

I am a Cat – Chapter 10b

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

"Curious thing, that Jizō."

"Then came the talk."

"There was more?"

"There was. Yagi continued on and expounded as follows. 'I chose this story today, to tell at this gathering of ladies, with a purpose in mind. If you'll excuse my candor, I believe that you ladyfolk are wont to avoid tackling matters head-on and resolving them directly. Instead, to your own and others' detriment, you beat around the bush, doing this and that here and there. This problem, of course, is not exclusive to ladies. In this present era of Meiji even men, taking on tinges of femininity in the guise of social cultivation, expend their energies in myriad futile forms. Oftentimes they delude themselves with references to gentlemanly conduct and proper course of action. What these modern men are, in fact, are aberrations of nature, rendered impotent by the trappings of civilization. They merit no further discourse. Rather, I implore you ladies to bear in mind the lessons of old, as related by my tale. In times of crisis, handle matters with simple sincerity, just like Foolish Také. If all here today would channel Foolish Také, I ensure you that a good degree of rancorous conflict, whether arising between husband and wife or arising between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, could well be avoided. The more a person schemes and connives, the greater their fall from grace. Why is it the average lady is less content than the average gentleman? I'll tell you. Too much scheming and too much conniving. My ask of you, then, is to become Foolish Také.' Such was the gist of Yagi's talk."

"Given all that, will we be seeing less Yukie and more Foolish Také going forward?"

"Not on your life! Who would aspire after Foolish Také? Tomiko, the Kaneda daughter, was greatly offended and quite upset."

"You mean the same Kaneda Tomiko who lives down the way?"

"Yes, that's her. The stylish gal."

"She attends your same school?"

"No, she just came to hear the Women's Society lecture. I have to confess, she really is stylish. I was impressed despite myself."

"But they say she's also a stunning beauty."

"Her looks are nothing special. Not so attractive as she'd like to think. Any plain Jane, under that much makeup, is bound to look good."

"Then you yourself, with similar adornment, would be Kaneda two times over when it comes to beauty."

"Forget that. It's not for me, and I want no part of it. Her makeup is way over-the-top. However much money one might have --"

"She may overdo it with the makeup, but wouldn't you love to have that kind of money?"

"Having money would be fine -- but honestly, that girl, if anyone, could take a lesson from Foolish Také. All she does is put on airs. Just the other day, she was boasting how some so-and-so poet dedicated his collection of new-style poems to her."

"That would be Tōfū."

"No!?! Tōfū did that? I wouldn't have thought him so fanciful."

"He was utterly sincere. He believed it only proper to make such dedication."

"It's fellows like him who fan the flames. -- By the way, guess what else happened. The other day, someone sent her a love letter."

"Scandalous! Who was it?"

"She doesn't know who it was."

"There was no name on it?"

"There was a name, in fact, but she says she's never heard of the guy. She also says it's odd in its choice of expression. 'My heart bows before you like an ardent believer before his deity. For your sake, I'd sacrifice my all, like a lamb led to the altar. No honor could be greater. ... My heart's shape is triangular, and dead in its center stands an arrow, shot from Cupid's blow gun. ...'"

"Seriously?"

"Serious enough, it would seem. I have three friends who've seen the actual letter."

"Shame on her, showing such things around. Given her intention to wed Kangetsu, she'd do best keep this quiet and not have it widely known."

"Do best to keep it quiet? She trumpets it all about town. Next time Kangetsu calls, perhaps you should tell him. I assume he's unaware?"

"I wonder. He spends his days at the school polishing spheres, so likely he hasn't heard."

"Does Kangetsu really intend to take that gal as his bride? I pity him if he does."

"How so? She comes with money, and when times get lean, isn't it nice to have money to draw on."

"If money's all you think about, Auntie, you're bound to sell yourself cheap. Isn't love more important than money? Without love, a marriage is doomed to fail."

"I'll grant you that. In which case, what sort of man do you see yourself marrying?"

"Who can say? There's no one comes to mind."

As Yukiko and her aunt are absorbed in their discussion of marriage, Tonko, who has been listening on and following as best she can, suddenly chimes in. "I want to be married off too." Yukie, herself brimming with youthful passion and generally sympathetic to the hopes and aspirations of young ladies, finds herself suddenly disarmed by this rash declaration. The wife, on the other hand, takes it relatively in stride. "Where is it you have in mind?" she asks with a smile.

"Where I want to be married to, actually, is the Shōkonsha Temple. Only problem is I'm afraid of crossing Suidō Bridge."

Both the wife and Yukie, taken aback by the sophistication of Tonko's answer, can only respond with forced laughter. At this point, Sunko turns to her older sister to offer a proposal of her own.

"You like Shōkonsha? I do too. I love that place. We can go as brides together. What do you think? Either way is fine. I can hire a cart and ride there myself."

"Lil gal too!" Even Lil gal is in on the idea to be married off to Shōkonsha. What a relief for the master if all three daughters can be married off en masse to the same place.

