

I am a Cat – Chapter 10a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"You'd best get up. It's seven already." The wife calls out from the other side of the fusuma. The master, whether awake or still sleeping, has his back to her and produces no sound. To produce no sound is the master's trademark. If absolutely compelled, the most he might manage is a short "um." Even eliciting this short "um" is no easy feat. There's a certain refinement in a man who guards his words, but among the lady folk such men are seldom endeared. Given that even the master's wife struggles to tolerate him, it's no great leap to suppose that the rest of womankind should wholly disdain him. A question posed in song asks, "Shunned by his own folk, what muse should ever adore him?" and so it goes with the master, whose wife just barely abides him and whom other women find patently unappealing. There's no particular need here to deliberately dwell on the master's lack of appeal to the opposite sex. I only mention it for the sake of the master himself, lest he delude himself and attribute the wife's cold shoulder to the different stars under which they were born.

If at the very time he prescribed, even when given notice, he dismisses that notice, turning away and producing not the slightest response, then as the wife sees things, she's done her duty and any blame rests with the husband. Let him be late if he wants to be late. Thus washing her hands of the matter, she shoulders her broom and duster and marches off to the study. The sound of patting and sweeping, echoing from various parts of the room, is the signature of her cleaning and dusting routine. Whether this routine is for exercise, or whether it's some form of sport, is of no concern to a cat with no such responsibilities. Though I've no need to involve myself, I must remark that the wife's approach to the matter seems utterly pointless. The reason I deem it pointless, if I may be allowed to expound, is that she only cleans for cleaning's sake. She runs her duster over the shōji panes, then slides her broom over the tatami mats. With that, she regards the room as clean. Effect and outcome concern her not in the least. Thus it is that the places that are cleaned are always clean, and the places with clutter and dust remain cluttered and dusty. As in the tale told of Confucius and the routine sacrifice of the lamb, perhaps it's best she continue doing as she does. However, it's hard to see where her cleaning serves the master. Given that it serves no purpose, it's all the more laudable that she goes to lengths, day in and day out, to repeat it. Despite the long-standing custom of the wife cleaning the house, and despite the ingrained mechanics of the associated activities, this wife's cleaning does nothing to further the art. Going back to before she was born, or even back to before there were dusters and brooms, cleanliness has advanced not the least. As I see it, this relationship between the wife and cleaning is akin to those dubious associations drawn between disparate elements in a formal logic proposition.

Unlike the master, I'm by nature an early riser, and even at this hour, my stomach's already grumbling. As the lowly cat, I've no hope of being fed in advance of the family members. Such is a cat's lot, but it's not inconceivable that enticing vapors could already be wafting up from some savory broth in my clamshell

bowl, and just the thought of this spurs me to my feet. When one's hope lies in fickle fantasies, and one knows them to be fickle, it's best to stay put and just relish the hope for hope's sake. That being said, I can't refrain from searching out the visions playing in my mind's eye. Even in the face of certain disappointment, there's no peace to be had until that disappointment is met head on. Unable to contain myself, I crawl out to the kitchen. First stop is my clamshell bowl in back of the stove. As expected, it's licked clean from the evening prior. In silence and stillness, it glows with the weak rays of early autumn sun that spill through the opening over the transom. Osan has scooped freshly-cooked rice into the wooden serving vessel and is stirring a pot on the earthenware brazier. The outside of the iron pot is adorned with myriad streaks of dried-on rice broth that's leaked down its sides, looking in places like it's been plastered over with yoshino paper. As the rice is done and the pot well along, the time is right, as I see it, for feeding the cat. Where nothing is ventured, nothing is gained, and there's no harm in trying. I may not get what I'm after, but I at least intend to give it a go. Though a free lodger in this house, I'm hungry nonetheless. Thus determined, I let loose with a series of mews, buttering up, appealing, and also tinged with a hint of discontent. Osan pays me no heed. She's a homely thing, and always has been, and never been known to exude any feminine warmth. It's my mission, though, to cry up to her just so and elicit some sympathy.

I try again with my very best mews. These are first-rate, if I do say so myself, tinged with tragic resolve and evoking the image of a lonely wanderer too long in distant lands. Osan, fully unmoved, again pays no heed. It may be this woman is deaf. A deaf woman could hardly function as a maidservant, so it may be the case she's selectively deaf to cats. There's such a thing in this world as colorblindness. Those afflicted believe they are seeing just fine, but any doctor would declare their eyes deficient. Osan is seemingly mew blind and thus deficient, which makes her haughtiness all the more comical. In the night, when I've pressing business and make it known that I need to go out, she never opens the door. When on rare occasions I do make it out, she doesn't let me back in. Summer dew is bad for my coat, and autumn frost even more so. Until one's passed a night under the eaves, on one's feet and awaiting the dawn, one can't imagine the hardship. The other day, unfortunate enough to find myself shut outside again, I was accosted by a stray dog. Just as I thought I was done for, I managed to somehow clamber onto the roof of the shed, where I spent the rest of the night trembling. All of these misfortunes were direct consequences of Osan's inhumanity. Mewing up to such a creature, one can hardly expect any sympathy. All the same, it's a well known fact that hunger drives one to prayer, poverty drives one to theft, and a lonely heart drives one to pen prose. Yours truly is no exception. After three tries with my best mew, I up my game even more, emitting an exquisite series of cries. The result, I'm firmly convinced, is nothing less impressive than any of Beethoven's symphonies, yet Osan remains unmoved. She drops to her knees, lifts and removes a loose floorboard, and pulls out a new stick of charcoal. She takes the stick of charcoal and taps it against the corner of the brazier, breaking it into three shorter pieces, blackening the vicinity with charcoal dust in the process. Some of the dust seems to land in the pot, but Osan's not the kind of woman to concern herself with such trifles. Her focus is on the fire as she pushes her new sticks of charcoal under the bottom edge of the pot. She's not about to lend an ear to my symphony. Defeated and dejected, I start back toward the

