

# Kokoro – Sensei’s Testament – Parts 1 to 9

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

## Book Three - Sensei’s Testament

1

... I received several letters from you this past summer. In the second one, if I recall correctly, you sought my assistance in securing a suitable position here in Tōkyō. My thought, when I read that, was that I ought to help. Or I felt, at least, that I should write you a proper response. However, to be perfectly honest, I made no endeavor with respect to your request. As you know, my circle of acquaintances is quite small. It might better be said, even, that I’m fully alone in this world. As such, my latitude for effectual intercession is nil. That wasn’t the real problem, though. The real problem was my own struggle with the question of my existence. Whether to continue on as I am, like a mummified figure forgotten amongst the living, or whether to ... In those days, I shuddered at the implication of the words “or whether to.” Like a man who runs for a cliff edge then suddenly glimpses the bottomless depths below, I was a coward, and I agonized as all cowards do. Regrettably, I might even say that in those days I reserved no room for you in my thoughts. To state this bluntly, your lot in life and how you earned your living were of no import whatsoever. They didn’t concern me in the least. I couldn’t suffer such agitation. I stuck your letter in the holder, folded my arms before me, and resumed my brooding. Why should a man from a family of means, just out of school, fret about his livelihood so and kick up a fuss? I viewed you thus, from a distance, with an air of mild contempt. I divulge this by way of explanation, as I still owe you a response, and not to offend through impudence. As you read further, I believe you’ll see what’s truly in my heart. At any rate, I didn’t write when I should have. This was wrong of me, and I wish to apologize for my negligence.

Later on I sent you a telegram. In all honestly, at that time I was wishing to see you. I was ready to share with you the story of my past, just as you’d requested. You wired back that at present you couldn’t come to Tōkyō. Disappointed, I gazed for a long while at that telegram. It seemed you were not satisfied with just the telegram, and you followed up with a long letter, from which I understood fully why you couldn’t come. By no means did I feel you were slighting me. How could you leave home and abandon your father on his sickbed? My request, in light of your father’s condition, was inappropriate. --- In truth, when I sent that telegram the plight of your father had fully slipped from my mind. That despite what I’d said to you here in Tōkyō, about the severity of his illness and how vigilant you must be in tending to him. I’ve exposed myself as temperamental. Maybe the weight of my past has made me so, subjugating my rational thoughts. On this point, I’m aware of my own shortcoming, and I ask for your understanding.

When I read your letter --- that last one you sent --- I felt as though I’d wronged you. I thought to write you back to that effect, and I took up my pen to do so, but I didn’t produce a single line. If I was going to write you, it had to be this letter, which I was not yet ready to write, so I stopped. That was why I only wired back, telling you that you needn’t come.

Thereafter I set myself to drafting this letter. I'm unaccustomed to taking pen in hand, and it pained me greatly when events and thoughts in my head would not take shape on paper. I came close to renegeing on my promise. I laid my pen down many times, but never for very long. Within the same hour I would reach for it again. I may strike you as a man consumed by adherence to obligation, and I don't deny this. As you know, I'm a solitary man with limited social contact. Turn which way I may, nowhere do I face any real obligation to speak of. By design or by nature, I've strived to live a humble and quiet life. Banishing obligation offhand, however, was never my intent. If anything, my deference toward obligation is excessive, and I lack the vigor to withstand its demands. Hence the subdued existence you've come to witness. Once I've made a promise, therefore, it troubles me deeply to renege. In your case, to avoid any such ill feeling, I found myself compelled to pick back up the pen I'd laid aside.

It's also the case that I wanted to write. Obligation aside, I want to explain my past. I believe it's fair to say that my past is my own and unique to me. It would be a shame, would it not, to depart this world without a chance to share it. This too is in part what drives me. I would never share my experiences, of course, with those not fit to receive them. Faced with such choice, I'd rather carry them to my grave. In fact, it's only you that prevents my past from remaining my own, that allows it to serve another, albeit vicariously. Of the tens of millions inhabiting Japan, it's only to you that I wish to convey my past. You're sincere. You confessed to me your sincere desire to learn of life's lessons.

I intend to unleash upon you, in full force, the darkness of humanity. You mustn't shrink from it. Study it intently, and seize from its midst that which can serve you. When I speak of darkness, I mean so in an ethical sense. I was born into and brought up in an ethical world. My concept of ethics may seem foreign to young folk today, but nevertheless, it's something thoroughly my own. By no means is it a borrowed suit, donned for expedience. For this reason, I believe that you, with a lifetime before you, can take from it something of value.

