

I am a Cat – Chapter 9b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"Hey, what's up? Don't you know you have guests?"

"Oh, it's you, huh?"

"What kind of reception is that? If you're home, then answer. I thought the place deserted."

"I was thinking."

"So deeply you couldn't bid your guests welcome?"

"I suppose I could have."

"Cocky as ever, aren't you?"

"I'm striving of late to refine my mind."

"Whatever suits your fancy. If your refined mind precludes you from greeting callers, though, folks will be quite put out. Don't refine yourself beyond reach. Anyway, I haven't come alone. I'm here with a noteworthy guest. Come and meet him."

"Who did you bring?"

"Never mind who. Just come and see."

"Who is it?"

"Never mind, just come."

Thinking this another Meitei ruse, the master rises, hands still in his pockets. Following the veranda, they make their way to the parlor. Only after entering the room does the master notice an elderly gentleman, sitting bolt upright on his heels and facing the alcove, quietly awaiting his host's appearance. Reflexively, the master's hands withdraw from his pockets and he promptly lowers himself to the matted floor, his back against the partition. At this, both visitor and host face west toward the alcove, ill-positioned for exchange of greetings. The older generation are loathe to breach etiquette.

"Please do seat yourself." The old man gestures toward the cushion in front of the alcove. Until several years ago, the master was indifferent as to who sat where in his parlor. Then he attended a certain lecture, where he learned that the alcove is a representation of the raised floor on which emissaries of the shogunate were received. Since learning such, he exercises due deference in distancing himself from this

seat of honor. Particularly in the presence of an unknown elderly gentleman, who's no doubt versed in such formalities, he's not about to breach etiquette. Unable to engage in preliminaries, he simply lowers his head. "Please do seat yourself." He matches, verbatim, the words of his guest.

"No, I'm afraid I can't impose so. Do seat yourself."

"No, on the contrary. Do seat yourself." All the master can manage is to parrot his guest's prodding.

"You mustn't be so modest, really. It only puts me to shame. Feel free, please, to take your seat."

"Such modesty ... I'm afraid ... somehow." The master's face reddens as he fumbles for words. His refined mind, it seems, has left him in the lurch. Meitei, who until now has been observing all this from behind the fusuma with an air of amusement, decides enough is enough. He gives the master a gentle push forward.

"Now take your place already. With you back here on the partition, there's nowhere for me. No need to hold back. Let's go." Thus intervening, he breaks the deadlock. The master, having no other recourse, occupies the forward seat.

"This, Kushami, is my uncle from Shizuoka, of whom you've heard me speak. My dear uncle, allow me to introduce Kushami."

"How do you do? I understand Meitei calls frequently and is graced with the honor of your hospitality. Such being the case, I was thinking to call myself should the opportunity ever arise. Happily, my business today has brought me hereabouts and presents me the chance to stop and pay my respects. My sincerest hope is for from this day a long and fruitful acquaintance." The old man smoothly rattles off a somewhat antiquated greeting. The master, reticent by nature and having few associations, even less so with such elderly gentlemen, is out of his element and a bit flustered. Caught off guard by this outpouring of formalities, he forgets completely Korean ginseng and the candy-striped envelope. It's all he can do to try to compose a response.

"I too ... I too ... was thinking of calling ... at any rate, it's my pleasure." He lifts his head off the tatami a touch, only to see that the old man's head is still in the full depths of a deferential bow. In awkward panic, he lowers his own head back to the mat.

Having carefully measured his breaths, the old man raises his head. "I resided many years here, rendering long service to the shogunate. Since the downfall, though, I've moved away and rarely return. These days, when I do come back, I've no idea what's what -- without Meitei to guide me, I can't get around. 'What was once open water is now a mulberry grove.' So the saying goes, but the shogunate lineage, from its founding, endured on some three hundred years ..." The old man is starting in, so Meitei intervenes to head off a tedious ramble.

"The days of the shogunate may have been wonderful, my dearest uncle, but the Meiji era too is not without its charms. In the past, for example, I don't suppose there was any Red Cross."

"Indeed not. There was nothing of the sort. Until Meiji, in fact, to look on the face of a prince or princess was forbidden. Owing to my long life, I was able to take part in today's general assembly, where I heard with my own ears the voice of his Highness the Imperial Prince. After today, I can happily go to my grave."

"Just seeing the sights of Tōkyō, after a long absence, is reward in its own right, but it was a general assembly of the Red Cross, Kushami, that drew my uncle here from Shizuoka today. I accompanied him to Ueno earlier, and we're on our way back now. As you can see, he's wearing the frock coat I ordered up from Shirokiya."