living room. As I pass the bathing room, it's abuzz with activity. The three daughters are busily washing their faces.

When I say they're washing their faces, bear in mind that the older two are still preschoolers, and the youngest is too small to even tag along behind them. They're a far cry from proficient in preparing themselves for the start of the day. The small one has grabbed the wet cleaning rag out of the bucket and is rubbing it over her face. It can't be the best of feelings to rub one's face with this rag, but this is the same child who shrieks with delight when tremblers shake the house, so her antics here hardly merit mention. Then again, perhaps she's an ascetic, already outracing Yagi Dokusen on the path to self-awareness. The eldest sister, the self-anointed leader of this small crew, pushes aside the rinsing cup with a clank. "Little gal, that there is a rag!" She reaches to pull it away. Little gal, firm in her convictions, is not about to relinquish her rag to this older sister. "Uh uh! Babu!" With that, she yanks it back. No one knows the meaning or origin of this word "Babu!" It's exclusively heard, though, when Little gal is upset. The rag is being pulled back and forth between the older sister's hand and Little gal's hand and dripping incessantly onto Little gal's legs as it's center is wrung out. Wet legs are one thing, but it's also dousing her knees and her lap. Little gal is wearing a genroku. This word "genroku," as I've gathered from asking around, can refer to just about any outfit at all, as long as the fabric is modestly-patterned. I've no idea where they get these words. "Little gal, let's stop this before your genroku's soaked," the older sister wisely advises. Wise though her counsel may be, this well-informed older sibling was known previously to confuse "genroku" with the board game "sugoroku."

This recalls to my mind how often these children confuse words, often at the expense of personal embarrassment. A fire sends mushrooms (kinoko) rather than sparks (hinoko) through the air. The girls' school isn't in Cha-no-mizu, but rather Cha-no-miso. The companion god of Ebisu is daidoko (kitchen) rather than Daikoku. "I'm no straw shop girl," is a common retort. This one confused me until I realized it was a mix-up of straw shop (waradana) and backstreet (uradana). The master smirks at such blunders. Then he heads off to the school, steps up onto the classroom podium with all seriousness, and instructs his charges in blunder-laden and cringeworthy English.

Little gal -- who incidentally refers to herself not as Little gal but as Lil gal -- takes note of her wet genroku and cries out, "Gendoko wet!" Fearing the child will catch cold, Osan rushes out from the kitchen, snatches the cleaning rag, and wipes her dry. Throughout all this, the one who's been relatively quiet is Miss Sunko, the second daughter. Miss Sunko is turned away and occupied with a jar of white face powder that's rolled off an upper shelf. She's opened the jar and proceeds to make herself up. Her first move is to take her finger, whitened with powder, and run it down her nose to the tip. This nose, normally nondescript, now stands out in relief. The next stop for her whitened fingers is her cheekbones, which are daubed into white circles. At this point, the maidservant enters the scene, and after wiping Lil gal's dress clean turns her rag on Sunko's face. Sunko's a bit put out.

I take these scenes in in passing, making my way to the living room and then on to the room where the master sleeps. Thinking to see if he's awake, I quietly peek in. The master's head is nowhere to be seen. All I can see is one large, arched foot protruding from under the edge of the bedding. Apparently concerned that his exposed head might be subject to another wake-up call, he's turtled in and hid himself under the quilt. As he lies there concealed, the wife, who has finished cleaning the study and is still shouldering her broom and duster, reappears. From the threshold, she calls out as before.

"Still not up?" Having called out, she stands there for a moment, surveying the headless mass of bedding. Again receiving no answer, she advances several steps and gives the mat a firm thrust with her broom. "Don't you think you'd best be up?" She's determined to have an answer. The master is, in fact, awake. It's because he's awake that he's steeled himself against the wife's assault by burying himself, head and all, in his bedding. He's fostering some foolish notion that if he simply lies low, head out of sight, the wife will let him be. The course of events, however, is proving otherwise. Her first call to him was from the threshold, some half a room away, which had given him some sense of security. The thrust of the broom was closer, only half again as far, which had put some fear in him. Her second call was louder and closer yet, penetrating the covers with double or more the force. Realizing his ruse is up, he reluctantly musters a feeble grunt.

"You need to be there by nine, do you not? Better get moving or you won't make it."

"I know that. That's why I'm getting up now." This response, coming from somewhere under the bedding, is none too credible. The wife's been through this before, assured that the master was waking up, only to have him fall back to sleep on her. "Well get up then." She stays on him, ever vigilant. Being told to get up, after one's already said one's getting up, infuriates a self-centered man like the master, who at this point finally throws off the bedding under which he's been hiding. Both his eyes are wide open.