As you'll remember, you often engaged me on topics of contemporary thought, and you're well aware of how I responded. I never showed disdain for your views, but neither could I respect them. There was no substance to back them up. You were too young to draw on any real experience. I laughed at times, and received in return a dissatisfied look from you. Finally, you insisted I lay out my own past before you, unroll it like a picture scroll. In that moment, for the first time, I respected you. You showed yourself willing, in no uncertain terms, to reach within my gut and seize my very life. You were ready to cut at my heart and partake of my warm flowing blood. My life at that time was dear to me still. I felt no desire to die, so I fended you off with a promise to someday comply. I'm now prepared to rip open this heart and pour out my blood before you. It's my sincere hope that, as my own heart falls still, a new beat of life might stir within your breast.

I lost both of my parents before the age of twenty. My wife, I remember, once told you of this. They both died of the same disease. As my wife mentioned, much to your surprise at the time, they died almost together,

one right after the other. The truth is, my father died of abdominal typhus, a terrible disease, and my mother contracted the same while tending him.

I was their only son. We were quite well off, and I was raised in comfortable surroundings. Looking back on it all, if my parents hadn't died, or if even one had survived, I believe I would still to this day enjoy that same sense of comfort.

Their passing left me vacant and alone. I was lacking in knowledge, lacking in experience, and lacking in discernment. When my mother died, we had not even told her my father was already gone. I don't know if she sensed his passing, or whether she believed, as those around her asserted, that he was on his way toward recovery. I do know that she placed her cares in my uncle's hands. Once, when I was present with them, she gestured to me and appealed to him for my care. My parents had given me their blessing to leave for Tōkyō, and this too seemed to be on her mind. She managed the word "Tōkyō" before my uncle broke in to assure her that all would be fine. He then turned to me and praised my mother's fortitude, meaning perhaps her stamina under duress of high fever. When I think back on this now, however, I'm not fully convinced that my mother intended the words of that day as her last.

My mother, of course, knew what my father had contracted and knew of its terrible nature. She was also aware that she herself was infected. It's still not clear to me, however, that she really believed she would lose her life. The words she spoke when feverish, though coherent and concise, often vanished from her memory without so much as a trace. Accordingly ... but I've digressed from the topic at hand. This tendency to dissect things so, to turn them round and scrutinize every facet, was at that time already ingrained in my being. I think it's important to tell you this up front. This account, which is hardly vital to the story I intend to relate, perhaps will serve to illustrate this tendency at work. Please read it in this light. I'm disposed to viewing the conduct and actions of others through the lens of my own ethics, and over time I believe this has led me, more and more, to question people's decency. This has certainly contributed, in no small way, to my discontent and distress. Please bear this in mind.

For the sake of coherence, I'd best set my story back on track. As I prepare to write at length, I believe myself, for a man in my situation, to be relatively well composed. The echo of the trains, that reaches one's ears when the world is sleeping, has now ceased. Outside the shutters, at some point, the insects have started their faint and doleful song, evoking thoughts of the dew-covered autumn chill. In the next room, oblivious to my endeavor, my wife is resting peacefully. The tip of my pen scratches out these characters one by one. With feeling of calm I work the page. If my pen goes astray, it's only for want of practice, not for want of a quiet mind.

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At any rate I was left alone, with no recourse but to heed my mother's words and rely on my uncle. My uncle, for his part, took charge and managed affairs on my behalf. Through his good graces, I was able to leave for Tōkyō as planned.

I came to Tōkyō and began my high school studies. High school students back then, in contrast to today, were a crude and rambunctious lot. One fellow I knew, in an after-hours altercation, bloodied a worker's

head with his wooden clog. This was after much drink, and in the heat of trading blows he was relieved of his school cap. Inside the cap, of course, his name was neatly inscribed on a patch of white fabric. This landed him in hot water, and the police came close to taking their case to the school. Only through concerted efforts of his friends was the matter finally hushed. Your generation was raised in gentler times, and such reckless abandon probably strikes you as asinine. I can't say I disagree. At the same time, however, in students of my time was an element of authenticity that's lacking today.

The monthly allowance I received from my uncle was far less than what you receive from your father. (Though of course the cost of living was also less.) Even so, I did not feel the least bit pinched. I can also say that among my peers, when it came to money, I could hold my own and felt no need to envy others. Looking back now, I rather suspect it was I who was looked on with envy. I say this in part because, in addition to my monthly allowance, there was also book money (I was already fond of collecting books), and there were discretionary remittances I received from my uncle on request. In short, I was fairly well able to live as I pleased.