Sure enough, the uncle is dressed in a frock coat. The frock coat he is dressed in, however, fits poorly on all counts. The sleeves are too long, the collar is agape, fabric pools across the back, and it's tight under the arms. Even with intent, one could hardly craft a more ill-fitting suit. Furthermore, the white collar is unseated from the white shirt. On each upward glance, the Adam's apple peeks through the gap. It's unclear if the black necktie is there with the collar or there with the shirt. Letting the frock coat pass, the old man's silver topknot too is a sight to see. Then there's his fabled iron-ribbed fan, duly positioned on the mat by his side. The master by this time has regained his senses, and his refined mind, conditioned through focused training, can indulge in observation of the curious figure before him. Meitei's depictions of this uncle, which he'd suspected were hyperbole, prove in fact to be understatements. If the master's pockmarks are a relic of the past meriting study, then even more so are this man's topknot and iron fan. The master is curious to hear the story behind the fan but hesitates to ask point-blank. At the same time, he's obliged to carry the conversation.

"I suppose it was well attended?" He leads off with a commonplace question.

"The place was packed. And everyone I met looked me up and down -- folks these days are a curious lot. It didn't used to be so."

"Exactly. It didn't used to be that way." The master talks as though he, too, is an old-timer. However, this needn't be construed as pretension. It's more likely the case of the master's fuzzy mind failing to check or measure his words.

"I'll tell you, what caught the most notice was this helmet cracker."

"Your iron fan? It looks quite heavy."

"Try holding it. It's surprisingly heavy. Uncle, be so good as to hand it to Kushami for a bit."

The old man lifts it with due ceremony. "If you'll be so good." He passes it to the master. The master, like a pilgrim at the Kurodani temple in Kyōto humbly handling Renshōbō's long sword, weighs it in his hands for a moment. "I see." He passes it back to its owner.

"Folks call this an iron fan, but it's nothing of the sort. It's properly referred to as a helmet cracker. The iron fan is altogether different."

"I see. And what was it used for?"

"For cracking open helmets -- when an enemy was stunned, this rendered the coup de grâce. These came into use in Kusunoki Masashige's time ..."

"Uncle, do you suppose this was used by Masashige himself?"

"I can't say whose it was. I do know it's very old, perhaps dating from the Kenmu era."

"It may be a Kenmu piece, but it sure did a number on Kangetsu. You see, Kushami, our return presented a good opportunity to cut through the university, so we stopped by the science department to see if we could get a look at the physics lab. This helmet cracker, being cast from iron, set the magnetic instruments awry, causing a bit of a stir."

"It couldn't have been us. This is Kenmu work of the finest grade. No need for concern."

"It wasn't a problem of quality, it was a problem of iron. Kangetsu made that clear."

"Kangetsu was that fellow polishing the glass sphere, was he not? Unfortunate task for an enterprising young man. Is there nothing better he can do?"

"For better or worse, that's research. That sphere, when polished to perfection, is his ticket to scholarly acclaim."

"If polishing spheres is the ticket to scholarly success, then anyone can succeed as a scholar. I could do it. A glassware proprietor could do it. They have such men in China, known as sphere crafters, of no particular import." Thus making his case, he looks to the master for confirmation.

"Indeed." The master concedes.

"Today's scholarship is all focused in the physical sciences. That's fine in and of itself, but who does it serve when calamity calls? Things were different back in my day. The samurai lived their lives on death's doorstep and were trained to face crises with stoic resolve. As I'm sure you'll agree, this was hardly so simple as polishing spheres or twisting wires."

"Indeed." The master can only acquiesce.

"But uncle, while they weren't polishing spheres, weren't they largely just sitting around?"

"You completely miss the point. Their's was no easy task. Mencius taught how the freed soul strives to recover itself. And Shao Yong preached on freeing the heart to focus the mind. Among the Buddhists, too, was the great monk Zhongfeng who advocated persistence of purpose. These are concepts not easily grasped."

"They're certainly beyond my grasp. How does one even approach them?"

"Have you never read 'The Unfettered Mind' by the renowned priest Takuan?"

"Nope. Never even heard of it."

"Where to train one's thoughts. Train your thoughts on your adversary's motions, and your adversary's motions occupy your mind. Train your thoughts on your adversary's long sword, and your adversary's long sword occupies your mind. Train your thoughts on your adversary's intention to cut you down, and your adversary's intention to cut you down occupies your mind. Train your thoughts on your own long sword, and your own long sword occupies your mind. Train your thoughts on not being cut down, and not being cut down occupies your mind. Train your thoughts on the stances and postures of those around you, and the stances and postures of those around you occupy your mind. There's no right place to train one's thoughts."