"Enough of your racket. If I say I'm getting up, I'm getting up."

"To say you're getting up is one thing. I'll believe it when I see it."

"When have I ever backtracked, faking and staying in bed?"

"Only all the time."

"Nonsense!"

"We'll see who's talking nonsense." The wife stands her ground, broom planted firmly by the master's pillow, with a defiant scowl on her face. At this moment Yatchan, the youngster from the cartman's place that back's to the master's, breaks out bawling. Yatchan is under orders from the cartman's wife to parrot the master's outbursts with fits of his own. This is all well and good for the cartman's wife, who earns

pocket money by setting her child off whenever the master is riled, but it's a terrible imposition on the child himself. With a mother like that, he'd just as well bawl all day, straight from morning through night. The master, for his part, should sense what's going on and refrain from his outbursts, if nothing other than for Yatchan's sake. Kaneda may be funding all this, but only a full-fledged deviant, worse by far than Tendō Kōhei, would carry out such asinine orders. It would be one thing if Yatchan's bawling was only in response to the master's outbursts, but every time the local rogues, again at Kaneda's bidding, came out to harangue the master with shouts of "Imado no Tanuki," Yatchan has to bawl. Whether the master is truly riled or not, his outrage is anticipated, and Yatchan is hence set to bawling. In these cases, it's unclear whether the master's outbursts are setting off Yatchan's bawling or Yatchan's bawling is triggering the master's outbursts. The master has thin skin and frayed nerves, so a simple scolding of Yatchan, which starts him bawling cross the way, is as good as a slap to the master's face. It's told that in Western countries, in times past, when a criminal fled the land and escaped justice, they would sculpt an image in his likeness and burn him in effigy. Among Kaneda's minions, it would seem, is a strategist well-versed in such traditions and applying them tactfully in present-day form. Whether the boys of Rakuunkan or Yatchan's mother, the master is ill-equipped to counter the forces that assail him. Stated more generally, the master is ill-equipped to process anything and everything that surrounds him. There's more I could expound on, but all in due time, lest I stray too far from the matter at hand.

Yatchan's cries, early in the morning, seem to grate on the master's nerves. In an instant, he's seated himself bolt upright on the bedding. At this point, his cultivation of the spirit, together with Yagi Dokusen, are good as gone. In sitting up, he scratches his head vigorously with both hands. A month's worth of dandruff comes floating down in response, alighting on his pajama collar and the back of his neck. It's quite the sight. As for his whiskers, these too are something to behold. They're standing on end, stock straight. Perhaps sensing that they mustn't lie still through their owner's agitation, each hair is on edge, thrusting itself forward in its own chosen direction. Another minor spectacle. Just the day prior, owing in part to the scrutiny of the mirror, they'd lined up orderly, after the manner of his German majesty Wilhelm II. Just one night's sleep, though, and all grooming is forgotten. They've all reverted to their own habits, naturally facing this way and that. When I think on how this ill-tempered man, with these ill-tempered whiskers, has remained thus far in his teaching post, I can't but marvel at the vastness and variety of this land that's Japan. And it's this same vastness and variety that lets Kaneda and his snitches pass themselves off as respectable human beings. As long as Kaneda's lot are passing themselves off as respectable human beings, the master can reason with some assurance, then he himself has every right to continue as an instructor. Should doubts ever arise, he can always fire off correspondence to Tendō Kōhei in Sugamo seeking counsel.

At this moment, the master's dull and hazy eyes, which I described in detail the day prior, fix their stare on the cabinet cross the room. The height of this cabinet is about one meter, and it's partitioned horizontally into top and bottom shelves, each with two papered sliding doors. The bottom shelf all but touches the

corner of his bedding, so it's only natural that the master's line of sight, as he sits himself up and opens his eyes, should land here. The patterned paper of the sliding doors is torn in places, revealing curious designs in the paper batting that backs it up. Some of these batting papers are printed matter. Others are hand-scribed. Some are face down and some are upside down. As the master surveys this batting, curiosity gets the better of him, and he finds himself wanting to know what's written on these various fragments. It may seem odd that the same master, who just moments ago was angry enough to seize the cartman's wife, push her mug into a pine tree, and with it scrape the rough bark smooth, is suddenly fixated on reading paper scraps, but such is the nature of sparky hotheads. It's no different than a crying child pacified by a sweet. In former times, when the master lodged in a certain Buddhist temple, a handful of nuns occupied the adjoining room. When it comes to vile women, nuns are as vile as they come, and these vile nuns read the master like a book. While cooking their food, they were known to tap their kettle and sing to the beat. "The crow that cried's now smiling wide, the crow that cried's now smiling wide." The master to this day harbors an intense dislike of nuns, but be that as it may, the nuns were not off base. While the master is highly animated, crying, laughing, swaggering, or sulking in the extreme, none of these moods ever lasts for long. Seen in a positive light, he doesn't fixate on or obsess over things, and his outlook on life is constantly refreshing itself. In simpler, more vulgar terms, though, he's a shallow, wavering, and highly cantankerous brat-child. Given his brat-child nature, it should be no surprise when his hankering for a quarrel, once he's roused himself to his senses, might abruptly fall away and yield instead to intense interest in deciphering the writings on old paper batting in a cabinet door. The first to paper to hit his eye is an upside-down image of Itō Hirobumi. At its top is inscribed, "September 28, Meiji 11." The Korean Resident-General, it seems, from these earlier days was already chasing his own edict-adorned tail.