At this point a cart rattles to a stop out front. "Here you are!" exclaims an animated voice. The master, it seems, has returned from his outing to Nihonzutsumi. The cartman holds out a large wrapped bundle that the master hands over in turn to the maidservant before sauntering into the living room. "Look who's

here," he calls out to Yukie by way of greeting as he takes his place by the renowned brazier. With a bit of a flourish, he thumps down something resembling a saké bottle. The reason I say "resembling," of course, is that it's like no actual saké bottle I've ever seen, yet at the same time also not quite a vase. It's some oddball form of ceramic for which there's no right word to describe.

"That's an odd thing. The police were passing those out?" Yukie, righting the tipped vessel, enquires of her uncle. Her uncle, in return, looks back at her beaming with pride. "A handsomely-crafted piece, wouldn't you say?"

"Handsomely-crafted? This thing? I struggle to think so. And why come home with an oil jar?"

"Who says it's an oil jar? It's lame remarks like that that show off your lack of culture."

"In that case, enlighten me."

"It's a flower vase."

"For a flower vase, the neck's too narrow and the body's too fat."

"That's the point. You're so uncouth. You and your aunt are cast from the same bad mold. You're both beyond help." The master, disregarding the ladies, takes up the vessel, holds it up with the shōji as backdrop, and examines it anew.

"If only I were more cultured. Then I too could call at police headquarters and come home bearing an oil bottle. Really now. Don't you think, Auntie?" Yukie's aunt, however, is off in her own world. With eager eyes she's untied the bundle and is sorting through the recovered goods. "Will you look at this? Thievery has advanced with the times. Everything's been unstitched, laundered clean, and dried flat. Really, look for yourself."

"Who said anything about bringing back an oil bottle from the precinct? I grew tired of waiting, strolled the environs for a change of pace, and discovered this piece. It may be lost on the likes of you, but this is quite the find."

"Quite the find indeed. Where exactly did your stroll take you?"

"You know full well. Nihonzutsumi and thereabouts. I even ventured into Yoshiwara. Thriving quarters. The iron gate there's a sight to see. Don't suppose you've ever seen it."

"Don't suppose I have. What business would I have in Yoshiwara? The place is crawling with prostitutes. To think that you, a teacher, would be traipsing through it. Hard to believe. Don't you think Auntie? Auntie?"

"Yes, certainly. Something seems to be missing here. Is this really everything that was taken?"

"Except for the yams, that's everything. Can you believe they summoned me at nine, only to keep me waiting till eleven? The police in this country are woefully incompetent."

"The police may be incompetent, but that's no excuse for you sauntering off through Yoshiwara. If word gets out you'll lose your post. Isn't that right Auntie?"

"Right indeed. Say, there's no backing piece for my obi. I thought there was something missing."

"Let your obi go. It's already cost me three hours of my time. Half the day's gone." The master has changed into his casual Japanese dress and is leaning against the brazier, turning his attention again to his oil jar. The wife, giving up on her obi backing, stows the returned goods away in the cabinet and returns to her place.

"Look at that Auntie. He claims this oil jar was a rare find. Not worth the clay it's cast from, if you ask me."

"You went and bought that in Yoshiwara? Really now."

"What do you mean, 'really now?' As if you knew anything about ceramics."

"Well I don't think you need to go to Yoshiwara for a piece like that. Don't they sell those anywhere?"

"That's my point. This is highly uncommon. A rare find."

"Uncle plays the stone Jizō"

"Impertinent child, this one. Schoolgirls these days have sharper and sharper tongues. You'd do well to verse yourself in Onna Daigaku."

"I hear you take issue with insurance too. Which is worse, schoolgirls or insurance?"

"I've nothing against insurance. It serves a purpose. Anyone with any concern for the future does well to enroll. Schoolgirls, on the other hand, are nothing more than fifth wheels."

"Well a fifth wheel's just as good as the other four. And what would you know about enrolling in insurance?"

"In the coming month I intend to enroll."

"For real?"

"Absolutely."

"You shouldn't rush into insurance and such. Think what else that money you'll spend on premiums could buy. Wouldn't you agree, Auntie?" Yukie's aunt can barely suppress a grin. The master turns serious.

"You're only carefree 'cause you think you'll live forever. Contemplate mortality for a moment, and you'll soon enough grasp the need for insurance. Come next month, I'm signing up."

"No point in my trying to dissuade you then. In fact, considering the things you spend money on, like buying me that umbrella the other day, insurance may well be the wiser bet. I tried to tell you I didn't need an umbrella, but you insisted nonetheless."

"You really didn't want it?"

"No, not at all."

"Then hand it back. Tonko's been wanting one. I can give it to her. Did you bring it with you?"

"I can't believe you. How awful! Buying me an umbrella then asking to have it back."

"I only asked for it back after you said you didn't want it. How is that so awful?"

"I may not want it, but asking for it back is downright awful."

"You're making no sense. What's so awful about asking you to give back something you said you don't even want?"

"It's just ..."

"It's just what?"

"At any rate, it's awful."