Naïve as I was, I not only trusted my uncle, but also looked up to him with a sense of gratitude. He was an entrepreneur. He was a prefectural assemblyman. I also recall his affiliation with a political party, I suppose through these same connections. He was my father's younger brother, without a doubt, but his interests in life seemed fully divergent from those of my father. My father had inherited the family wealth and was intent to a fault on preserving it. For pleasure, he indulged in the arts of tea and flowers. He was also an avid reader of poetry, and he was always quite taken with paintings and antiques. We lived in the country, but there was a town some eight kilometers distant - this was the town where my uncle resided. The curio dealer from town would sometimes call on my father with picture scrolls, incense burners, and the like. The term "man of means" seems suitable in summing up my father. He was a country gentleman of relatively refined taste.

My uncle, magnanimous by nature, was a very different man. Even so, the two of them were surprisingly close. My father saw my uncle as dependable and far more enterprising than himself. He even said once that inheriting wealth, as he had done, and not having to fend for oneself, robs a man of his edge. He said this to my mother, and he also said it to me. He intended it more for my sake, it seems, by way of guidance. "You'll do well to remember this," he added while looking directly my way. And I still do, to this day, remember it. How could I doubt this uncle whom my father so trusted and admired? This was an uncle in whom I too felt pride. My feelings toward him, when my father and mother were gone and I depended on him so, went well beyond pride. I saw him as the mainstay of my own welfare.

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When I first returned home for summer holiday, my uncle and his wife had taken up residence and were running the house in place of my parents. We'd agreed to this prior to my departure for Tōkyō. Given that I was alone in the world, and given that I could not stay and mind the house, this was the only workable alternative.

My uncle at that time had a hand in various ventures. In tending to his affairs, he'd pointed out by way of mild objection, his present place in town was far more convenient than my house in the country. He said this to me after the passing of my parents, when I'd consulted with him on how to manage the house during my absence in Tōkyō. My house had a long history, and it was well regarded in the region. I expect it's the same in your home town - the dismantling or sale of a pedigreed house in the country, despite their being a successor, would cause quite a stir. I'd do so now without a second thought, but I was young then and felt myself in a bind. I had to go to Tōkyō, and at the same time I had to maintain my house.

My uncle reluctantly agreed to move into the empty house. However, he insisted on keeping his place in town. For convenience in handling his affairs, he would need to commute between residences. I had, of course, no grounds for opposing this plan. Any arrangement that freed me to leave for Tōkyō was, in my mind, satisfactory.

As a young man out on my own, I still felt a strong attachment to my family home. In the spirit of a traveler, I knew there was a place I could always come home to. No matter how Tōkyō enticed me, once the holidays came, I felt a strong pull to return. I studied hard and played hard in Tōkyō, but at night I dreamt of holidays home in the country.

I didn't know of my uncle's comings and goings during my absence, but on my return his entire family was gathered under my roof. I expect that his school-aged children spent most of their time in town, but they were on holiday too now and enjoying time in the country.

All were happy to see me. I was glad to see the house so full of activity, much livelier now than in my parents' days. My uncle displaced his eldest son, who had taken over my room, and put him elsewhere. There were plenty of rooms, so I offered to lodge in another, but my uncle wouldn't hear of it, reminding me that it was my house.

Other than an occasional reflection on my parents, I passed a carefree summer with my uncle's family and returned to Tōkyō. However, there was one thing that summer that cast a slight pall over my stay. Both my uncle and his wife, despite the fact that I'd just started high school, advised that I marry. They brought this up repeatedly. The first time, it was completely out of the blue and caught me off guard. The second time, I clearly declined. The third time, I was compelled to ask why they persisted. Their thought process was simple. I should take a bride and return home to assume my father's place as master of the house. In my mind, coming home for holidays was enough. On the other hand, what they said was not unreasonable. My father's place was mine to take, and to do so I'd need a bride. Versed as I was in the ways of the country, I could understand this. I don't believe I was dead set against it. However, I'd just begun my studies in Tōkyō, and such notions seemed far away, as though viewed via scope from a remote vantage. I left home again, with my uncle's wish unanswered.

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I thought no more on the matter of marriage. In the faces of the young men around me was no trace of marital or domestic concern. All were free, and all, it seemed, were masters of their own destinies. Amongst these carefree souls, if one dug deeply, there were perhaps some who, compelled by family circumstances,

had already taken a wife. However, I was too naïve understand this at the time. Those in such situations likely refrained from disclosing their private affairs, out of deference toward fellow students for whom such thoughts were still so distant. It occurred to me later that I myself was in fact in such a circumstance. Without yet knowing this, though, I pursued my studies with carefree innocence.