"Well recited, and without missing a line. Your memory's sharp. That's a lengthy passage. Did you get that, Kushami?"

"Indeed." The master again reverts to his standard response.

"Think about it. It's true, is it not? Where to train one's thoughts. Train your thoughts on your adversary's motions, and your adversary's motions occupy your mind. Train your thoughts on your adversary's long sword, ..."

"Thank you uncle, but Kushami's already well versed in such matters. His days, of late, are spend in his study, toiling at length to refine his mind. Rest assured, his thoughts are high and away. He's oblivious even to callers."

"Good for him, then -- you yourself should do likewise."

"Heh, heh, heh. If only I had the time. You're a man at leisure, but you mustn't imagine that others, too, have idle time."

"It seems to me you've idle time aplenty."

"Remember, though, that even times of leisure give rise to busy moments."

"There you go with your careless notions again. That's why I'm telling you, discipline would only do you good. The saying goes like this. 'Even the busiest of times give rise to moments of leisure.' I've never heard the converse, that times of leisure give rise to busy moments. Is that not the case, Kushami?"

"I guess I would have to agree."

"Ha ha ha ha. Seems I'm outnumbered on that one. How about this then? What would you say uncle to Tōkyō's finest eel? It's been a while, huh? Let's go to Chikuyō, my treat. It's only a short train ride."

"Much as I love eel, I promised Suihara I'd pay him a call. I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

"Ah, Sugihara? An old timer, but still in the best of health."

"It's Suihara, not Sugihara. You need to stop muddling folks' names."

"Look how he writes it. It's Sugihara."

"He writes it Sugihara, but it's read Suihara."

"That's odd."

"What's odd about it? The readings of names have never followed convention. Take the earthworm. It's written 'kyūin' in Chinese characters but read as 'mimizu' in colloquial Japanese. And 'mimizu' stems from 'memizu,' meaning 'unseeing.' Same goes for frogs, with 'gama' read as 'kaeru.'"

"One learns something new each day."

"Knock a 'gama' senseless and watch it 'change' from upright to overturned. Hence 'kaeru.' And from 'kaeru' the common name 'kairu.' The 'sukigaki' fence is 'suigaki,' and the term for turnip, 'kukudachi,' derives from 'kukitachi,' meaning 'upright stalk.' I could go on, but my point is this. Only a bumpkin reads 'Suihara' as 'Sugihara.' Take care, or you'll only embarrass yourself."

"Understood. At any rate then, it's off to Suihara's, is it? Just when I'd thought we were done for the day."

"If you're not so inclined, you've no need to come with. I'll go on my own."

"Can you get there yourself?"

"Not following my own two feet. Call me a cart. I'll ride from here."

The master accommodates by dispatching Osan to the rickshaw station. The old man, after lengthy salutations, dons his bowler hat over his topknot and takes his leave. Meitei remains.

"So that's your uncle."

"That's my uncle."

"Indeed." As soon as they've re-seated themselves, the master slips his hands back into his pockets and sets to thinking.

"Ha ha ha. Larger than life, is he not? I count myself lucky to have such an uncle. Wherever we go, he's true to character. I take it you found him duly imposing?" Meitei reflects on the impression his uncle made on the master and revels in the afterglow.

"I wouldn't say I found him so imposing."

"If not, then you're better-steeled than most."

"I will say, however, I did find him impressive. He places great import on cultivation of the mind, and for that I admire him."

"Do you now? I can just picture you at sixty, in the same vein as my uncle, loosing touch with the times. Guard yourself. Forever behind the times is no way to live."

"You're always averse to falling behind the times, but depending on place and time, falling behind can put one ahead. Think about it. Today's intellectuals are forging ahead with abandon, but where to? Where is there ever any satisfaction? What Eastern scholarship lacks in assertion, it makes up double in grace. It speaks to the heart." The words imparted to the master during his recent exchange with the philosopher resurface, expressed as though original thought.

"What's the world coming to? You and Yagi Dokusen are two of a kind."

On hearing the name Yagi Dokusen, the master is taken aback. As it turns out, the philosopher who recently ventured into the master's lair, lectured him on the error of his ways, and then quietly went his way, was none other than this very Yagi Dokusen. And the master's assertion, just now so weightily articulated, is nothing more or less than the parroting of said Yagi Dokusen's words. Meitei's immediate conjuring of the man's name, when the master had assumed he was not in the know, puts immediate brakes on the master's heretofore posturing.

