

I am a Cat – Chapter 11a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

Meitei and Dokusen sit on opposite sides of the 'go' board, which is set up in front of the alcove, ready to face off.

"We're not just playing to play. The loser treats the winner. Agreed?" Meitei presses his condition.

Dokusen gives his goatee a signature tug and replies as follows. "Let us not debase a noble game with petty contrivances. Wagers shackle the mind to the mundane matter of victory or defeat. To truly immerse oneself in the moment, to lose oneself in the game, one must banish all thoughts of winning or losing. Make your spirit like the white clouds, bumping 'gainst lofty peaks, yet skirting through and flowing on."

"Here we go again. How does one cope with an otherworldly opponent? Like some Daoist immortal, straight from the pages of Retsusenden."

"The perfect tune is plucked from an unadorned and stringless qin."

"And the perfect telegraph system is all poles and no wires. Am I right?"

"At any rate, let's play."

"You're taking white?"

"Either color is fine."

"Ever the composed and tranquil ascetic. If you're white, then I guess it follows that I'm black. Alright, make your move. Show me what you've got."

"The rules state that black plays first."

"I see. In that case, allow me to play here, a tried and true opening."

"None of the standard openings start there."

"Fine if they don't. I'm pioneering a new standard."

My social interactions are limited, and it's only recently that I first set eyes on a go board, but the more I reflect on it, the more it strikes me as odd. A square cut of wood, not so large to begin with, is partitioned into an array of even smaller squares, which are then crowded with a dizzying multitude of black and white stones. Anxious excitement ensues, with territories gained or lost, and squadrons of stones perishing

or prevailing. All this within a square of some thirty or so centimeters on a side. One swipe of a cat's front paw, and the whole shebang's in tatters. A hermitage, as they say, is sheaves of grass collected and tied into thatch. Unbundle and scatter the thatch, and nought but an empty field remains. This game of go is a futile and useless pastime. Better to just sit still, hands in one's pockets, and reflect on the empty squares. The first thirty or forty stones, spread cross the board, hardly offend the eye. But the scene later on, as skirmishes rend the landscape, is a sorry one indeed. White and black jostle and crowd, all but spilling off the edge of the board. However confined, no stone can call for another to yield. However obstructed, no stone can order another aside. Consigned to their fates, these locked-in stones have no recourse but to hold their ground and hope for the best. As a game contrived by men, it's safe to conclude it mirrors human nature. The confinement of stones on a crowded board is but manifestation of man's narrow-minded worldview. As one contemplates the plight of these confined stones, one sees quite clearly the tendency of men to carve up the vast sky and rolling sea into small portions, mark out a portion as one's own through petty devices, and plant oneself in place with no faculty for ever venturing forth. In brief, man by his nature devises and concocts his own duress.

For whatever reason, on this of all days, the easy-going Meitei and the Zen-like Dokusen have pulled the old go board off the shelf and immersed themselves in this stodgy pastime. Not unexpectedly, given these two players, the first stones are scattered at will, with white and black spread this way and that. The board is bounded, though, and with each subsequent move its squares fill tighter and tighter. However carefree Meitei, or however passive Dokusen, confrontation is bound to follow in due course.

"Meitei, my friend, think before you move. I assure you you don't want to play there."

"A Zen monk might hesitate to play there, but not a Honinbō master? Watch and learn."

"But it's suicidal."

"Sacrifices sometimes have to be made, just as pork shoulders sometimes have to be chewed and swallowed. I'm making my play, and that's that."

"If you insist, then fine. 'Breezes of early summer, stirred from the south, refresh the palace halls.' I bridge these two formations, and all stands secure."

"Bridge them you did. Impressive. I can't say I saw that coming. Sound the bells. Now what?"

"Do as you might, it is what it is. 'The sword is drawn, and heaven guides its path.' -- You're out of luck. Decisively divided and duly doomed."

"Oh my. Dear me. Cut me off and I wither and die. This is no laughing matter. Hold on a moment here."

"I warned you not to play there. It was sheer suicide from the start."

"A thousand pardons for an untimely intrusion. Be a pal and take back this stone."

"A do-over? Again?"

"And while you're at it, take back this one too."