"This is ridiculous. All you do is repeat your same assertions."

"As do you. Don't pin this on me."

"I'm only repeating myself because you're repeating yourself. You did say, did you not, that you don't want the umbrella?"

"That's what I said. I said I don't want it, but I never said I wanted to give it back."

"How does that figure? You're a headstrong numbskull, beyond the reach of reason. At that school of yours, is there no instruction in logical thought?"

"Just keep on piling it on. Heap disdain on the unenlightened. No one with even an ounce of human feeling would asks another to return a gift once given. It's men like you who could stand to learn from Foolish Také."

"Learn from whom?"

"I'm talking about sincerity. About purity of heart."

"You're a buffoon, and a stubborn one at that. It's no wonder you don't make the grade."

"Whether I make the grade or not, it's no skin off your nose. No one's asking you to fund my studies."

Yukie, having fought back valiantly with her words, finally succumbs to emotion. She bursts out crying, dropping tears onto her purple hakama. The master, who seems to be pondering the underlying psychological workings that would lead to such an outburst, gazes in turn at the hakama and Yukie's downturned face with an air of observational detachment. At this point Osan's ruddy hands, heretofore at work in the kitchen, appear on the threshold. "A caller sir," she announces. "Who is it?" the master enquires. "A student from the school," Osan replies with a sideways glance at Yukie's tear-stained face. The master heads out to the parlor to receive his caller. In part to feed my curiosity, and in part to further my study of the human condition, I indiscreetly tail behind by way of the veranda. The human condition, I've found, only presents itself fully in times of distress. Ordinarily, the general populace is just that, a general population of nondescript folk, hardly worth noting. Put them under duress, however, and their calm veneers suddenly crumble, as if rent asunder by some mysterious and miraculous force. In these moments, billowing up in boundless measure, come all things novel, strange, curious, and unconventional. In short, we cats are thus blessed with myriad informative glimpses into the raw human condition. Yukie's feminine tears are an example of one such glimpse. The depths of her emotions, as she conversed with the wife, were so well hidden as to belie their very existence. Then the return of the master with his oil jar, like a firehose trained on a sleeping dragon, evoked in short order a plethora of the deepest and most profound deft, elegant, curious, and wonderful charms. What's more, such hidden charms are not unique to

Yukie, but common to all of the gentler sex. Regrettably, though, they show themselves only reluctantly. Or better said, they're ever apparent, just not in such unbridled measure as to set them front and center. Fortuitously, owing to this crotchety oddball master of mine, who's like as not to stroke my fur in the wrong direction, I witness more than my share of open human folly. Just tail behind, wherever he goes, and sure enough the actors take the stage, strutting and fretting despite themselves. Blessed with this most eccentric of fellows as my master, I'm able to experience, even within my brief feline lifespan, a great many things. I can only count myself fortunate. What, I'm wondering, is this latest caller about.

A boarding student of seventeen or eighteen, about the same age as Yukie, is waiting in the corner of the parlor. His large head is close-cropped, so close that its shiny surface is visible, and a stout nose, the size of a dumpling, dominates the center of his face. His defining feature, though, is his oversized skull. Even close-cropped, it seems remarkably large. Should he ever grow out his hair, as the master does, it's proportions would stand out even more. The master has long believed that it's just such features and faces that defy scholarship. He may in fact be on to something, but at first glance, at least, this oversized head conjures up visions of grandeur, along the lines of a Napoleon or such. His attire, typical of boarding students, consists of a lined kimono, cut short in the sleeves in keeping with current style, and sewn from some form of splash-patterned plain weave fabric, perhaps in the Satsuma style, or perhaps in the Kurume or Iyo styles. Who can tell. Under this lined kimono, it seems he's donned neither shirt nor undergarment. They say a single lined kimono and bare feet are trendy these days, but not so on this fellow. He personifies filth and grime. Owing to his bare and dusty feet, three clear prints adorn the tatami, as when that burglar stole cross this very same room. He's seated himself on print number four, bolt upright and struggling mightily to hold himself still. Waiting quietly, in a situation that calls for quiet waiting, should hardly be noteworthy, yet there's something terribly incongruous in this rambunctious young man, with his close-cropped head and awkward attire, surrendering himself to the dictates of formality. For him and his ilk, who when passing their teachers in the street pride themselves on displaying no deference, thirty minutes of respectful stillness is sheer agony. That being said, there he sits, acting the part of the humble gentleman or virtuous nobleman. To the casual observer, despite his internal suffering and duress, the scene comes across as highly comical. To think that this young urchin, so boisterous in the classroom and raucous on the playground, has for whatever reason been forced now to restrain himself, is both heart-rending and at the same time amusing. The master, however witless he may be, when thus paired one-on-one with a student, assumes due weight of authority. He beams with satisfaction. They say that dust piles into mountains. Likewise, the massing of single students is a force to be reckoned with, capable of ousting educators or boycotting classes. This is no different than a coward emboldened by drink. In the safety of numbers, intoxicated by the fellowship of kindred human spirits, these students stand ready to cast aside all semblances of sobriety at the drop of a hat. How else could it be that this fellow here now, humbled to the point of dejection, shrinking against the wall in his shabby kimono, could so disdain the master, who

however decrepit is still his instructor? How else could said fellow be so emboldened as to mock the master routinely?