Wondering what the old boss was up to back then, the master strains to piece together obfuscated text. "Minister of Finance" reveals itself. Clearly a man of prestige. Even upside down and standing on his head, a Minister is a Minister. Off to the left is the same Minister of Finance, this time reposing sideways. Of course. After very much time on one's head, rest is in order. Below, in wooden typeset print, are the words "You all ..." What follows, unfortunately, cannot be seen. On the next line down, "without delay," is printed. This too is regrettably in isolation, with what follows obscured. If the master were an investigator with the Metropolitan Police, he would no doubt peel back the outer layer of paper, despite the cabinet owner's objections. Investigators, who are seldom learned men, are known to do anything and everything to get at the facts. This can lead to bad outcomes, with one wishing they were better versed in discretion. Facts alone, without discretion, are a dangerous thing. From what I hear, they're known to ensnare good citizens, catching them up in a web of iniquity. Given that these investigators are agents of the citizenry, it's utter insanity that a good citizen should be dragged into the mire at the hands of these same agents. Shifting his gaze toward the center, the master next catches sight of Ōita Prefecture tumbling through space. If Itō Hirobumi is standing on his head, then it's only natural that Ōita Prefecture be tumbling through space. Having thus scrutinized these scraps of old paper, the master balls up both fists and thrusts them skyward in preparation for a yawn.

The master's yawn, like the cry of a whale, is characterized by waves of intricate undulations. As it finally subsides, he slowly changes out of his bed clothes and heads off to the washroom to wash his face. The wife, who's been waiting in the wings, promptly folds up the bedding and bed clothes and sets into her cleaning routine. Just as the wife cleans per routine, the master washes his face per his own long-established routine. As I've previously described, his usual sounds of "ge-ge" and "ga-ga" echo from the washroom. After carefully parting his hair, he enters the living room in grand fashion, his Western-style hand towel draped over his shoulder, and casually takes his place by the long side of the brazier. At the mention of a long-sided brazier, some may imagine marbled zelkova wood, with inlaid copper lining, and a young maiden seated thereby with freshly washed hair and one knee drawn up, tapping a long-necked pipe against the black-persimmon edging. In the case of our dear Kushami, though, the long-sided brazier is by no means anything so stylish. It's antiquated to the point that no layman could possibly discern its nature. The great merit of a long-sided brazier is the sheen it acquires through years of polishing, but in the case of this particular article, that's seldom seen a cleaning cloth and is greatly the worse for wear, it's entirely unclear what its dark shadows hide, be it zelkova, cherry, or paulownia. When asked where it was procured, the master and his wife have no recollection of procuring it anywhere. In which case someone gifted it to them, yet they can identify no such giver. Such being the case, one has to ask if it's pilfered, and the answer here is none too clear. Long ago, among their relations, was an old retired couple. The couple passed away, and the master and his wife were asked to hold down the property. Then, as it's told, when it came time to move out and establish their own household, this brazier, which they'd been using as their own, just naturally came with. The whole thing seems a bit underhanded. At the same time, while a bit underhanded, it's not at all out of the ordinary. Take the banker, for example, who handles others' money every day. Over time, they say, he comes to regard this money as his own. Then there are government officials, servants of the citizenry entrusted with authority for handling affairs on behalf of those they represent. However, as they carry out business, day after day, wearing this mantle of borrowed authority, they're apt to lose their bearings, imagining their authority is their own and consigning the citizenry to irrelevance. Given the prevalence of such cases, it would hardly be proper to fault the master for sticky fingers. If the master is at fault for sticky fingers, then so too is the bulk of humanity.

In taking up his position by the brazier, the master has also taken up his position by the dining table. Seated around the other three sides, and already working through their breakfasts, are Lil gal, who some moments ago had been washing her face with the cleaning rag, Tonko, who goes to school not in "Chanomizu" but "Chanomiso," and Sunko, whose finger had found its way into the jar of white face powder. The master casts his gaze over each of the three girls in turn. Tonko's face is round like the hand guard on a foreign-made sword. Sunko bears some resemblance to her older sister, adding the blush of a vermilion tray, lacquered in the style of the Ryūkyū islands. Only Lil gal displays a distinctive countenance, oval in form. While an oval face is no rarity, the longer axis is most always oriented top-to-bottom. Lil gal's face, in contrast, is oval side-to-side. Standards of beauty are apt to change with time, but a face like this, stretched from side-to-side, is highly unlikely to ever find favor. The master reflects

intently at times on these children of his. They're all growing. Like bamboo sprouts in a Zen temple that overnight erupt into young stalks, the pace and vigor of growth is astounding. Every time he marks their growth, he can't but feel harried, as though time is fast on his heels. Even the master, absent-minded as he is, is well aware that these three daughters will grow into young women. And given that they'll grow into young women, he's also aware that they'll need to be married off. Awareness is one thing, but the ability to carry through is another. This too weighs on the master's mind. In short, he's ill-equipped to manage the disposition of his own offspring. One shouldn't produce what one's not equipped to manage, but such is the human condition. In fact, the defining characteristic of humanity rests exactly on this point. Suffice it to say that men subject themselves to endless torment through imprudent products of their own making.