"Another impudent ploy."

"What's that? 'An utterly prudent boy?' -- Come now, we're friends here. Don't be so standoffish. Call off your stones. My very fate rests in your hands. 'A poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.'"

"Your meaning eludes me."

"Then let it elude you, but retract these stones."

"You've taken back six moves now already."

"A man with a sound memory. I intend hereafter to indulge in further take-backs. At any rate, I'm asking you to retract these stones. Don't be so headstrong. For all that meditation you do, where's your sensibility?"

"But I cede this region at my own peril ..."

"You said yourself it's not about winning or losing."

"It's fine if I lose, but I've no intent of letting you win."

"What was that path you're on? 'Light cutting shadows of spring breeze' was it?"

"It's not 'light cutting shadows.' It's 'light and shadow slicing the spring breeze.' You've got it switched round."

"Ha ha ha. I thought it time to switch things round, but I suppose I'd best let order reign. I'm out of luck here, so I'll lick my wounds and move on."

"The gravity of death and rebirth. The transience of life. Live to fight another day."

"Amen to that." So saying, Meitei drops his next stone on a distant part of the board.

As Dokusen and Meitei give it their all by the alcove, the life and death of go stones hanging in the balance, Kangetsu and Tōfu are seated side by side near the parlor entrance. Opposite them sits my sallow-faced master. In front of Kangetsu, neatly laid out on the tatami, are three bare stalks of dried bonito. It's a curious scene.

The origin of the dried bonito stalks is the breast pocket of Kangetsu's kimono. As he produced them, though bare and unwrapped, they were still warm to the touch. He offers explanation. "I returned from the countryside some four days ago, but was dashing all about, attending to various matters, and only now finally found time to call."

"No need to rush things. You can always call at your leisure." The master, as usual, is at best lukewarm in receiving his guests.

"I wouldn't have rushed had it not been for these. I was worried about their condition."

"They're dried bonito, I presume?"

"They are. Dried bonito is my hometown specialty."

"There's dried bonito aplenty in Tōkyō. What makes these special?" So enquiring, the master picks up the largest piece, brings it to the tip of his nose, and gives it a sniff.

"When it comes to dried bonito, you can't tell good from bad with your nose."

"Then it's the size that makes these special, is it not?"

"Wait till you taste them."

"I certainly will taste them, but this one seems to be missing its tip."

"That's why I was anxious to bring them over."

"How so?"

"I lost that tip to a rat."

"Is it still safe? The last thing I need is to fall down ill with the plague."

"Not to worry. It's only a small bite. No harm done."

"Where on earth did it happen?"

"On the boat."

"On the boat? How?"

"There wasn't any locker, so I dropped them into my violin sack on boarding. It happened that night. I didn't mind so much the tip of the bonito block, but it seems at some point my prized violin was mistakenly chewed as well. There were several bite marks cross the body."

"Heedless critters. I suppose that comes from living on a boat. Erodes one's faculties for distinction." The master, eyes still fixed on the dried bonito, provides his nonsensical two cents.

"Rats are rats. Heedless here and heedless there. That's why I worried, even back at my lodgings, they'd strike again. To guard against such dangers, I've tucked these into my bedding each night."

"That's a bit unsavory."

"Just wash them off before using."

"A bit of washing seems hardly sufficient."

"Then take some lye and scrub them down good."

"You had your violin in the bedding too?"

"The violin was too bulky to bring into the bedding, but ..."

"What's this? You slept with your violin? A cultivated companion. 'With passage of spring, the biwa lays heavy on heart and hands.' So says the poet, speaking from times long past. Our Meiji prodigies, if they hope to surpass those men of old, must follow suit and embrace their violins. 'In a sleeved quilt, through long-enduring nights, watching o'er one's violin.' How's that? Tell me Tōfū, could new-style poetry embrace such prose?" Meitei, from across the room in a loud voice, thus injects himself into the conversation.

"New-style poetry, unlike haiku, is not so spur-of-the-moment. On the other hand, when crafted with care it has a way of beckoning to the soul." Tōfū, in all earnestness, responds to Meitei.