"Have a seat," the master offers while sliding a cushion cross the floor. The close-cropped young guest acknowledges the cushion but makes no move to employ it. It's an odd scene, this young fellow with his larger-than-life head squatting vacantly on the floor, while the frayed cotton cushion, come to rest directly under his nose, all but invites him to mount it. Seating cushions are for sitting. It was not to have callers stare at it blankly that the wife went all the way to the marketplace and procured said cushion. To shun a cushion by declining to mount it is to strip it of all honor, not to mention the slight to the master who offered it up. It's not that this shorn head, staring down the cushion, harbors any animosity toward cushions per say. It's rather that, with the exception of his grandfather's wake, he's never in his life been formally seated, and his feet, tucked up under his haunches, are already tingling with numbness. The cushion, having no other recourse, waits in vain for his response. The master's "have a seat" goes unheeded. A troublesome shorn-head lad. If inclined to exercise restraint, why not do so when gathered with his buddies? Why not do so at school? Why not do so in the boarding house? By refraining where he need not, and by failing to refrain when he should, he sows discord near and far. He's calamity incarnate.

At this point the fusuma in the rear of the room slides open and Yukie, with due ceremony, presents the visitor with a cup of tea. Under other circumstances, such act might well elicit jeers of "savage tea," but here one-on-one with the master, as a guest in his household, and in the presence of a young lady who extends the teacup with gracious gesture, the result of her recent schooling in Ogasawara-style etiquette, the young fellow seems fully beset by an awkward discomfort. Yukie, backing through the fusuma and sliding it shut, is sporting a wide grin. When it comes to peers of equal age, the female takes the day. Of these two youngsters, Yukie's far more composed. Her self-assured grin is all the more remarkable for following in the wake of her recent bout of feminine tears.

After Yukie's withdrawal, both men sit for a while without speaking. Finally the master, realizing they're carrying on like a pair of ascetics, breaks the silence with a question.

"What was your name?"

"Furui ..."

"Furui? Furui what? What was your given name?"

"Furui Buemon."

"Furui Buemon -- I see. That's a long name. Not modern. Harkens back to earlier times. Fourth year, I believe?"

"Nope."

"Third year, then?"

"Nope. Second."

"Group A?"

"Group B."

"Group B's mine. I see." The master's interest picks up. In fact, from the moment this large-headed lad appeared at the school, he'd caught the master's eye and impressed himself in the master's mind. Furthermore, so impressive was this large head that from time to time it invaded the master's thoughts. That being said, the master was too lax in his thinking to associate this remarkable head with its archaic name, and too lax to associate head and name with his own second year Group B charges. So now, informed that this head, so remarkable as to invade his thoughts, belongs to a student in his homeroom class, the master is inwardly elated. However, he has no idea why this large head, with its archaic name, who is a student in his homeroom class, should be calling at his residence. The master is patently unpopular, so it's rare indeed that a student, be it New Year's or Year's End, should ever come to call. His callers to date, it can even be said, begin and end with said Furui Buemon. As such, the master finds himself at complete loss as to why this student is here. The house of such a nondescript man as the master certainly warrants no social call. Then again, there's no hint of triumph in the caller's demeanor, so he's clearly not here to pressure the master for his resignation. Finally, he hardly seems likely to have come seeking counsel on personal matters. However much the master ponders, he can make neither heads nor tails of this visit. Buemon himself, judging by the look on his face, seems not entirely sure why he's there. Having no other recourse, the master finally forces the point.

"I take it this isn't a social call."

"Correct."

"Then you're here on some matter of business?"

"I am."

"Concerning the school?"

"Yes. There's something I need to discuss ..."

"I see. What is it then? Let's hear it." Even thus prompted, Buemon sits in silence with eyes cast down. For a second-year middle schooler, he's the talkative sort. His brain may be lacking in horsepower, especially in proportion to the oversized skull that houses it, but when it comes to chatter he bests his Group B peers.

In fact, it was this very Buemon who confounded the master the other day by asking how "Columbus" translates to Japanese. For this vibrant young master to sit here now, stammering and fidgeting like a spoiled girl torn between myriad whims, can only mean there's something of import at play. His deference is all too extreme. The master senses something's amiss.

"If you've something to say, then why not say it? No point dawdling."

"It's a bit awkward ..."

"Awkward?" The master directs his gaze to Buemon, but the latter's face is still downturned and yields no hint of what's at play. Of necessity, the master changes his tact. "Listen, you're free to speak here. No one else is listening, and whatever you say will be held in strict confidence," he adds with a soothing tone.

"I'm not sure I can say it." Buemon still wavers.

"Of course you can." The master settles the matter for him.

"I guess I have to, but ..." The cropped head slowly rights itself, and reluctant, half-closed eyes peer into the master's. The master puffs up his cheeks and turns his head a bit to slowly exhales his cigarette smoke.