One has to admire these children. Oblivious to their father's fretting over their futures, they're happily eating breakfast. Lil gal, however, is a bit out of hand. She'll be turning three this year, and her mother, thinking ahead, has equipped her with an age-appropriate small set of chopsticks and small bowl. Lil gal, though, is having none of it. Having seized her older sister's bowl and grabbed her older sister's chopsticks, her little hands struggle to wield them. In the world in general, it's the pettiest of men, lacking in talent or abilities, who strive hardest to force their way into positions of influence for which they're patently unqualified. This tendency is already evident in Lil gal's conduct. Given how deep-seated it is, it can't be remedied through education or training, and any attempt to do so is in vain.

Lil gal, with the large bowl and full-length chopsticks plundered from her neighbor, is a force to be reckoned with. Determined to use these sticks that are too big for her little hands, the inevitable outcome is unbridled havoc. Gripping both sticks together in a single fist, her first move is to thrust them down to the bottom of the bowl. In said bowl is a solid layer of rice beneath a floating surface of miso soup. As the sticks hit their mark, the bowl, until now holding its own, is suddenly tilted some thirty degrees by the impact. As it tilts, soup splashes and streams down Lil gal's front. Such occurrence does little to deter her. She unleashes her next assault, this time striking deep and rooting up rice. As the rice comes up, she brings her small mouth to the bowl's brim, capturing a number of grains in the process. Those grains she doesn't capture, along with the amber broth, jump free and cling to the tip of her nose, the sides of her cheeks, and the front of her chin. Additional grains, failing to cling anywhere, end up out of play on the tatami mat. As methods of eating rice go, it's highly inefficient. A respectful note of caution here, if I may be so indulged, for Kaneda and other men of influence in this world. If such leaders work their fellow men the way Lil gal works this bowl and chopsticks, most all flying grains will escape their open mouths. What they do take in will be not by design or force of will, but merely by random happenstance. Due reflection is in order here. To be truly capable men, wise in the ways of the world, they'll have to devise a better approach.

Tonko, the eldest sister, having lost her own chopsticks and bowl to Lil gal's raid, is making due as best she can with the smaller items, but the small bowl, even when full, is good for no more than three

mouthfuls. As a result, she's constantly reaching for the server. Helping number four is gone, and she's on to number five. She lifts the lid of the server, picks up the big scoop, and regards it a moment. She seems to waver, unsure if she really wants a fifth helping. Finally, with newfound resolve, she dives in with the scoop, avoiding the charred grains. She deftly lifts the scoop, piled high with rice, but things go awry as she flips it over to fill the bowl. The bowl catches only part of the rice, with the excess tumbling down onto the tatami in a clump. Tonko, with full composure, carefully recovers the fallen rice. However, rather than discard it, she drops it back in the server. A bit unsavory, I must say.

The moment Tonko finishes serving up her rice is the same moment in which Lil gal is aggressively rooting up rice with her oversized chopsticks. Acting the older sister, Tonko is not about to let pass the condition of Lil gal's face. "Lil gal, look at you, you're covered with rice!" So declaring, she sets to work tidying up. Starting with Lil gal's nose, she picks away its resident rice grains. Surprisingly, she doesn't pick off these grains and discard them, but rather puts them into her own mouth. Next she works the cheeks. There are quite a few grains here, maybe twenty in all on both sides. With meticulous repetition, she picks off one grain and eats it, picks off another and eats it. Finally, she's eaten every offending grain, and Lil gal's face is rice-free. In this moment Sunko, who until now has been quietly crunching pickled daikon radish, suddenly unearths sweet potato pieces from beneath the filled-to-the-brim surface of her miso soup and eagerly shovels them into her mouth. As my dear readers well know, nothing hits one's mouth as hot as sweet potato fished from steaming soup. Even an adult palate, if one's not careful, will feel the scald. Much more so one like Sunko then, whose experience with sweet potatoes is limited and from whom a panicked reaction is only to be expected. She lets out a cry and ejects the offending potato pieces from her mouth onto the table. The ejected pieces, as it happens, slide to a stop just in front of Lil gal. Lil gal, who's always been fond of sweet potatoes, immediately tosses aside her chopsticks, collects the potato pieces in her fists, and pushes them into her mouth.

The master, bearing witness to this chaos around him, has offered not a word. He's been focused on eating his own rice and drinking his own soup, and he's now picking his teeth with a toothpick. When it comes to his daughters' upbringing, the master appears to have committed himself wholeheartedly to non-intervention. All three could, before too long, be donning the shrimp-brown hakama of college girls, or a rat-gray hakama for that matter, and all three could, as if on cue, abscond with their beaus. The master, for his part, would be unperturbed, still eating his own rice and drinking his own soup. He's devoid of all ambition. On the other hand, when one looks at ambition in this day and age, it seems to consist of nothing more than snaring the innocent with lies, wielding shrewdness to get oneself ahead, intimidating others through false fronts, or entrapping the gullible with trickery. Middle schoolers, even from their first year, are quick to pick up on this conduct, deluding themselves that this is how one makes one's mark. What should by all rights be grounds for shame, they practice with great fanfare, imagining themselves gentlemen in the making. These are not what one can call productive citizens. They're better referred to as thugs. I'm a Japanese cat and am by no means unpatriotic. When I see such men posturing as citizens, my

first instinct is to level them good with a hard smack. Each and every one is a blight on the national honor. Any school housing such students only debases itself, as does any country hosting such citizens. Despite being grounds for shame, such men these days seem to litter the landscape in ever-increasing numbers. Why is beyond me. The men of Japan, it seems, lack the mettle of the nation's cats. A wretched situation, indeed. Compared to these thugs, I have to say that the master is by far the better man. He's better for lacking in ambition. He's better for lacking in competence. And he's better for lacking in audacity.