"Is that so? I always thought it was the kindling of hemp stalks that beckoned souls home. A new-style poem carries the same effect, does it?" Meitei's mind has abandoned the go match in favor of banter.

"Keep up the chatter and you'll find yourself in hot water again," the master cautions him. Meitei is fully unfazed.

"I may win this, or I may lose it, but I've hemmed in my opponent like an octopus in a jar. His arms and legs just twitch with nowhere to go. Weary of waiting on his move, I've joined in on the violin." This elicits an animated reaction from Dokusen.

"It's your move, good sir, and it's me here who's waiting," he fires back.

"Huh? You've made your move?"

"Indeed. Some time back now."

"Where?"

"Observe this white stone here. I've extended on the diagonal."

"I see. Slicing in at an angle to cut out my feet. In that case I'll just -- I'll just -- I'll just watch as the curtain falls. I seem to be at a loss. Tell you what, why don't I give you another move. Anywhere you please."

"Who plays go like that?"

"If that's your answer then I suppose I'd best come up with a move. -- Here then. I'll change course and impose my will on this corner. -- Kangetsu, rats won't respect a low-grade violin. That's why they chewed it. Can you not spring for something a bit better? How 'bout I order you an Italian instrument? A tired and true model from three centuries or so back?"

"Yes please, and can you foot the bill to boot?"

"Who on earth would want something that old?" The master, knowing nothing of the subject at hand, promptly takes Meitei to task.

"You're assuming violins age in the same way as men. Even a man, take a certain Kaneda for example, may still wield influence into old age, but when it comes to violins, the older the better. -- Alright Dokusen, how 'bout it? Not to steal words from Keimasa, but autumn days are fleeting."

"Go's a chore with a fidgety fellow like you. Never enough time to think. Since you insist, I'll play here and secure these stones."

"Oh my. You've finally done it. Secure they are, much to my chagrin. I'd hoped you wouldn't see that. I did my very best to distract you with my prattling, but to no avail."

"Of course to no avail. There's no method to your play, just diversion and distraction."

"My play is learned from the masters of old, infused with the style of Kaneda, and samples the essence of the modern-day gentleman. -- See here, Kushami, after his time in Kamakura, subsisting on a diet of slow pickles, nothing perturbs our good Dokusen. He's no great go player, but he wields the force of singular focus."

"And a fellow like you, who's always flitting and fluttering, would do well to follow suit." The master replies with his back still turned, and Meitei immediately proceeds to stick out his big red tongue.

Dokusen stays out of the fray and pushes back on Meitei. "It's your move sir."

Tōfū turns to Kangetsu with a question. "When did you start with the violin? I'm thinking of taking it up myself, but they say it's not easy to learn."

"It's not easy, but anyone can master the basics."

"I'm hoping that proficiency in a musical instrument, perhaps, comes faster to one who's versed already in poetry and song. What do you think?"

"I don't see why not. I'm sure in your case you'll pick it up quickly."

"When did you start?"

"In high school. -- Have I ever told you, good teacher, the story of how I got started?"

"No, I've never heard it."

"Back in your high school days you had an instructor?"

"Nope. No instructor, or anyone else for that matter. I had to learn on my own."

"I knew it. A prodigy."

"Being self-taught and being a prodigy are two different things." Kangetsu expresses some annoyance. It's a rare man who takes offense at being branded a prodigy, but Kangetsu fills the bill.

"That aside, let's hear the story. How did you start? I'm taking mental notes."

"You're sure you all want to hear it?"

"Go on. Let's hear."

"If you stroll the streets these days, you're bound to see young folk toting violin cases, but in my day, when I was a high-schooler, Western music was seldom taught. Especially where I went to school, in the remotest of countrysides. It was a crude place, where even hemp-soled sandals were not yet in use. Needless to say, not a single student among us was trained in the violin. ..."

"There's an interesting story starting cross the room. What do you say, Dokusen, shall we call it a game?"

"There're still a few contested spots here."

"What if there are? They're no big deal. You can have them."

"I can't just take them. That wouldn't be right."

"How on earth can a student of Zen be so stubbornly meticulous? Alright then, let's have it out and be done with it. -- Kangetsu, I can't help but be intrigued. -- That's that senior high school, is it not, where the students walk to school in bare feet ..."

