for the ages, then there's always this burglar. Having surmised the progression of affairs thus far, my concerns for the young lady were put to rest. The existence of this burglar, in this space between heaven and earth, was assurance enough of Miss Tomiko's future bliss.

The burglar had something tucked under his arm. On closer observation, it was the old blanket that the master had tossed into the study earlier. The burglar was wearing a striped cotton half-coat, tied at the waist with a sash of gray-blue Hakata silk. His legs were bare from the knees down, exposing his pale shins. He had just lifted one foot and placed it on the tatami mat when the master, who was dreaming of a red book devouring his thumb, suddenly thrashed about in his sleep and called out, "It's Kangetsu!" in a loud voice. The burglar dropped the blanket and quickly withdrew his foot. In the shadow of the shōji, I could see his slender shins as he labored to stand stone still. The master, with a groan and a mutter, pushed away the red book and scratched at his dark arm as though beset by the itch. After this he reverted back to sound slumber. In shouting out to Kangetsu, it seems, he'd been talking in his sleep. The burglar remained standing on the veranda for a time, observing the state of the room. Finally, satisfied that husband and wife were both sleeping soundly, he stepped again onto the tatami. This time, "It's Kangetsu!" was not repeated. The burglar's trailing foot followed into the room. The large room had been amply illuminated by the spring nightlight, but now the burglar cast a shadow across its middle. The wicker trunk, and a good portion of the wall above my head, went dark. Turning to look, I saw the profile of the burglar's face, bobbing vaguely in shadow, two-thirds of the way up the wall. Dashing as he was, his face in shadow was oddly contorted, like a taro root mounted on a pair of shoulders. He glanced down at the sleeping face of the wife and then, for whatever reason, couldn't seem to suppress a grin. Amazingly, his grin too matched Kangetsu's to a tee.

By the wife's pillow was a rectangular box, about twelve centimeters square and half a meter long. Its lid was secured with nails. Its contents, it seemed, were of due import. It was, in fact, a gift of yams from one Tataro Sanpei, who hailed from Karatsu in Hizen-no-Kuni and had recently traveled home for a visit. It was hardly the norm to adorn one's pillowside with yams, but the wife was known to store high-grade sugar, which she used for stewing, in her dresser drawers. Suitability of place was clearly not her forte. As far as she was concerned, whether storage of yams or storage of pickled radishes, the bedroom served just fine. The burglar though, being only human, had no idea with what sort of woman he was dealing. It was

natural enough to assume that anything held so carefully next to one's person must be of great value. He lifted the box and appeared satisfied that, in line with expectation, its heft was significant. The thought that he was finally seizing these yams, that this dashing burglar was pilfering yams, suddenly struck me full on with its comedy. Caution called for silence, though, and it was all I could do to restrain myself.

The burglar, at last, wrapped the yam box carefully in the old blanket. He looked around for something with which to tie it. Fortunately, the master had discarded his silk crepe sash onto the floor before turning in. The burglar tied his bundle tight with the sash and slung it easily over his back. His appearance, as a consequence, was suddenly ungainly. Next, he stuffed the children's padded vests into the master's knitted long johns. The thighs bulged and swelled, like a rat snake that's swallowed a frog -- or perhaps a pregnant rat snake about to give birth is the better description. At any rate, it produced an odd effect. Anyone doubting should try it themselves and see. The burglar secured the long johns by wrapping them round his neck. As I wondered what was next, he spread the master's pongee jacket wide, placed the wife's sash, the master's undergarments, and various other articles on top of it, then bundled it all up neatly. I couldn't help but admire the efficiency and dexterity of his movements. After that he tied the wife's sash bustle and undergirdle into another bundle to hand carry. Looking around for anything else of worth, he spotted the master's pack of Asahi cigarettes and dropped them into his sleeve pocket. He then took a single cigarette from the pack and lit it from the lamp. Before the smoke, which he'd relished by drawing in deeply and exhaling at leisure, had completed its circuit of the frosted lamp cover and risen away, the burglar's footsteps had receded down the veranda and out of earshot. The master and his wife dozed on. Human beings are astoundingly numb to the world around them.

I'm due for another rest. All this storytelling wears me down. ... I slept soundly, and next thing I know, the spring sky is shining bright and clear, and the master and his wife are conversing with a police officer at the side door.