"You've heard Dokusen articulate his views, then?" Sensing he's on thin ice, the master sounds out Meitei.

"What's to hear or not hear? That fellow's views, whether today or a decade back, when we were all still students, haven't changed in the least."

"Truths are truths. It's this consistency, perhaps, that lends his views credence."

"It's patronage like yours that keeps the man going. Starting with his name Yagi, he's the complete package. It's no coincidence that he bears the name 'Yagi' and sports a goat-like beard. That beard, in shape and form, is just as it was during our days in the residence hall. Even his name, Dokusen, is part and parcel of his persona. He once came to stay with me for a night. As usual, he argued his case for cultivating a placid mind. On and on he went, reconstituting the same notions again and again. I suggested we'd best get some rest. He brushed my suggestion aside, making it clear he wasn't the least bit tired, and expounded ad nauseam on his theory of passivity. I finally had to shut him down. 'You may not be tired,' I told him, 'but I'm ready to drop. Please, let's get some rest.' He did, at my urging, finally turn in -- that was well and fine, but then that night a rat crept out and bit the tip of his nose. An uproar ensued. His placid mind, in the face of existential threat, soon succumbed to panic. 'I can feel the toxins! They're coursing through my veins! You have to help me!' His urgent appeals compelled me to do what I could. Having no other recourse, I went to the kitchen and smeared a sticky layer of cooked rice over a slip of paper. That did the trick."

"How so?"

"I told him it was an imported liniment, developed by a renowned German physician. It was used to great effect, in places like India, as treatment for venomous snakebites. All he need do was apply it over the wound."

"Even back then, you were quite the trickster."

"... Dokusen, good-natured soul as he is, bought it hook, line, and sinker. His fears aside, he nodded off and slept most soundly. When he woke in the morning, his signature goatee was duly adorned with sticky strands of liniment. It was quite the sight."

"But he's come a long way since those days."

"You've seen him lately?"

"He called last week, and we spoke at length."

"That explains it. I thought I sensed Dokusen. He's sold you on his doctrine of passivity."

"I have to admit he impressed me. So much so that I'm making some effort to govern my own mind in like fashion."

"Making an effort is well and good, but taking others' words at face value is never wise. The problem with you is you're far too impressionable. Dokusen talks a good game, but when push comes to shove, he's just like you or me. You'll remember that quake of nine years back? There was only one fellow jumped from the second floor of the residence hall and hurt himself. Dokusen."

"He gave good reason for his act."

"He did. The way he told it, it was all for the best. The mind of the Zen practitioner is honed so sharply, he explained, that physical reaction is spontaneous. While others were still flustered by the onset of the tremors, he was already out the window. This swift response bore testimony to the fruits of his mental training. I can see him still, limping about on his hurt leg while beaming with pride. Never one to admit to failure. When a fellow spouts Zen this or Buddhist that, you'd best be on your guard."

"I wonder." The master's conviction seems to be waning.

"Let me guess. When he called the other day, did he prattle off some nonsense about a Zen priest?"

"He used the expression, 'flash of a sword slicing the spring breeze' in his telling."

"That's it, the flash. His stock story, unchanged through all these years. Back in our lodging days, there was no one in the hall unfamiliar with Mr. 'flash in the pan' and his trademark story. Best of all was when we'd get him flustered and confused. 'Flash of a sword' came out as 'flash of a spring breeze' or what not. Next time you see him, give it a try. As he settles into his narrative, challenge him with various objections. Before long, he'll lose his composure and set to bumbling."

"Few men can hold the line against a mischief-maker of your caliber."

"But who, indeed, is the mischief-maker? I've deep disdain for Zen priests and any others who peddle enlightenment. There's a temple near my place called Nanzōin, with a retired priest of eighty or so. The other day, evening showers moved in, and lightning struck the inner garden where this old one sits, rending a pine tree to splinters. The esteemed priest, as it's told, kept his composure throughout, fully unperturbed. On inquiring further, it came to light that he kept his composure because he's deaf as a doornail. If Dokusen wants to enlighten himself that's fine, but he oughtn't be roping in others. I can name two men at least who, owing to Dokusen, went out of their minds."

"Who are they?"

"I'll tell you. One was Rino Tōzen. Inspired by Dokusen, he set off for Kamakura, where he immersed himself in Zen study, eventually losing his wits. You're familiar with the Engakuji Temple, I take it, and the rail crossing out front. He made his way into that crossing and perched himself on the rail. Claiming

the power to stop trains, he commenced with meditation. The engineer spotted him and stopped the train, sparing his life, but that's not the end of it. His next claim was the indestructibility of his own flesh. Fire couldn't burn him, and water couldn't drown him. He plunged himself into the temple's lotus pond, trailing bubbles as he ambled about."