"Nothing of the sort."

"At any rate, though, I hear they drill in their bare feet, right about-face and what not, and the soles of their feet are thick-skinned."

"Certainly not. Who ever said such things?"

"Never mind who said it. I also hear they come to school with a single large rice ball, the size of a mandarin orange, tied 'bout their waists. That's what they eat for lunch. Eat, perhaps, is not the right word. They bite their way through it. Buried in the center is a single umeboshi. Their minds set on uncovering this tasty prize, they chew their way through the surrounding plain rice with abandon. There's nothing like the vitality of a youthful appetite. You can relate I imagine, eh Dokusen?"

"I can. Simple and wholesome, to me, is ideal."

"I'll tell you some more. One can't buy a bamboo ashtray in those parts. A friend of mine, stationed there for some time, went out to buy an ashtray of Togetsuhō make. Not only could he not find anything from Togetsuhō, he couldn't find a single ashtray at all. Thinking this odd, he was told quite plainly on inquiring that anyone can walk out back and cut their own, so who would think of selling the things. I always liked this story, as it touches again on the simple and wholesome. Don't you think?"

"I'm inclined to agree. Be that as it may, though, there's neutral ground here in need a stone."

"So there is. Here, and here, and here. Now we're done. -- As I heard all this, it impressed me to no end. I applaud you for teaching yourself to play the violin midst such a setting. As is said in the Songs of Chu, 'Greatness waits on no one, but blazes its own path.' You, Kangetsu, are a Meiji-era Qu Yuan."

"I'd rather not be Qu Yuan."

"In that case, how about this century's Werther? -- What's that? Tallying of stones? Must you always go by the book? There's no need to count. I accept that I've lost."

"The game only ends when the final reckoning's done."

"Then reckon away. I can't be bothered with counting stones. Young Werther here, a towering talent of the new generation, is about to relate how he came to take up the violin. To miss out on his story would be an unpardonable disservice to my forebears. You'll have to excuse me." With that, Meitei slides his cushion cross the floor to seat himself close to Kangetsu. Dokusen picks up his errant white stones and places them one by one into open voids within his own territory. He then does the same for black, all the while counting silently to himself. Kangetsu continues his story.

"The place being what it is, the folk there are hard set in their ways. Any slightest show of weakness from even a single student, they're quick to point out, reflects on the honor of all. The consequences of breaking rank are severe. One can never be too cautious."

"From what I know of the boarding students in those parts, they're a bit off kilter. Where to begin. For one thing, their sole form of dress is a navy blue hakama. That alone sets them apart. Then for whatever reason, perhaps overexposure to the salty sea breeze, they're all of dark complexion. That's fine for the guys, but it can't be so fine for the gals." Meitei's intrusion, as usual, has sidetracked the speaker's narrative.

"The gals are indeed every bit as dark as the guys."

"It's a wonder they manage to marry."

"How so? The entire region is dark-complexioned, so who's to take issue?"

"Unfortunate state of affairs. Wouldn't you say so, Kushami?"

"Darker-skinned is better. A fair-skinned bride, every time she passes a mirror, can't but stop and dote on her own reflection. It's hard enough keeping a woman in line. Vanity only further fuels discord." The master lets loose with a mournful sigh.

"But if all in the land are dark-skinned, aren't they equally vain in their darkness?" Tōfū poses the obvious question.

"At any rate, a woman is a fifth wheel," is the master's response.

"You'd better be careful, or you'll catch an earful later." Meitei cautions the master with a grin.

"Not to worry."

"The wife's out today?"

"She and the kids went out a short time ago."

"I thought it was awfully quiet. Where did they go?"

"Who knows? They're out and about as they please."

"And they'll be coming back as they please?"

"I suppose. You're lucky, being single." Tōfū seems a bit taken aback by the master's sentiment. Kangetsu is mildly amused.

"Everyone with a wife says the same. Isn't that right, Dokusen? I understand that wife of yours is a terror at times."

"What's that? Hold on a moment. Four sixes is 24, then 25, 26, 27. Who would've guessed there were 46 here. I thought I'd outmaneuvered you by a wider margin, but the final tally's a mere 18. -- What were you asking?"