"The truth is ... I've landed myself in trouble ..."

"How so?"

"A great deal of trouble. That's why I've come."

"I've got that. Now what sort of trouble?"

"It wasn't my idea. It was Hamada. 'Let me use it. You have to let me use it,' he said. He kept pressuring me ..."

"By 'Hamada,' you mean Hamada Heisuke?"

"Yes."

"You lent Hamada money for room and board or what not?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"Then what was it you let him use?"

"My name."

"And what was it Hamada did with your name?"

"Put it on a love letter."

"Put it on what?"

"I offered to serve as currier. Anything other than lending my name."

"This isn't making much sense, is it? Who exactly did what?"

"We wrote a love letter."

"You wrote a love letter? To whom?"

"That's where it gets awkward."

"Okay, so you sent off a love letter to some certain young lady?"

"I didn't send it."

"Then Hamada sent it?"

"It wasn't Hamada either."

"Then who sent it?"

"No one, really."

"You're making no sense. Was it sent or not?"

"At any rate, my name's on it."

"Okay, your name's on it. But I've no idea who did what. Can you not order your story in some logical fashion? For starters, who received said letter?"

"Kaneda. The young lady in that lane cross the way."

"The daughter of the industrialist?"

"Yes."

"Now then, what do you mean when you say your name's on it?"

"That young lady, they say, is always dressed to the nines and is full of herself, so we sent her a love letter. -- Hamada insisted it be signed, so I suggested he sign it himself. Not satisfied with his own name, he countered that 'Furui Buemon' had a much better ring to it. -- In the end, I relented and let him use my name."

"And you're acquainted with said young lady? You've encountered her somewhere?"

"I've never met her. I've never even seen her."

"My word. What were you thinking, sending off a love letter to someone you've never even seen? Who on earth does such things?"

"Everyone says she's full of herself and always putting on airs, so we thought to tease her a bit."

"All the more reckless. And it's signed with your name, plain as day?"

"That's right. Hamada wrote it, I lent my name to it, and Endō snuck round at night and dropped it into their box."

"So the three of you acted together?"

"Correct. But then it hit me later, as I got to thinking, that I might be expelled if this all comes to light. That would kill me. I haven't slept in three days, and my head's a mess."

"No doubt. You're suffering the consequences your own foolish action. Tell me you didn't include the name of the school, or your class rank, in the signature."

"No, there's no mention of the school."

"Thank goodness for that. The last thing we need is something like this."

"What do you think? Will they likely expel me?"

"We'll have to see ..."

"Help me out. My father's strict with me, and my mother, who's really my stepmother, is no less severe. It's curtains for me if I end up expelled. Do you really think they'd expel me?"

"You should have asked yourself that sooner, before acting."

"It wasn't a conscious act. It all just sort of happened. Is there not some way to avoid expulsion?" Buemon entreats the master, his voice unsteady and on the verge of tears. On the other side of the fusuma, throughout all this, the wife and Yukie are exchanging grins. The master, caught up in the gravity of Buemon's torment, responds again with, "We'll have to see ..." It's all quite intriguing.

When I say it's all quite intriguing, some may ask how so. It's no surprise they should ask. Whether man or beast, the hardest endeavor over the course of any lifetime is learning to know oneself. I'll grant, in fact, that any human being who succeeds in knowing himself can rightly claim supremacy over us cats. At such point, I would immediately cease and desist, out of sympathy for Buemon and his like, the reporting of the occasional misdeed. However, just as a man can't see the height of his own nose, he also struggles to discern his own nature, and thus he questions how a cat, whom he regards with perpetual disdain, could view his travails as intriguing. Man, while brash and boastful, is also flawed and deficient. He parades what he calls the "triumph of the human spirit," proclaiming it far and wide, yet fails to perceive his own shortcomings. And he does so in all sincerity, betraying no hint of self-doubt, which makes it all the more farcical. He walks through this world convinced that his spirit must triumph, yet soon devolves to fretting and fussing. "Where's my nose? I can't see it. Help me find it," he implores. Is he thus compelled to abandon his ruse? Not in the least. He'd sooner die than relinquish his self-proclaimed "triumph." There's a certain charm in any creature so overtly indifferent to his own inconsistencies. The price of this charm, though, is never-ending folly.