At the end of the school year, I packed up my things and returned to the country and the place of my parents' graves. Just as the year before, I found the familiar faces of my uncle and his children in the house of my parents. I drank in again the smells of home. Such smells were still dear to me. In part, I believe, for the welcome respite they offered from the routine of the school year.

In the midst of these smells of my childhood, however, I was accosted again by my uncle on the matter of marriage. His persuasions were simply those of the year prior, restated. His arguments were the same, but this time, unlike the year prior, he had a specific match in mind. This put me in an uncomfortable position. The match was none other than his own daughter, who would of course be my cousin. According to my uncle, taking her as my bride would be advantageous to both families, and my father, in the past, had been of like mind. I could see the advantage in this. I could also imagine that my father and uncle might have discussed it. However, until my uncle broached it, the thought had never crossed my mind.

At any rate, I was caught off guard. I was caught off guard, but I also saw the sense in what my uncle proposed. Perhaps I'd been oblivious to the world around me. If that were the case, then indifference toward this cousin was by and large the cause. From my childhood, I'd frequented my uncle's house in town. I'd sometimes spent the night there. This cousin and I had grown very close. As I'm sure you're aware, romantic feelings do not arise among siblings. It may be that I'm extending this principle to my own ends, but I believe that the same applied to this cousin and me. Having spent so much time together, and having become so familiar with each other, there was no hope for the fresh sensations of romance. Just as the first whiff of incense or the first taste of saké most excites the senses, there seems to exist, in the flow of time, a critical juncture for the stirring of romance. Once having passed it unawares, familiarity only grows with each interaction, and by and by, receptivity to romance is lost. Try as I might, I could not imagine this cousin as my wife.

My uncle was willing, if I insisted, to wait on my graduation. At the same time, he encouraged me to "strike while the iron is hot" and marry without delay. Neither option appealed to me, as I took no interest in the intended bride. I turned him down. My uncle scowled at me. My cousin cried. She was not upset that we weren't to be wed. Being rejected as a bride had simply damaged her female pride. I knew full well that she felt no more attraction for me than I for her. I departed again for Tōkyō.

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My third return home was a year hence, at the start of the next summer. As soon as year-end exams were over, I immediately bolted Tōkyō. Such was the pull of my native place. You've probably felt this too. The air of one's birthplace is different, and the scents of its soil are special. Fond memories of one's parents permeate the place. To spend two months of the year, July and August, lying still in the midst of this, like a snake warm in its den, was for me the best feeling imaginable.

In my simple mind, there was no need for further worry over my cousin and the question of our marriage. If one doesn't agree to something, one turns it down, and the matter is thereupon settled. This was how I saw things. The fact that I'd defied my uncle's wishes, therefore, did not concern me. I'd hardly thought of it over the intervening year, and I rushed home with my usual enthusiasm.

On returning, however, I found my uncle a different man. He didn't seem happy to see me, and he didn't welcome me as before. I'd been raised in a household loosely bound to protocol, so it was only after four or five days that this fully sank in. Some occurrence triggered something, and I suddenly felt myself ill at ease. What struck me as strange was not just my uncle. It was my aunt too. And my cousin. Even my uncle's eldest son, who had just finished middle school and had written me to inquire about vocational schools in Tōkyō, seemed strange.

By my very nature, I couldn't help but dwell on this. Why did things feel so different? Or rather, why had these others changed so? My deceased parents, I suspected, had intervened to open my half-closed eyes, and suddenly I was seeing the world for what it was. Somewhere deep down I believed that my parents, while no longer of this world, continued to love me no less than before. I had at the time, of course, no deficiencies in faculty of reason. At the same time, though, the superstitions of my ancestors coursed within me and worked their will. They're in me still to this day.

I went alone to the hillside and knelt before my parents' graves. My feeling as I knelt there was half of sorrow and half of gratitude. I felt that the two of them, reposing now beneath the cold stone, still held my future in their hands. I prayed for their care in watching over my fate. You may laugh this off as nonsense, and I suppose it's fine if you do. However, this is the person that I was.