"I was asking if your wife too isn't a terror at times."

"Ha ha ha. I'd hardly call her a terror. Whatever may erupt onto the surface, deep down she holds me in cherished esteem."

"I should have known. Leave it to Dokusen to tame the fairer sex."

"It's not just Dokusen. Marital happiness is the rule rather than the exception." Kangetsu chimes in in the general defense of wives.

"I'm with Kangetsu. As I see it, there are only two paths by which a man can hope to perfect himself. Through the arts or through romance. Affection between a husband and wife is the highest form of

romantic love, and as such a man should by all means take a wife. To deny oneself the happiness of marriage is to defy the will of Heaven and render oneself less than complete. -- What do you think, good teacher?" Tōfū, as usual, engages Meitei in all earnestness.

"Impeccable reasoning. In my case then, I'm afraid the prospects of perfection are quite dim."

"Take a wife, and you'll find they're dimmer still," the master adds with a downtrodden look.

"At any rate, for unmarried young men like myself, immersion in the mysteries of the arts is our only means of cultivating a higher humanity. Hence my interest in learning the violin and my question to Kangetsu on his own experience in the matter."

"Ah yes. We were about to have young Werther relate his story of the violin. By all means, please tell. No more interruptions, I promise." Meitei finally manages to restrain his own tongue, only to have Dokusen jump in.

"Don't imagine you can cultivate a higher spirit simply by dabbling in the violin. Heaven forbid the universe should yield its secrets so lightly. To fathom existential truths, one must skirt the abyss, hanging on by finger holds, then consciously drop away, plunging into the void, intent on resurrection and rebirth." Dokusen's grandiose words, delivered as a stern admonishment, are utterly lost on Tōfū, who knows not the first thing about Zen philosophy.

"That's all well and good, but in my mind the arts are the pinnacle of human aspiration, which I intend to pursue undeterred."

"In support of your undeterred pursuit, let me relate to you my history with the violin. What follows is an unabridged account. Starting from the start, before I could learn the violin, I had to procure one, and this, as I'll tell you, was no easy feat."

"I can imagine. In a land where they didn't have hemp-soled sandals, there were no doubt no violins."

"As a matter of fact, there were violins. And I had the money, as I'd been saving up. The problem was making the purchase."

"How so?"

"Being a tight-knit community, one couldn't buy anything discreetly. If it became known that I'd purchased a violin, I'd be branded as vainglorious and taken to task."

"The age-old persecution of prodigies." Tōfū is deeply sympathetic.

"Enough already about prodigies, please. It profits one nothing to be branded as such. At any rate, I'd pass the storefront on my walk each day where violins were hung up in full display. Each time I passed, I longed to own one. I imagined how it would feel to hold it in my hands. Not a day went by when this yearning didn't move me."

"Naturally." Meitei empathizes. "Oddly eccentric, I'd say." The master fails to relate. "Like it or not, a prodigy indeed." Tōfū is unwavering in his admiration. Dokusen, in contrast to the others, maintains an air of detachment as he carefully twists his whiskers.

"You may be wondering why the shop would even carry violins in such a place. The reason is simple enough. It's because there was also a girls' school nearby. The girls there were required to practice the violin as part of their daily lessons, so the local shop carried a stock. Nothing lavish, of course. Just enough to merit the name 'violin' and nothing more. They didn't number among the shop's prominent wares, but there'd always be two or three hanging there together. On occasion, though, as I passed by on my walk, they'd be stirred by a breeze of brushed by the shop boy's hand, and I'd hear in my mind a tone let loose in response. That tone would rend my heart, so much so I could hardly contain myself."

"That's a bit worrisome. Seizures and fits have various triggers, the sight of water or an overly-crowded room for example, but your trigger, fitting of a young Werter, was violins."

"Such heightened sensitivity, I would argue, is the mark of a true artist. We do indeed have a prodigy before us." Tōfū's admiration is only growing.

"It may have indeed been a seizure of sorts, but I'll never forget how those tones caught hold of my mind. From then on and to this day, I've practiced and played for hours on end yet never matched those sounds. How can I even describe them. There are no words."