The master, thus taking breakfast in his own time and without mishap, finishes eating, dons his suit, boards a hired cart, and heads off for the Nihonzutsumi branch. On stepping out the front door, his first action is to ask the cartman if he knows Nihonzutsumi. The cartman just grins in response. "It's right by Yoshiwara, known for its red light district," the master adds for good measure. The whole exchange strikes me as comical.

After the master makes his uncharacteristic departure by cart, the wife, per habit, finishes her own breakfast and then turns to the children. "Off to school. You don't want to be late." "But today's a holiday," the children answer back in a leisurely manner, showing no signs of movement. "Since when is today a holiday? Hurry on now," she reprimands. "The teacher reminded us, just yesterday." The eldest sister digs in and stands her ground. The wife, thinking something's amiss, goes to the cupboard and takes out the calendar. Sure enough, the day is marked in red. The master, utterly unaware, had drafted up a notice of absence to dispatch to the school. The wife, also unaware, had walked out and posted it. Meitei too had seemed not in the know, though one never can tell with Meitei. He may well have known and merely been faking. Surprised by this new revelation, the wife tells the children to go play quietly. She then proceeds to take out her sewing box, as always, and sets to work.

For the next thirty minutes, all is calm in the house, with nothing noteworthy to report, until suddenly an odd caller appears - a schoolgirl of seventeen or eighteen. In shoes with worn heels, trailing a purple hakama, and with hair done up like abacus beads, she lets herself in unannounced through the side entrance. This is the master's niece. From what I gather, she's a student somewhere. She calls from time to time on Sundays, has it out with the master on various topics, then takes her leave. Her name is Yukie, which has a lovely ring to it, but her features, I hate to say, do not live up to the billing. Walk one or two blocks down the street, and you'll soon enough see a similar hum-drum face.

"Hello, Auntie," she calls out as she proceeds into the living room and plops herself down by the sewing box.

"Well, look who's bright and early ..."

"Since we all have the day off today, I thought I'd pay my regards. I left at half past eight and came straight over."

"I see. Is there something you need?"

"Nope. Just that it's been a while, so I thought I'd call for a bit."

"Don't make it just a bit. Stay as long as you like. Your uncle will be back soon."

"He's already out? That's unlike him."

"You'll never guess where he went today. ... To see the police. Unusual, don't you think?"

"Unusual indeed. Whatever for?"

"They caught the fellow who robbed us last spring."

"So uncle's been summoned to court? What a pain."

"Not at all. It's about our belongings. Yesterday an officer came by to inform us our things were recovered, so we should go and claim them."

"That explains it. It takes a lot to get Uncle up and out this early in the day. Normally, he'd be sleeping away still."

"When it comes to sleeping in, nobody rivals your uncle. ... And one wakes him at one's own peril. Just this morning, he'd told me to be sure to wake him by seven, so I did as instructed. What does he do? He turtles in under the quilts and ignores me. I'm worried he'll oversleep, so I go back after a short while and wake him again. This time, he mutters back at me through the sleeve opening of his bed quilt. It's really too much."

"How can he sleep so much? Must be his nerves are shot."

"I wonder."

"He really does have a short temper. I can't see how they put up with him at the school."

"From what I hear, when he's at the school he's deferential and reserved."

"That just makes him all the worse. Have you heard the term 'jelly-wobble devil?' That's him to a tee."

"How so?"

"It's just what he is. Jelly-wobble devil is perfectly apt."

"It's not just his temper, you know. Say 'right' and he goes left. Tell him 'left' and he's sure to go right. He's never once listened to anyone else -- he's stubborn like a mule."

"He's Amanojaku incarnate, defiant by design. If you want him to do something, just tell him the opposite and he'll give you the outcome you're after. The other day, when I had him by me an umbrella, I made a point of insisting I didn't need one. 'Of course you need one!' he argued back and proceeded to buy it without hesitation."

"Ho ho ho. Well done! From here on I'll follow suit."

"By all means, give it a try. Otherwise you're just beating a dead horse."

"The other day a man from the insurance company called, recommending that we should by all means have a policy. --- He explained why at great length, taking an hour to cover this and that merit. With very little savings and three children, I'd rest easier knowing we at least had insurance, but your uncle showed no such inclination."

"I'm with you. It's worrisome to imagine if something should happen." For a young lady of seventeen or eighteen, Yukie's surprisingly sympathetic when it comes to domestic affairs.