"Was that his end?"

"Fortunately, at just that moment, a priest from the training hall happened by and pulled him out. After that, though, he returned to Tōkyō and met his end from peritonitis. The cause of his death was peritonitis, but the cause of his peritonitis was that temple diet of boiled barley and pickled daikon. In this sense it was Dokusen, albeit indirectly, who brought about his demise."

"When it comes to unbridled devotion, no doubt there are cons as well as pros." The master's face betrays his growing unease.

"Exactly. Among our peers there's yet another done in by Dokusen."

"Seems he sows destruction. Who else did he get to?"

"Tachimachi Rōbai. Indoctrinated by Dokusen, he rambled at length on eels seeking heaven. In the end, he finally went full tilt."

"Full tilt meaning what?"

"Meaning eels seeking heaven, and pigs becoming hermits."

"I'm not following you."

"It's simple. If Yagi's the 'solitary hermit' then Tachimachi's the 'pig hermit.' When it comes to lust for food, Tachimachi's unrivaled. While given over to lust for food, he aspired too to the austere life of the Zen priest. Torn by irreconcilable longings, he was doomed from the start. It took a while for us to catch on, but his words grew stranger with time. He called at my place once, and you know what he said? He asked if cutlets don't alight in the neighboring pines. Then he told how fishcakes, in his native country, ply the waters on wooden floats. His words alone were cause for concern, but then he pressed me to join him in digging for sweet potatoes in the culvert. That's when I knew he was gone. A few days hence, our pig hermit was taken into the ward at Sugamo. It's not clear that a pig can be a bonafide madman, but nevertheless, owing to Dokusen, there he resides. Dokusen's sway is nothing to sneeze at."

"Is he still there in Sugamo?"

"I expect so. He seems to harbor delusions of grandeur. He's decided, of late, that the name Tachimachi Rōbai is unworthy of his stature. He's taken to calling himself Tendō Kōhei - lord of heaven and earth made flesh. A worrisome turn of events. Go and see him sometime."

"Tendō Kōhei?"

"Tendō Kōhei indeed. Not bad for a madman, wouldn't you agree? Depending on how he writes it, it also channels Confucius. At any rate, he's convinced that the people of this world are lost, and it's his calling to redeem them. He fires off letters to friends and anyone else. I've received four or five myself. Two were so lengthy I had to pay additional postage."

"That letter that came to me, then, was no doubt from Rōbai."

"You got one too? Interesting. In a red envelope?"

"Yes. Red in the middle with white on both sides. Highly unusual."

"He orders those special, all the way from China, I'm told. One white is the way of heaven, and the other white is the way of the earth. The red in the middle is humanity. According to our pig hermit's design ..."

"A lot of meaning in just an envelope."

"He's a man of great passion, as madmen are wont to be. However mad his mind might be, though, his lust for food seems unabated. His letters, curiously, always touch on food. Was yours the same?"

"Indeed. It mentioned sea slugs."

"No surprise there. Rōbai loves sea slugs. What else?"

"Then there was this and that about fugu and ginseng."

"Fugu and ginseng - an artful combination. I suppose the idea is to brew up ginseng to counter the toxins of fugu."

"I'm not sure that's what was meant."

"If not then no matter. At any rate, the man is mad. Was that all?"

"There was more. He also wrote, 'Dearest Kushami, why not have some tea?'"

"Ah ha ha ha. He really outdid himself with the tea. Was clearly aiming to win you over. A grand success. Hat's off to Tendō Kōhei." Meitei, finding great amusement in it all, breaks into laughter. The master,

having learned that this letter, which he'd perused over and over with no small degree of reverence, is the work of a madman, is distressed by a growing feeling that his new-found passion and hard work have all been in vain. He's also a bit sheepish in thinking how he toiled over the prose of an unhinged mind, relishing each line. Finally, he wonders whether his susceptibility to the lure of a madman is perhaps owing to the strained state of his own wits. He holds his silence, his face an uneasy mixture of anger, shame, and concern.

Just then the front latticework door is slid open with a rattle and two heavy footsteps echo in the lower entryway. "Hello there. Anyone home?" A loud voice calls out in greeting. Meitei, who's much lighter on his feet than the languid master, usurps the role of the maidservant in receiving the guest. "Welcome," he calls as he floats across the intervening chamber in two quick steps and flits down into the entry hall. Meitei's unannounced visits, while at times disruptive, are not without their merits. Once settled in, he makes himself at home, as much as any boarding student, and is happy to run out and entertain callers. That being said, he is still a guest in the house, and it's unheard of for a guest to run and receive callers while the master remains rooted in place. Any ordinary host would follow on out front, but not master Kushami. Unconcerned, he remains at rest on his cushion. At rest, though, does not mean at ease, just as a calm surface does not mean stillness within.