"How about 'exquisite echoes of resounding ephemeral bells?'" This from Dokusen, who much to his chagrin gets no takers on his offer.

"In my daily walks past that shopfront, these wondrous sounds stirred my soul on three separate occasions. On the third and final occasion I made up my mind. Come what may, I had to have a violin. Let the whole town censure me severely, let the neighboring hamlets scorn and shame me -- let them run me through the gauntlet and strike from me my final breath -- let them drive me into exile from the school, I was not to be deterred. I had to purchase a violin."

"Spoken as a true prodigy. Only a true prodigy would obsess so. I'm envious. In all my years, try as I might, I've never stirred such passion in myself. I go to concerts and listen with eager intent, but inspiration never takes root." Tōfū makes no attempt to veil his envy.

"Inspiration is as much a curse as a blessing. I can talk easily of it now, but the anguish of those days was relentless. You can't imagine how I suffered. -- And that's why, in the end, I pushed myself and bought a violin."

"I see. How did you go about it?"

"It was early November, the night before the Emperor's Birthday holiday. All of my classmates were off to the hot springs for an overnight stay. The town was emptied out. I'd feigned illness, stayed home from school, and remained in bed. This night was my night. As I lay under the covers, my mind raced with visions of my yearned-for violin."

"You feigned illness and even skipped classes?"

"Exactly."

"Perhaps we do have a prodigy here before us." Meitei, for one, seems duly impressed.

"I popped my head out from under the covers, hoping to find that the sun had set, but was greeted by lingering daylight. I dove back under the covers and closed my eyes for a time, but the day still lingered on. As I re-emerged the autumn sun, much to my chagrin, was blazing bright cross the shōji. Long thin shadows, stirred by the breeze, caught my eye as they played across the shōji's upper reach."

"Long thin shadows? What was that?"

"Astringent persimmons, peeled and hung out on strings from the eaves."

"I see. Then what?"

"Restlessness overtook me. I threw off the bedding, slid open the shōji, ventured onto the veranda, pulled off one of the drying persimmons, and ate it."

"How was it?" The master poses a child-like question.

"Exquisite. Trust me, persimmons in Tōkyō don't compare."

"Enough about persimmons. What happened next?" Tōfū is eager for more.

"I dove back under the covers, hiding my eyes, and praying to Buddha and the gods to hasten the onset of evening. After what seemed like hours, I emerged again, thinking it must be time. Contrary to expectation, the fierce autumn sun was still blazing with full force. Those long and narrow shadows, stirred by the breeze, danced in unison cross the shōji's upper reaches."

"So we heard before."

"This same scene played out repeatedly. I threw off the bedding, slid open the shōji, ate one of the drying persimmons, dove back under the covers, and prayed for evening to fall."

"I might have known. Right back where we started."

"Patience please. Let me tell the story. Again under the covers, I persevered for what felt like hours. Certain the day must be done, I emerged again, only to find the fierce autumn sun still blazing away over the full face of the shōji. Those long and narrow shadows, stirred again by the breeze, danced in unison cross the shōji's upper reaches."

"Does this story never progress?"

"I threw off the bedding, slid open the shōji, ventured onto the veranda, ate one of the drying persimmons ..."

"Another persimmon? All you're doing is eating persimmons. Where does it end?"

"You can imagine my frustration."

"As you can imagine ours."

"Patience, please. It's not an easy story to tell."

"And it's not so easy to listen to either." Tōfū can't refrain from airing his discontent.

"It would seem I'm taxing your patience, so I've no choice but to rush things along to their conclusion. In short, I'd eat a drying persimmon then bury myself under the covers. I'd bury myself under the covers, then eat a drying persimmon. In the end, I ate every persimmon that hung off those eaves."

"Surely by then the sun had set."

"There's the thing. After the last persimmon and a final dive under the covers, the autumn sun still blazed cross the shōji ..."

"I've heard enough. On and on, it never ends."

"It's a difficult tale to tell."

"I do believe, where there's a will there must be a way. The way you tell it, that autumn sun just blazes on from day into night. When exactly did you intend to buy your violin?" Meitei too, it would seem, has reached the limits of his patience. Only Dokusen is unperturbed. Let the autumn sun blaze till the morn, or the morn after the morn, he's content to listen on.