"I witnessed an interesting exchange, let me tell you. 'I don't deny the need for insurance. The fact that insurance companies exist and prosper attests to this need. However, unless one actually dies, what's the point in owning a policy?' Your uncle dug in from the start."

"Uncle said that?"

"He did. 'Of course there's no need for insurance if you don't die,' the salesman conceded, 'but human life, which seems so enduring, is actually quite fleeting. There are hazards all around, both seen and unseen.' 'Not to worry,' your uncle countered, casting all reason aside, 'I for one am resolved not to die.'"

"Resolve or no, every man dies. It's like my exams. I had every intention of passing, yet in the end I failed to make the grade."

"The insurance man made the same point. 'No man dictates the number of his days. If resolve sufficed to assure long life, then who would ever die young?'"

"The insurance man's in the right."

"Absolutely. But try telling that to your uncle. 'I'm not going to die. I'll even swear to it,' he boasts in return."

"Odd."

"Odd indeed. More than odd. Even if he had the money for insurance payments, he asserts matter-of-factly, he'd be better off depositing it with the bank."

"Do you have much savings?"

"None to speak of. What happens to us after he's gone is furthest from his mind."

"That's rather unsettling. How did he come to be so? I don't see like tendencies in any of his associates."

"Of course not. He's always the odd man out."

"Maybe you could have Suzuki try to talk some sense into him. Suzuki is a calming presence and just might pull it off."

"Suzuki, I'm afraid, is not in favor round here."

"That figures. In which case, how about that other fellow -- you know, the easygoing one --"

"You mean Yagi?"

"Yes."

"Yagi too is in bad repute. Meitei was here yesterday and dished on him good. After that, an appeal from Yagi is unlikely to carry any weight."

"Isn't it still worth a try? He's such a grounding presence --- the other day I heard him talk at school."

"Yagi gave a talk?"

"He did."

"Is he part of the teaching staff?"

"No, he's not one of our teachers, but he was invited to talk at a Society for Womanly Virtues gathering."

"Was it interesting?"

"To tell the truth, not really. But that long face of his, and the way he channels Tenjin with a like goatee, had everyone enthralled."

"What did he talk on?" Just as the wife poses this question, the three children, having heard Yukie's voice carrying across the veranda, come spilling into the room on hurried feet. They're back, it would seem, from beyond the bamboo fence, where they run and play in the vacant lot.

"Yukie's here!" the two older sisters call out with excitement. "No need for an uproar," the wife admonishes. "Settle down and have a seat. Yukie has an interesting story to tell us." With that, she sets aside her work in the corner. "What kind of story? I love stories." This from Tonko. "Is it Kachi-kachi Yama?" This question from Sunko. "Lil gal story too," the youngest daughter adds as she wedges in, knees forward, between her older sisters. However, in Lil gal's case it's not about hearing Yukie's story but rather telling her own. "Not Lil gal's story again," the older sisters laugh. "You'll have to wait your turn. Yukie's up first," the wife advises. Lil gal asserts herself. "Babu!" she cries in her loudest voice. "Well then, let's hear Lil gal first. What have you got for us?" Yukie yields the floor.

"Here goes. Bōtan, Bōtan, where are you off to?"

"Good so far. What's next?"

"Off to the field, to gather my rice."

"Really, well told."

"You can't come. You'll hinder me."

"It's not 'hinder,' it's 'hinder,'" Tonko interjects. "Babu!" exclaims Lil gal, again at top volume, taking her sister to task for the unwelcome intrusion. However, having once paused in her storytelling, she forgets where she was and struggles to resume. "Is that all dear?" Yukie enquires.

"Here's more. Don't you fart. I won't have no puu, puu puu."

"Oh my. Enough please. Where on earth did you learn that?"

"From Otan."

"Shame on Osan, teaching such things." The wife forces a smile. "Let's give Yukie her turn now. Sit quietly and give her your best attention." Thus instructed, even Lil gal reigns in her restlessness and settles down.

"Here's what Yagi told us." Yukie finally starts in. "Long ago, in the dead center of a crossroad, stood a large stone Jizō. Unfortunately, though, this crossroad was a bustling place, with myriad horses and carts, and this Jizō hampered their flow. The townspeople gathered together, and after discussing the matter

concluded that it must, somehow, be relocated from its present central spot to one of the crossroad corners."

"It this a true story?"

"I wonder. He didn't say if it was or wasn't true. --- anyway, as the folks were all still talking, the strongest man in town stepped up, suggested he could handily move the Jizō, and set off alone for the crossroad. Once there, he stripped himself to the waist and heaved and hoed till he was dripping with sweat. The Jizō, however, didn't budge in the least."

"It must have been heavy."

"It was. The strongman wore himself out and went home to rest, so the townspeople reconvened. This time another fellow, the cleverest man among them, raised his hand and offered to tackle the task. Entrusted to go and try, he filled a box with layers of botamochi and set out to engage the Jizō. Once in front of it, he called, 'Come get some,' while showing off his wares. Jizō are voracious eaters, so he figured he could surely entice this particular Jizō to yield its spot in exchange for a meal, but no such luck. Setting aside the mochi, he next filled a bottle gourd with saké. Dangling the bottle gourd from one hand and holding a small cup in the other, he returned again to tempt the Jizō. 'Wouldn't a drink be nice now? If you'd like a drink, just follow me.' For three hours he taunted and tempted the Jizō, all to no effect."