"So it would seem he entered here and made his way to the bedroom. And the both of you were sound asleep through it all?"

"Correct," the master replies a bit sheepishly.

"In that case, at about what time would you say the theft occurred?" The officer poses a problematic question. If they'd known what time they'd been robbed, then they needn't have been robbed in the first place. The master and his wife, failing to grasp as much, work to formulate a response.

"About what time was it?"

"I wonder." The wife ponders the question. She seems to imagine she can somehow reason it out.

"When did you go to bed last night?"

"After you."

"Yes, I was in bed before you were."

"When was it we woke?"

"It must have been around seven thirty."

"Then about what time would the burglar have made his entry?"

"It must have been during the night."

"Of course it was during the night. The question is what time."

"We'll need to think on it further before we can give you an answer." The wife is still working at it. The officer, who'd only asked as a matter of protocol, couldn't care less about the time of the theft. He'd gladly accept any arbitrary response, even a fabrication. The couple's rambling discourse is beginning to try his patience.

"Shall we just say then that the hour of the theft is uncertain?"

"That seems the case," the master replies in his characteristic manner.

"Well then, you'll need to file a formal written complaint, to the effect that on this thirty-eighth year of Meiji, such-and-such day of such-and-such month, after locking up and going to bed, a certain storm door was removed and entry gained through a certain entrance, with so many of such-and-such articles being taken from the premises. Label it a complaint, not a report. Address it against no one in particular," the officer instructed matter-of-factly.

"Do we need to list out each article taken?"

"Yes, in tabular format. For example, each article of clothing, along with its respective value. -- No, I don't need to survey the scene. What's gone is gone." The officer makes his exit with an air of indifference.

The master fetches his brush and inkstone, places them in the center of the room, and summons the wife. "We need to draft our complaint, detailing all that was taken. State the missing items, one by one. Go on now, what's missing?" the master addresses the wife as though cross-examining her.

"Enough already. You think you can grill it out of me, just like that?" The wife, wrapped in a narrow sash, plunks herself down on the floor.

"What's the idea, dressing yourself like some washed-up, post-town hussy? Where's your obi?"

"If you're offended, then buy me a new one. Post-town hussy or whatever, I can't wear what I don't have."

"He even made off with your obi? Rotten scoundrel. Well then, let's list that first. What sort of obi was it?"

"What sort of obi? How many do you think I own? Black satin with a silk crepe lining."

"One obi of black satin with silk crepe lining -- approximate value?"

"Six yen or so, I'd say."

"Brazen extravagance. Don't spend more than a yen and a half on the next one."

"Try finding an obi at that price. That's why they call you cold-hearted. You happily outfit yourself, then dress your wife in rags."

"At any rate, what's next?"

"A silk-cloth haori. It was given to me by Aunt Kōno. Today's silk-cloth doesn't compare to it."

"We can dispense with the commentary. How much?"

"Fifteen yen."

"Who do you think you are, dressing yourself in a fifteen-yen haori?"

"It wasn't your money, so you've no business harping."

"What's next?"

"One pair of black socks."

"Yours?"

"Those were yours. Twenty-seven sen."

"What else?"

"One box of yams."

"He even took the yams? Is he planning to stew them, or do you think he wants to grate them for soup?"

"How would I know? Why don't you pay him a visit and ask?"

"Their value?"

"I've no idea what yams cost."

"In that case, let's just say they're twelve yen and fifty sen."

"That's absurd. They may have come all the way from Karatsu, but they can't be worth twelve yen fifty."

"Didn't you say you have no idea what they cost?"

"I don't have any idea what they cost, but I do know that twelve yen fifty is excessive."

"If you've no idea, then how can you rule out twelve yen fifty? What kind of logic is that? That's why they call you Otanchin Palaeologus."

"What's that?"

"Otanchin Palaeologus."

"And what exactly is Otanchin Palaeologus supposed to mean?"

"Don't worry about it. Let's keep at this -- what about my clothes?"

"What about them? I want to know what Otanchin Palaeologus means."

"Never mind what it means."

"Would it kill you to tell me? Or are you just mocking me again, veiling derision in words you know I don't know?"