My fascination on this occasion with Buemon, the master, the wife, and Miss Yukie stems not simply from the fact that an external affair has intruded on their routines and set them all abuzz. What fascinates me more is how the same affair reverberates with unique timbre through each unique individual. Let's start with the master. He's more or less indifferent to the whole thing. However strict Buemon's father may be, or however much Buemon's mother may shun him as a stepchild, is not the master's concern. Why should he be concerned? There's a world of difference between Buemon's expulsion and any threat to his own position. Should the school's thousand students all be expelled, then yes, his continued livelihood as an instructor would surely come into question, but the particular fate of one Furui Buemon, whatever it might be, has little connection to the master's daily bread. Where connections are weak, empathy is in short supply. There's no reason whatsoever to knit one's brows, sob and sniffle, or sigh and lament over the plight of a relative stranger. Human beings are by no means such compassionate or sympathetic creatures. That being said, they are social creatures, and being such they're required at times to shed a supporting

tear or don a façade of commiseration. These crocodile tears, as they're often called, come only with practice and effort, and those who master this charade best are esteemed as caring and conscientious citizens. It follows then that the most esteemed of men are also the most deceitful. Observation confirms this time and again. The master, in contrast, numbers among the clumsy and inept. Being clumsy and inept, he garners no esteem. Garnering no esteem, he's blatantly candid, making no endeavor to mask his cool indifference. His detached and repeated "We'll have to see ..." in response to Buemon's angst is an honest manifestation of his inner indifference. I would caution against finding fault with the master, a man of honest virtue, on account of his indifference. Indifference is man's natural state, and it's the honest man who wears it on his sleeve. To expect any more of a man is to credit his race too highly. Even honesty is in short supply. Until the eight warriors of Bakin's novel, Shino and Kobungo and the like, leap from its pages and populate the neighborhood, expecting anything more than basic honesty is expecting far too much.

Leaving the master for a time, I turn now to the lady folk who are snickering away in the living room. In contrast to the master's cool indifference, the lady folk are emotionally engaged, reveling to no end in Buemon's predicament. They're receiving this whole account of the love letter, which has set the poor boy's head on fire, with no less joy than men of yore who first received glad tidings of the Buddha's enlightenment. Their glee defies explanation, but they're gleeful nonetheless. If one insists on digging deeper, one can only conclude it's Buemon's misery fueling their amusement. Try asking a woman if others' misery spurs her to gleeful laughter. Said woman will turn on her inquirer quite sharply. She'll dismiss him as a dullard, or she may even attack him for assailing her honor. While it may be true that she feels her honor assaulted, it's equally true that she has, indeed, reveled in the misery of another. She might as well give prior notice. "My behavior may be unbecoming of a lady, but I'll have you hold your tongue." It's no different than a man committing theft yet forbidding any mention of impropriety. Any mention of impropriety, after all, would sully his reputation. It would weigh on his good name. This he cannot abide. Women are clever things, anchoring their notions with sound logic. Any man born into the human race should expect at times to be stomped on, kicked in the face, and berated, with no help at all from his fellow men nearby. When one is spit on and smeared with feces, one must further don a brave face as shrieks of feminine laughter arise from all sides. Such is the cost of coexisting with these clever creatures called women. Young master Buemon, having landed in hot water through an impulsive action of youth and now showing due contrition, might well be indignant at the merciless mirth unfolding on the other side of the fusuma. The perpetrators of this affront, however, would readily counter that any indignation on his part stems from naïveté and lack of fortitude. All of this stems, at the end of the day, from his own actions. Were he not prepared to bear the repercussions, then he needn't have acted.

Lastly, a word or two on the inner workings of Buemon's mind. Buemon is angst incarnate. Just as Napoleon's head was steeped in ambition, Buemon's oversized cranial cavity is filled to bursting with

angst. The occasional twitch of his dumpling nose is the unconscious manifestation of angst at work on his facial nerves. He harbors an uncomfortable mass in his belly, as if he'd swallowed a large candy whole while lacking the means to digest it, and it's tormented him for some days now. The extreme of his torment, with no relief in sight, has led him to seek out his home room instructor. Imagining said instructor might somehow assist him, he now finds himself in the home of this man, for whom he holds no particular affection, humbly bowing his head. It no longer registers with him that he's cajoled and put the screws to this same man on a daily basis, all the while inciting his fellow classmates to follow suit. He's convinced, it seems, that as his home room instructor the man owes him sympathy, any past provocation and cajoling aside. What a naïve young thing. The master's role as Buemon's home room instructor came not by choice but by order of the principal. It's like that "bowler hat" Meitei's uncle sports. It's merely a name. As a mere name, when push comes to shove there's no force of effect. If names were functional, then Yukie, with her fair name, should have no shortage of marriage prospects. Buemon's not just self-indulgent. He also harbors a mistaken belief, stemming from far too great a faith in humanity, that his fellow men must somehow be sympathetic to his plight. The last thing he expected was laughter in response to his tears. If nothing else, Buemon will no doubt come away from this visit to his home room instructor having understood a truth of the human condition. This truth will prepare him to function in the world as a genuine man. The world's response to one's angst is indifference. The world's response to one's misery is shrieks of laughter. Armed with such understanding, Buemon has a bright future and is ready to make his way forward, following in the footsteps of the esteemed Kanedas. My hope for Buemon is that he opens his eyes, takes this all to heart without delay, and forges himself into a successful citizen. Otherwise, no amount of angst, nor any depth of repentance, nor any sincere effort at virtue, will ever bring him success on par with the Kanedas. On the contrary, he'll end up an outcast, at constant odds with his fellow men. Expulsion from Bunmei Middle School is the least of this young man's concerns.