"To answer your question, I fully intended to set out at sundown and execute my purchase. Regrettably, though, each time I poked my head out, the autumn sun relentlessly blazed away -- your present impatience, I can assure you, is nothing next to my aguish in those hours. After eating the final persimmon, then emerging again into blazing light, my spirit broke and I burst into tears. I tell you Tōfū, I wept most pitifully."

"I can imagine. Artists harbor, by nature, myriad stresses and cares. I can understand how this brought you to tears. You have my full sympathy, but at the same time, I'm eager to hear what happened next." Tōfū, gentle soul that he is, indulges Kangetsu in all sincerity.

"I'm eager to move on too, but the sun, I hate to say, just refused to set."

"If the sun refused to set, then for all of our sakes let's sunset the story." This from the master, who's had enough and wishes to hear no more.

"I can't stop now. We're just getting to the good part."

"Alright then, down with the sun and on to the good part."

"In that case, just for you, since you're forcing my hand, I'll jump ahead and we'll say the sun is set."

"I should think that best." Dokusen comments matter-of-factly, and the room erupts in laughter.

"With the sun finally set, and with dusk settling in, I breathed a sigh of relief and set out from my lodgings on the outskirts of Kurakake. I'm naturally drawn to quieter quarters, so I'd settled myself in a humble room in a farmer's house, remote from the bustle of the city center with its lures and attractions ..."

"'Remote from the bustle of the city center' seems overblown." The master lodges an objection. "As does 'humble room.' Just tell it like it is. A four-and-a-half mat room sans alcove." Meitei too lobs a critique. Tōfū begs to differ. "Who needs dry facts? Let's allow some poetic license." Dokusen poses an earnest question. "It must have been quite a hike to the school. How far was it?"

"Five hundred meters or so. The school itself was in the same remote village ..."

"In that case, there must have been boarding students all about." Dokusen is not buying Kangetsu's depiction.

"True. Most every farm house had one or two boarders."

"Sounds to me neither quiet nor remote." This time Dokusen challenges Kangetsu head-on.

"It was indeed quiet and remote, at least if not for the school. ... At any rate, I took care to make myself inconspicuous. Over a padded cotton undergarment, I wore my school coat with its brass buttons, and I pulled the hood down tightly over my head. It was the season for fall colors, and the way from my lodgings to Nangō Avenue was paved with fallen persimmon leaves. With each step, my feet stirred a rustling sound. The rustling stoked my anxiety, and I imagined someone stalking my wake. When I turned to look back, the Tōreiji woods towered dark and imposing above me. Tōreiji, at the base of the Kōshin Hills, and not a hundred meters from my lodgings, was quiet and secluded, the exclusive resting place of the Matsudaira lineage. Above the woods was an endless starry sky, the Milky Way stretching its arms, cutting cross the Nagase River and extending on to -- let me think a moment, trailing off toward Hawaii ..."

"Hawaii? Where did that come from all of the sudden?" This from Meitei.

"After walking a short way down Nangō Avenue, I reached the city center through Takanodai-machi, continued on through Kojō-machi, turned at Sengoku-machi, passed by Kuishiro-chō, made my way through Tōri-chō, one block, two blocks, three blocks, then on past Owari-chō, Nagoya-chō, Shachihoko-chō, Kamaboko-chō, ..."

"Spare us all these 'chō's.' Did you, or did you not, buy the violin?" The master's question but thinly veils his annoyance.

"The shop with the violins was Kanezen, so called on account of its location in the Kaneko Zenbei district. We've a ways to go yet."

"Let's get on our way, then, and hurry on to the shop."

"As you wish. So I arrived at Kanezen, where the lamp was blazing brightly ..."

"Not more blazing. With you, it's never just a momentary blaze. Let's not get bogged down in endless blazing again." This time it's Meitei who intervenes to keep things moving.

"We won't. This blaze is just in passing. No need for concern. ... There it was, beyond the glow of the lamp. My violin, its lean, curved body coolly illuminated as it reflected light in the crisp autumn air. The lighter color of its taught strings jumped out and caught my eye. ..."

"Artful depiction." Tōfū praises the narrative.