"Stop talking nonsense, and let's get on with it. What else is missing? If we want our things back, we need to get our complaint in."

"A lot of good a complaint will do us now. I rather think you'd best explain this 'Otanchin Palaeologus' business."

"Give it a rest. I told you never to mind."

"Then never mind what else is missing."

"You're a numbskull. Do as you please then, but don't look to me to draft your complaint."

"Don't look to me to tell you what's missing. And it's your complaint. I don't care if you draft it or not."

"I won't then." With that, the master, as he's wont to do, rises to his feet and heads for the study. The wife withdraws to the parlor and seats herself in front of her sewing box. For the next ten minutes, neither does anything but glower in silence at the shōji between them.

This is how things stand as Tatara Sanpei, purveyor of yams, makes a lively entrance. Tatara Sanpei was once a boarding student in this house, and he's now finished his law degree and taken a position in the mining division of a certain firm. As a budding industrialist, he's a younger version of Suzuki Tōjūrō. Sanpei still frequents his former teacher's humble abode, happy to while away a Sunday in idle conversation. He's a familiar face in the house.

"Mighty fine weather today, ma'am, wouldn't ya say?" Greeting the wife in his Karatsu dialect, or what whatever it is, he plops himself down in front of her, one trousered knee drawn up.

"Well! Tatara-san."

"Is the master off somewhere?"

"No, he's in his study."

"He shouldn't read so much. He'll ruin his health. It's Sunday, after all."

"No use telling me. You'll have to tell him yourself."

"That I'll do, but ..." As he's talking, he surveys the room. "I don't see any young ladies today," he remarks in part to the wife. As soon as he does so, Tonko and Sunko come rushing out from the next room.

"Tatara-san, did you bring us sushi?" Tonko, the older one, remembering his promise of the other day, presses him straightaway. Sanpei scratches his head.

"I see you remembered. I'll bring it next time. I forgot it today," he confesses.

"How could you?" the older one asks. "How could you?" her younger sister follows suit. The wife, her mood finally lightening, floats a slight smile.

"I didn't bring sushi, but how about those yams? Did you try them?"

"What yams?" the older sister asks. "What yams?" her younger sister echoes her again.

"You haven't tried them yet? Have your mother cook some up. Karatsu yams aren't like Tōkyō yams. You're in for a real treat." Sanpei puts in a proud word for his home region.

"Tatara-san, it was so kind of you to bring those by the other day," the wife adds, as if only now remembering.

"How were they? Did you try some? I packed 'em tight in a special box to keep 'em from breakin'. I take it they're still intact?"

"To tell the truth, after all your effort, we lost those yams to a burglar."

"A burglar? The guy must be a nutball. Either that or he's crazy 'bout yams." Sanpei is somewhat beside himself.

"Mother, was a burglar here?" the older sister asks.

"Yes, dear," the wife replies gently.

"If there was a burglar -- that means -- if there was a burglar -- what was his face like when he broke in?" This time the younger sister questions her mother.

The wife seems unsure how to respond to this offbeat question. "He had a scary face," she replies, and looks to Tatara for help.

"You mean scary like Tatara-san?" the older sister asks back unsparingly.

"What a thing to say! Watch yourself, young lady."

"Ha ha ha ha. Is my face really so frightful? Dear me." Tatara scratches his head. There's a bald patch, about an inch in diameter, on the back of his head. It appeared about a month prior, and he'd been to the doctor, but there seemed to be no easy cure. The older sister, Tonko, was the first to notice it.

"Tatara-san has a shiny spot too, just like Mother's."

"Enough from you already!"

"Mother, did the burglar last night have a shiny spot too?" Another question from the younger sister. The wife and Tatara burst out laughing despite themselves. However, it's impossible to carry on any conversation with the girls pestering them so, so the wife proceeds to shoo them out of the room. "You girls go off now and play in the yard for a bit. We'll have some nice treats when you come back in."

"What gave rise to your bald patch?" she turns to Tatara in earnest.

"Eaten away by bugs. And it doesn't seem to want to grow back. You too?"

"Not quite. Nothing to do with bugs. When a woman ties up her hair, it tugs a bit and thins from the stress."

"All bald patches are caused by bacteria, or so I'm told."

"Not in my case."