As I was thus ruminating, caught up in the intrigue of events, the front latticework door slid open with a rattle. A face appeared in the entryway, half masked by the shōji.

"Sensei!"

The master, who at this moment was continuing to string Buemon along with "We'll have to see," turned to see who had called. What he saw, visible obliquely in the shadow of the shōji, was the half-hidden face of none other than Kangetsu. "Well. Come in," the master called, not bothering to rise.

"You've a guest?" Kangetsu asked back in return, still half masked by the shōji.

"Yes, but not to worry. Come, join us."

"Actually, I'm here to invite you out."

"Where to? Akasaka again? No thanks to that. The other day you walked me into the ground. My legs are still stiff."

"Nothing like that today. How 'bout it? The outing will do you good."

"Where do you have in mind? Anyway, come in for a bit."

"I thought we could go to Ueno to hear the tiger roar."

"Not my cup of tea. At any rate, come in."

Kangetsu, sensing there's no point in continuing to negotiate from the entryway, takes off his shoes and steps up into the room. His signature gray trousers are patched cross the rear, though the rends did not arise, he would argue, from passage of too much time or untoward bodily pressure. He's learned to ride a bicycle of late, and the motions have imparted a severe chafing to the seat of his pants. Never imagining he's face to face with a rival in love, a young man who's latched on to his future wife and even wooed her with prose, he greets Buemon with a casual "Hey," nodding lightly as he seats himself at the edge of the room, close to the veranda.

"Is this roaring of the tiger really all that interesting?"

"It is, but only at the right time. The plan is to stroll about till night falls. Then, around eleven or so, we make our way to Ueno."

"Really?"

"By that time, the old trees in the park are still and deep, casting an eerie pall."

"I suppose it's a bit forlorn, compared to daytime."

"At any rate, we make our way into the densest woods, plotting a course where few folks venture, even in daylight. Before we know it, the dust and dirt of the city is out of sight and out of mind. We feel, rather, like two men lost on a mountain."

"So this feeling sets in. Then what?"

"So this feeling sets in, and we stop for a moment. Suddenly then, from over in the zoo, comes the tiger's roar."

"Are you sure we'll get a roar?"

"Absolutely. Even during the day, over at the College of Science, the roars resonate. Late in the night, when it's silent and still with no one about, when chills brush one's skin, when scents from the underworld assail one's nostrils ..."

"What's this about scents from the underworld?"

"Isn't that what they say in setting an eerie scene?"

"I'm not sure who ever says that, but anyway, go on."

"The tiger packs a powerful roar. The leaves on the old cryptomeria shake and all but fall to the ground. It's awesome to behold."

"I wonder if it's really so awesome as all that."

"Let's try it. Nothing ventured nothing gained. You won't regret it. Until you've heard the tiger's roar at night, you haven't heard the tiger's roar."

"We'll have to see." The master's indifference, already evident in response to Buemon's supplications, extends itself now to Kangetsu's proposed expedition.

Young master Buemon, who up until now had been listening with silent envy to Kangetsu's talk on the tiger, is seemingly pulled back to reality by the master's "We'll have to see." "I'm worried to death, sir. What can I do?" Kangetsu casts a quizzical look at Buemon's oversized head. As for me, having seen enough here I excuse myself and make my way to the living room.

In the living room, the wife is grinning from ear to ear as she fills a Kyō-yaki teacup to the brim with coarse tea and lifts it onto an antimony saucer.

"Yukie dear, if I can impose once more, please take this in."

"I'd really rather not."

"What's that?" The wife is somewhat taken aback. The grin fades from her face.

"I'd just rather not." Yukie tightens her face, leans over the Yomiuri newspaper spread at her side, and casts her eyes onto the print. The wife attempts to re-engage her.

"I don't understand. It's just Kangetsu. No need for formality."

"I know that, but I'd still rather not." She keeps her eyes fixed on the paper. She's not, in fact, taking in the text, but if confronted with such she'll only burst out bawling again.

"There's no reason to be bashful." Taking a gentler tact, the wife pushes the teacup onto the paper with a smile. "Stop already." Yukie reacts by pulling at the paper. In the process, she overturns the cup, sending tea across the paper and down into the seams of the tatami. "Look now," the wife scolds. "Oh my!" Yukie exclaims as she dashes into the kitchen, no doubt after a rag. I find this little episode telling.

Back in the parlor, oblivious to what's just played out in the living room, Kangetsu turns his attention to an utterly unrelated topic.

"I see you've re-papered the shōji. Who's work was that?"

"The womenfolk did it. Not bad, eh?"

"Not bad at all. That young lady who calls on occasion did it?"

"Yes, she helped out. In her own estimation, this competence at handiwork more than qualifies her for marriage."

"I see. Indeed." Kangetsu surveys the work. "This side is nice and smooth, but over on the right the paper was cut too large. See how it undulates."

"That's where they started. They learned and improved as they worked across."