"But Yukie, isn't the Jizō hungry?" Tonko asks. "I want botamochi," Sunko adds.

"Having thus failed twice, the clever fellow next printed up a stash of counterfeit banknotes. 'Is it wealth you want? Come with me and all this is yours,' he called as he repeatedly held out the notes and drew them back. To this, the Jizō reacted not in the least. It was stubborn and loathe to move."

"Stubborn indeed. Just like your uncle."

"Exactly like Uncle. In the end, the clever fellow'd exhausted his means and quit. Next came a boastful chap, known for blowing his own horn. 'Rest assured and leave it to me,' he declared, as if success were a foregone conclusion."

"What did the braggart do?"

"This is where it gets interesting. First off, he dressed himself as a police officer, even gluing a false mustache to his upper lip. Then he approached the Jizō and spoke in a forceful tone. 'Listen, buddy, you'd best be moving along. We're the law here, and we're not gonna let this slide.' I don't know about then, but no one today, of course, would pay such bluster much mind."

"I'd have to agree. So what happened? Did the Jizō move?"

"What do you think? He and Uncle are two of a kind."

"But your uncle, when it comes to police officers, is shamefully obsequious."

"Is he! In spite of that defiant demeanor? Then it must be his bark is worse than his bite. But at any rate, the Jizō, as it's told, calmly held its ground. The braggart, most upset at this lack of respect, ripped off his policeman's outfit and tossed his false mustache into the trash. For his next shot at the Jizō, he dressed himself to the nines and reappeared as a man of great wealth. In today's terms, he was Baron Iwasaki. Comical, is it not?"

"What does Baron Iwasaki look like?"

"Larger than life, I suppose. Rather than any direct action, and with no words spoken, the braggart lit up a large cigar and paced round the Jizō blowing smoke."

"And what did that do?"

"It veiled the Jizō in a shroud of smoke."

"Like something from an old-time storyteller's tale. Did the enshrouded Jizō capitulate?"

"Not in the least. It was stone, after all. It was time to dispense with deceptions, one would think, but the braggart came at it again, this time garbed up as royalty. Lunacy, if you ask me."

"Did they even have royals back then?"

"I take it they did. At least according to Yagi. He definitely told us the braggart, disrespectful though it sounds, decked himself out as some certain Royal Highness -- for starters most irreverent, given his own more-than-humble origins."

"Which Royal Highness did he deck himself out as?"

"Which Royal Highness? Well whichever Royal Highness, this braggart's posing did the Highness no favors."

"Without doubt."

"The Royal Highness garb too was a bust, so the braggart, having exhausted himself of ideas, gave up and slunk away in defeat."

"Taking his just deserts."

"In part at least - hard labor was his better just deserts. -- But anyway, the townsfolk were still in a bind. They gathered again and talked again, but no one came forward to champion the task. They were plumb out of options."

"Is that the end?"

"Not quite. As one final effort, they hired all the cartmen and rogues they could find to parade around the Jizō and stir up a ruckus. Hoping to pester it so that it had to leave, they banged and clattered day and night in shifts."

"A noble effort for sure."

"Even at that, to no effect at all. The Jizō prevailed in its obstinance."

"What did they do then?" Tonko eagerly asks.

"At that point, after days and days of fruitless clamor, they decided enough was enough, but the cartmen and rogues, happy to bang and clang for their daily stipends, kept on and on."

"Yukie, what's a stipend?" Sunko asks.

"A stipend means pay. Money."

"What did they buy with the money they got?"

"What did they buy ... Ho ho ho, come now Sunko, that's neither here nor there. -- To continue Auntie, on it went, endless commotion day after day and night after night. At the time, there lived in the town a fellow known as Foolish Také. A bonafide dullard, he knew little and was held in little regard. This fellow, as it's told, finally felt inclined to comment on the commotion. 'All that banging and clanging, day upon day, and you haven't moved even this single, solitary jizō? Futile enough, and pathetic too.'"

"Wisely spoken for a dullard."

"As dullards go, a wise one indeed. The townspeople, hearing Foolish Také's words, paid heed. With little hope and nothing to lose, they challenged him to come up with something better. Without hesitation, Také took them on. 'Let's cut out this racket,' he called to the cartmen and rogues, causing them to stand down for a bit. When all was quiet, he sauntered up to the Jizō with nonchalance."

"Yukie, who was Nonchalance? Was it one of Také's friends?" Tonko, just at the crux of the story, intrudes with a curious question. Yukie and the wife, exchanging glances, both break out laughing.

"No, dear, it wasn't a friend."

"Then what was it?"

"Nonchalance is -- well it's hard to explain."

"Nonchalance means 'hard to explain?'"

"It's not that. Nonchalance is ..."

"Yes?"

"Say, you're familiar with Tatara Sanpei, are you not?"

"Sure I am. He brought us that box of yams."

"It means like Tatara."

"Tatara's nonchalant?"

"Yes. Definitely. -- At any rate, Foolish Také appeared before the Jizō, hands folded into his breast pockets. 'Good Jizō, the townspeople wish you moved, so please oblige them and move.' The Jizō responded without a moment's thought. 'Is that so? They could have said as much.' And with no further fanfare, the Jizō set to moving."