Meitei, having flitted out to the entry hall, converses at length with the caller. Finally, he turns back toward the inner room and calls out in a loud voice. "I'm afraid, good master, the efforts of your presence are required. You'll have to come help." The master, pried from his resting place, ambles slowly out, hands still in his sleeve pockets. Entering the hall, he sees Meitei hunched down on the raised floor, a calling card in his hand, all the while engaging the caller. His manner shows no vestige whatsoever of formality. On the calling card is "Yoshida Torazō, Investigating Officer, Metropolitan Police Department." Accompanying Torazō is a tall and dashing fellow, in his mid twenties, dressed head to toe in navy blue cotton with thin vertical stripes. Oddly enough, this fellow too has his hands in his sleeve pockets, mirroring the master. He stands stock still, saying not a word. Thinking his face is somehow familiar, I train my gaze on him. On closer inspection, he's more than familiar. He's the very late-night trespasser who robbed the place a while back, swiping our yams to boot. Here he stands now, this time in broad daylight and by way of the front door.

"Listen, this gentleman's an investigating officer, and he's caught the fellow who robbed you the other day. He's come today to inform you that the matter will require your appearance."

The master, finally understanding the reason for the call, turns toward the burglar and respectfully bows his head. He's concluded all too hastily that the burglar, who cuts a better figure than Torazō, is the officer. The burglar, though no doubt caught off guard, is understandably disinclined to self identify as the villain. He reacts neither one way nor another. His hands remain in his sleeve pockets. Given that they're cuffed, he couldn't extract them if he wanted to. Most any modern man would read this response for what it was,

but the master is not in tune with the modern world. And when it comes to government officials or police officers, he's deferential to a fault. The power of authority, in his mind, is something to be feared. He knows full well, of course, that police officers and such are in fact just security detail collectively hired by the populace, but when face to face with a flesh-and-blood officer he can't help but grovel. The master's father, in former times, was the village headman of an outlying district, a role in which he only persevered through incessant kowtowing to superiors. The sins of the father, as fate has it, are now the sins of the son. It's a most unfortunate state of affairs.

The officer, mildly amused, is floating a grin. "You'll need to appear at the Nihonzutsumi branch office by nine tomorrow morning. -- What was it that was taken?"

"What was taken was ..." The master, having started his reply, can unfortunately no longer remember. All that comes to mind is Tatara Sanpei's yams. The yams are neither here nor there, but only a dimwit opens his mouth and trails off mid-sentence. It was he himself, and no one else, who'd been burglarized, and it was his place, as a man of competent intellect, to articulate the missing articles. "What was taken was ... one box of yams." He manages to finish his sentence.

In this moment the burglar, unable to suppress a grin, buries his face in his collar. Meitei lets out a laugh. "Those must have been quite some yams," he remarks. The officer, somehow, maintains a professional air.

"You won't be getting your yams back, but you'll get most everything else. -- At any rate, come and see. We'll need to produce an official receipt for goods returned, so be sure to bring your seal. -- Be there by nine. The Nihonzutsumi branch. -- Within and under the Asakusa Police Precinct. Have a good day then." Having said his say, the officer departs. The burglar follows him out through the gate. Not having free use of his hands, he's unable to latch it. The master, a mix of deference and annoyance flashing cross his countenance, puffs up his cheeks and bangs it shut himself.

"Ah ha ha ha. You hold the police in awfully high regard. If only you were always so humble, you'd be much the better man. I'm afraid, though, your civility starts and ends with officers of the law."

"Well he did take the time to call and serve notice."

"It's his business to call and serve notice. You needn't show him any special deference."

"But it's no ordinary business."

"Of course it's no ordinary business. Sleuthing is a vile business. A cut below all others."

"You'd best guard your words, or you'll end up in hot water."

"Ha ha ha. In that case, I'll lay off on detectives. It's well enough to revere law enforcement, I suppose, but when it comes to revering burglars, I have to say that seems a bit too much."

"Who ever revered a burglar?"

"You did."

"I wouldn't know a burglar to revere."

"Wouldn't know one? Did you not just bow your head to one?"

"When?"

"Just now. Your head all but brushing the floor."

"Nonsense. That was a detective."