"Clearly a bit unpracticed to begin with. Looks like a transcendental surface. Can't imagine any polynomial fitting such curves." The natural scientist in Kangetsu is evident in his remarks.

"I don't suppose," the master gives a cursory reply.

Buemon, realizing at this point that his entreaty has fallen on deaf ears, silently bends forward and presses his oversized head against the tatami, signaling his intended departure. "Are you leaving us?" the master enquires. With sunken spirit, Buemon dons his Satsuma geta and drags his feet out the main gate, cutting a pitiable figure. Who's to say he won't be next to scribe a verse on the upper rocks and throw himself over Kegon Falls. The root cause of his action, in any final analysis, will be the stylish impertinence of one Miss Kaneda. Should Buemon not survive, let his ghost hunt her down in vengeance. As far as the world of men is concerned, the absence of such young lady, or even several such, would almost be welcome. For Kangetsu's part, he'd be better served by a more lady-like young lady.

"Was that one of your students?"

"It was."

"He sure has a large noggin. How are his grades?"

"Not as impressive as that noggin might suggest. And he gives me fits. The other day he asked for a translation of 'Columbus,' putting me on the spot."

"With an oversized noggin like that, extraneous inquiries are matter of course. How'd you respond?"

"I hemmed and hawed a bit, then fudged up a translation."

"You managed a translation then? I'm impressed."

"Had to. These young fellows today are never satisfied with anything less."

"You're more the diplomat than you used to be. To be honest, though, he seemed a bit down. Hardly looked the troublemaker."

"He's out of sorts just now. His own idiocy's caught up to him for once."

"What happened? He looked rather wretched. What did he do?"

"Something utterly stupid. He sent a love letter to the Kaneda daughter."

"You don't say! That big noggin did that? Boarding students of old were never so bold. I'm impressed."

"I hate to give you cause for concern, but ..."

"No concern on my part. I find it rather charming. They can shower her with adoration for all I care."

"If you're not upset then maybe I'll let it pass ..."

"I'm not upset. Not in the least. I am surprised, though. That big noggin penned a love letter?"

"To tell the truth, it was done in jest. She flaunts her style. Seeing her as impertinent, they thought to bring her down a notch. There were three involved ..."

"Three guys penned a single letter to the Kaneda daughter? The tale twists and turns. Isn't that like three men sitting down to dine at a single plate?"

"Division of labor. One did the writing, one was courier, and one lent his name. The fellow just here is the one who lent his name, the dumbest of the three. Furthermore, by his own admission, he's never even seen the Kaneda daughter. What on earth could he possibly have been thinking?"

"As recent scandals go, this is quite the story. A masterful endeavor. To think that this large noggin would set its sight on a girl."

"The consequences could may be severe."

"What consequences? It's just the Kanedas. No cause for alarm."

"We're talking, perhaps, of your future bride."

"What of it then if she is? Don't worry 'bout the Kanedas."

"If it doesn't upset you ..."

"I don't see it upsetting Miss Kaneda either. Not to worry."

"I certainly hope you're right. This fellow in question, bitten after the fact by his better conscience, called in full contrition to come clean and seek counsel."

"I see. He did look awfully dejected. Must be timid at heart. What did you tell him?"

"What he really fears is expulsion. That's what drove him to see me."

"Why would he be expelled?"

"What they did was wrong and improper, was it not?"

"I wouldn't say it was all that bad. It's nothing, really. If anything, I would bet you our young Miss Kaneda's flattered and showing the letter round to her friends."

"I should hope not."

"At any rate, give the lad a break. Granted, he shouldn't have done what he did, but don't push him over the edge. He'll beat himself to death. He's got an oversized noggin, but feature-wise he looks alright. That nervous twitch in his nose is downright endearing."

"You certainly take things in stride, almost as easygoing as Meitei."

"We're merely products of the zeitgeist. Take a hard-line stance and you'll only date yourself."

"But what he did was asinine, was it not? Imagine, sending off a love letter to someone you don't even know. Totally lacking in common sense."

"Mischief-makers, for the most part, are lacking in common sense. All the same, help him out. You'll be the better man for it. Left to his own demons, he'll throw himself off Kegon Falls."

"Perhaps I'd best intervene."

"By all means do. There are bigger fish, who should and do know better, making much greater mischief with no penitence whatsoever. If this young lad is to be expelled, then it's only fair to make a clean sweep, taking out the full raft of greater mischief-makers along with him."

"I suppose that's true."

"Back to the matter at hand, how 'bout venturing to Ueno to hear the tiger?"

"The tiger, huh?"

"By all means, let's go. Truth is, I need to travel home in a few days to attend to certain matters. I won't see you for a while, so I came today to invite you out for a stroll."

"I see. You have to head back home?"

"Yes. Some things to take care of. -- At any rate, let's go out."

"Alright. In that case, I suppose I could go."

"Come on. I'll buy you dinner. -- And after that we'll walk about for exercise, arriving at Ueno at just the right time." Kangetsu's persistent urging finally wins the master over, and the two of them set out together. Once they're gone, the wife and Yukie are free to laugh up a storm.