"That's it! That's my violin! My heart raced and my legs quivered ..."

"Hohum!" Dokusen looses a grunt of amusement.

"Reflexively, I raced into the shop, pulled my purse from my pocket, and withdrew two five-yen notes ..."

"You finally bought it, then?" the master enquires.

"I thought to do so. But hold on now, I told myself. This is the crucial moment. I mustn't blow it by acting rashly. Stop and think. At the last second, I reigned myself in and refrained."

"Don't tell me. You still didn't buy it? All this to-do over a single lousy violin?"

"It's more than so much to-do. I couldn't buy it yet, in spite of all intent."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you why not. It was early evening still, and the street was crowded with passersby."

"Who even cares? Let a hundred pass by, let two hundred pass. Get a grip!" The master is beside himself.

"Were they ordinary passersby, then let there be a thousand, or two thousand. But there were students among them, roaming the streets with rolled-up sleeves and walking sticks, whose presence held me in check. There was one group in particular, the so-called Bottom Dwellers, who reveled in perpetually populating the bottom of the class. Where they fell short in academics, they excelled in the marital arts. There was no telling what might happen if they caught me buying a violin. Let there be no doubt that I yearned for that violin, but understand as well that I cherished life itself. Given the choice of life without a violin or loss of life with a violin, I preferred the former."

"In that case, I assume you called it quits?" The master presses for clarification.

"Nope. I bought it."

"Endless bother. If you're going to buy it, then buy it. If you're not going to buy it, then be done with the telling."

"Ah ha ha ha. This world, I'm afraid, is not so simple. Things don't always go as imagined." With that, Kangetsu pulls an Asahi cigarette from his pack, lights it up, and begins to puff.

The master, who seems to have heard enough, rises to his feet and disappears into his study. A moment later, for whatever reason, he reappears with a weathered foreign tome, plops down onto his belly, and begins to peruse it. Dokusen, who at some point has retreated back toward the alcove, is laying out stones on the 'go' board, playing against himself. Kangetsu is seeing his listeners, owing to the length of his tale, gradually dwindle away. Only Tōfū, steadfast devotee of the arts, and Meitei, to whom long-winded is second nature, remain.

Taking his time to slowly expel a long stream of smoke, Kangetsu continues on unfazed at his prior cadence.

"The following, Tōfū, were my thoughts in that moment. Early evening was absolutely no good. That being said, too late was no good either, as Kanezen would be closed up for the night. Unless I hit upon just the right time, when the students were done roaming and returned home, but Kanezen was not yet closed up, my plans would be all for naught. This was the problem I faced."

"I see. Not an easy problem."

"In the end, I reckoned sometime round ten to be best. Until that hour, I had to kill time somewhere. Returning home and setting out anew was unthinkable. I had no appetite for conversation, so was loathe to call on nearby friends. Having no other recourse, I decided to simply stroll about the town. Under usual circumstances, one wanders here and there, and before one knows it the hours are whiled away, but not so on this particular evening. How to describe those frozen moments -- 'The coming and going of myriad seasons' is one expression that comes to mind. I felt this most keenly." With an appeal on his face, as though still stuck in time, Kangetsu turns toward Meitei.

"They talk in verse, do they not, of waiting and waiting on a familiar face as the coals burn down and the embers die. They also say it's much harder to wait than be waited on. While it was no doubt hard for that violin, hanging there from the eaves, it was certainly harder on you, ambling about like a clueless sleuth. Or better said, like a dog without a home. That would be it. There's nothing so wretched as a dog cast out on the street."

"That's rather harsh. I've never till now been equated with a dog."

"As I listen to your story, it's like reading a sketch of those artists of old. That dog analogy was only the good teacher's banter. Don't let it dissuade you from telling more." Tōfū offers consoling words. Consoled or not, Kangetsu has no intention whatsoever of discontinuing his narrative.

"I passed from Okachi-machi through Hyakki-machi, then on to Ryōgae-chō and into Takajō-machi. I counted the withered willows as I passed the prefectural offices, made reckoning of the lamps burning in the hospital windows, stopped for a smoke in the middle of Konya Bridge, then pulled out my pocket watch ..."