"What detective would call in such attire?"

"Any detective. A detective's attire's a tool of his trade."

"Stubborn as ever."

"It's you who's stubborn."

"For one thing, then, would a detective, calling at a private residence, just stand there hands in pockets?"

"Nothing precludes a detective from keeping his hands in his pockets."

"My arguments are falling on deaf ears. Consider this, though. All the while you were bowing your head, the other party was standing stock still."

"Perhaps that's modus operandi for detectives."

"I can't, it seems, shake your convictions. I'd just as well talk to a wall."

"Then talk away. You're quick to decide who is and isn't a burglar, but were you there to witness the crime? You see things as you imagine them to be, and then you dig in your heels."

Meitei, at this point, seeming to have concluded that the master is beyond any hope of redemption, falls uncharacteristically silent. The master, having forced Meitei into silent submission for the first time in a while, beams with triumph. In Meitei's eyes, the master's unyielding obstinance merely diminishes his worth as a man. The master sees things differently. By prevailing in his perseverance, he's elevated

himself above the likes of Meitei. In the world of men, such inconsistencies abound. A man digs in his heels and relishes his wins, oblivious to the damage he's inflicted on his own character. Curiously enough, the stubborn one remains convinced, till the end of his days, that he's earned respect from his fellow men. Others may disdain him, or even begin to shun him, but to no effect. He persists in his bliss. It's this form of bliss, as I understand it, that they refer to as the ignorant bliss of a pig.

"At any rate, what's your plan for tomorrow?"

"I figure I'll go. I have to be there by nine, so I'll leave here at eight."

"What about the school?"

"I'll take the day off. The school can cope." The master is energized and talking big.

"Good for you, then. They won't object?"

"What can they do? I work on salary, so they've no basis for docking my pay. It'll be fine." The master speaks with full candor, not so much conniving, but rather just matter-of-fact.

"Given that you're going, do you know how to get there?"

"What's to know? I'll hire a cart." The master dismisses this difficulty as inconsequential.

"When it comes to knowledge of Tōkyō, you and my country uncle are equally adept."

"Then prepare to be impressed."

"Ha, ha, ha. The Nihonzutsumi branch is no ordinary place, you know. It's in Yoshiwara."

"It's in what?"

"Yoshiwara."

"You mean that Yoshiwara? With the red-light district?"

"The one and only. Check it out while you're there." Meitei banters with his usual flair.

The master, on hearing the name Yoshiwara, seems to waver a moment before steeling his resolve. "Yoshiwara or red-light district be damned. If I'm going, I'm going." His tenacity is a bit over the top. He doubles down and digs in, as fools are wont to do.

"It'll be something new for you. Expand your horizons."

With that, the affair with the detective has run its course and wound down. Meitei talks of this, that, and nothing till sundown. Then, fearing his uncle's ire should he return too late, he takes his leave.

After Meitei's departure, the master downs a hasty dinner and withdraws to his study, where he folds his arms again and ruminates as follows.

"Yagi Dokusen, whom I'd been taken with and thought to emulate, is according to Meitei patently unworthy of emulation. Furthermore, the views he espouses can't be said to be all that sensible, and just as Meitei says, he and his ilk may well be a bit unhinged. Not to mention the two madmen who number among his disciples. I'd best be careful. If I get too close I'm liable to be sucked in and likewise indoctrinated. That Tendō Kōhei, who turns out to be none other than Tachimachi Rōbai, and whose prose impressed me so that I thought him a great intellect, is in fact a raving lunatic bidding his time in Sugamo. Meitei's telling of things is often over the top, but it's true, I suspect, that he's anointed himself the divine purveyor of Heaven's will, propagating his missives well beyond the asylum walls that hold him. I may myself be slowly losing my mind. Like minds gather, they say, and like attracts like. If I subscribe to the views of a madman -- or at least am moved by his prose -- am I not myself perhaps borderline mad? If not cast from the same mold, I'm aligning myself and taking up common quarters. Only one thin wall separates me from them, and who's to say it will hold? With a single bump it could crumble down, and there I'd be, before I knew it, face-to-face with the merry company of madmen. I shudder at the thought. Come to think of it, my thoughts of late wax more and more eccentric, so peculiar at times as to strike me almost as alien. I don't believe my spinal fluid has been chemically altered, but that aside, what's most curious is that as thoughts take shape and emerge as words, they're often these days void of moderation. Flames don't shoot from my tongue, nor do cold blasts of air pour forth from my armpits, yet unsettling odors do carry from the roots of my teeth, and my nerves set to tingling in strange ways. This really isn't good. If affliction has taken hold, I may be already gone. Fortunately, at least, I've not harmed anyone. As I've not disturbed the peace, I've not been run out of town, and am I not still abiding here as a good citizen of Tōkyō? Forget about questions of passivity or assertion. I need to check myself, starting with my pulse. My pulse seems normal enough. Perhaps I'm running a fever. Here too, my head doesn't seem overly warm. I still fear something's wrong though."

"If I continue like this, comparing myself to madmen, then I'm bound to see similarities, and I'll never conclude but I'm one with their lot. My approach is all wrong. I've been holding up the madman as the standard against which to assess myself, and that's why I've reached the conclusions I've reached. Conversely, if I compare myself against men of sound mind, then I may well come to an opposite conclusion. I'd might as well start with those closest at hand. First of all, there's that uncle of Meitei's, the gentleman in the frock coat, who called today. 'Where to train one's thoughts ...' I'm not so sure about that one. How about Kangetsu? He sets out in the morning, lunch in hand, and works till sundown polishing spheres. Not sure about him either. Who else ... Meitei? His mission in life is the socialization of foolery."

Good-humored, for sure, but nevertheless unsound. Then there's ... Madam Kaneda. Her vile nature precludes any hope of sensibility. Totally off her rocker. Then there's Mr. Kaneda. I've never met him, but his devotion to such a mate, and the absence of strife in their marriage, surely marks him an outlier. And what is an outlier but a man gone bonkers? Mr. Kaneda, too, can be lumped in with the misfits. Who else? -- Plenty more. All those gentlemen of Rakuunkan. They may be young in years, but when it comes to frenzied antics they're a force to be reckoned with, fully capable of dragging a whole generation into the dirt. Thus counting folks off, most would seem to belong to the same camp. This is unexpectedly comforting. Society, as it turns out, is perhaps nothing more than an assembly of madmen. Madmen come together, sharpen their swords, push and pull, argue and quarrel, rant and rave, and in the process vie for society's spoils. Society as a whole is an outsized body whose individual cells are madmen, constantly breaking apart and reforming, reforming and breaking apart. Amongst all this, any number of men, exercising some degree of reason, may discern the true nature of things and endeavor to right the ship. It's to preserve the status quo, is it not, that asylums are built and such men locked away? If that's the case, then it's men of sound mind who sit behind high walls, and it's madmen who run amok in the world. A solitary madman is mad through and through, but madmen en masse, taking up a semblance of authority, can readily set new norms. It's not uncommon for the maddest of the lot to seize upon wealth and might, wield them to his own advantage over lesser madmen, and be feted as a man among men. What has this world come to?"

The preceding depicts, unabridged and unadulterated, the workings of the master's psyche on this particular evening as he pondered the world from under the light of his solitary lamp. The opacity of the master's intellect is on full display here. Despite his finely cultivated Kaiser Wilhelm whiskers, he's a hopeless dullard incapable of discerning sanity from madness. Furthermore, after duly applying all of his analytical faculties to the matter, he left empty-handed with no resolution. Time and again, he lacks the mental tenacity to wrestle things to ground. The one noteworthy characteristic of his musings, which is worth bearing in mind, is that firm conclusions are just as soon grasped as the smoke that swirls from his nostrils.

I am a cat. And as I'm a cat, some may question how it is that I can note down in detail the inner workings of my master's mind. Truth be told, it's not very hard. I've mastered the art of mind reading. Never mind when or how I mastered it, just suffice it to say that I have. When I climb onto a human lap and nod off, my pliant fur conforms to the contour of my host's belly. In that moment, like an electric spark jumping a void, all of my host's inner thoughts take shape, plain as day, in my mind's eye. Just the other day, in fact, as the master was gently stroking my head, a terrible notion took root in his thoughts. It occurred to him, fully out of the blue, that this pelt of mine, if flayed from my body and sewn up into a padded vest, would have to be remarkably warm. A reflexive shudder immediately raced down my spine. Truly frightful. At any rate, though, it's my great honor that, through the good fortune of my faculties, I've been able to report to my readers the series of thoughts that wound their way through my master's head on this particular

evening. That being said, after asking himself, "What has this world come to?" the master drifted off into sound slumber. When he wakes in the morning his mind, no doubt, will be perfectly blank. Should his thoughts turn again to the subject of sanity, he'll have no choice but to start anew from the very beginning. Such being the case, there's no assurance he'll follow the same course and arrive in the same manner at, "What has this world come to?" However many times he starts anew though, and however many paths he traverses, one can rest assured that he will arrive in some manner at some form of, "What has this world come to?"