My world had turned upside down. This wasn't for me the first such experience. I remember my great astonishment at sixteen or seventeen, when it suddenly hit me that the world was full of beauty. I couldn't believe my eyes. I rubbed them again and again. My heart cried out in exaltation. The age of sixteen or seventeen of course, in a young man or young woman, is a time of sensual awakening. For the first time, I was awake to a new beauty in the world, embodied in the female form. With regard to the opposite sex, whose existence I'd hardly noticed, the scales had fallen and my eyes were suddenly open. From that point on, heaven and earth were utterly new to me.

When I first saw my uncle for what he was, it was the same sort of awakening. All was suddenly clear. I was granted no premonition, nor chance for preparation. It was on me out of the blue. In an instant, I saw my uncle and his family in an entirely different light. I was astonished. Remaining in their care, I feared, could only lead to bad ends.

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Up to this point, I'd entrusted the family's assets to my uncle, but I felt now that I owed it to my parents to make myself smarter. My uncle was a self-professed "busy man," always hurrying place to place. He came and went between the house and his lodgings in town, two days here, then three days there. Thus he moved about, day after day, always looking flustered. He never failed to mention, too, how busy he was. Before I'd come to distrust him, I'd presumed he was, in fact, busy. Or at least, in my cynical moments, I'd assumed

his busy airs a necessary part of his modern persona. However, now that I required his time to review the family assets, I began to perceive his busyness as nothing more than a pretext for avoiding me. It was no easy task to get time with him.

I heard that my uncle had a mistress in town. I heard this from a friend, a former middle school classmate. I wouldn't put it past this uncle to have a mistress, but I'd never heard such rumors while my father lived, and I was duly taken aback. There were various other things that I also heard from this friend. One was that my uncle's businesses had flirted with insolvency. Then, over the past several years, the situation had suddenly reversed itself. This seemed to confirm my misgivings.

I finally brought my uncle to the bargaining table. "Bargaining table" may not be quite the right word, but given how things played out in the natural course of events, I can think of no better way to describe it. My uncle was intent on treating me as a child. I confronted him, from the start, with an air of suspicion. There was no hope for any amicable resolution.

Regrettably, I can't detail here the particulars of all that transpired. There's too much else to tell. There are things of far greater import still to be written. It's only with difficulty that I restrain my pen and keep it from racing ahead. The chance to see you and relate all in due time is lost to me now. Because I'm unpracticed with the pen, and because the time left me is precious, I'm forced to refrain from telling all I would like.

You'll remember, I trust, the time I told you there are no archetypal villains in this world. How I told you that villains, in their time, emerge from the ranks of the virtuous. How one can never be too cautious. You pointed out to me, on that occasion, that I was worked up. You then asked what it is that changes a virtuous man to a villain. When I simply replied "money," you seemed disappointed. I remember well that look on your face. I can tell you now that in that moment I was thinking of my uncle. I was thinking of him with contempt. He was proof to me that money can turn any man to a scoundrel. He was proof to me that no man can be trusted. You were ready for deeper ideas, and no doubt regarded my answer as trite and unsatisfying. My answer, though, was genuine. You remember, don't you, how worked up I'd become. I believe that a straightforward reply, stated with passion on one's tongue, is more impactful than novel words from a cool head. It's the flow of blood that powers the body. Words are more than waves disturbing the air, they induce great action in broader realms.

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To state it bluntly, my uncle cheated me of my wealth. It was easily done in my absence, in the three years I spent in Tōkyō. From a worldly perspective, I'd proven myself a bona fide fool, happily entrusting my uncle with all matters. From a higher perspective, however, I could perhaps be seen as a noble young man, pure of heart. Looking back on my younger self, I greatly regret my innocence. If only I'd been born more tainted. At the same time, though, I somehow wish I could go back and live again as I once was. Please bear in mind that you knew me only after I'd been sullied. If "superior" refers to one defiled with the passing of years, then you can regard me as your superior.

In material terms, would I have done better in marrying my uncle's daughter as he'd proposed? I don't believe that's the case. Pushing his daughter on me had simply been part of his scheme. Far from a good-

faith effort on behalf of both families, he'd been motivated all along, in proposing that I marry, by his own devious interests. I'd felt no love toward my cousin, but neither had I felt any particular dislike. Looking back on it now though, I find some comfort in the fact that I defied my uncle. Marriage or not, he'd have cheated me either way. In refusing to marry my cousin, I at least was cheated on my own terms and not on his. This is splitting hairs, though, and hardly relevant. From your vantage it must, I imagine, seem like some foolish fixation.

Other relatives intervened. I didn't trust these other relatives either. Not only did I not trust them, I viewed them as adversaries. Once aware of my uncle's treachery, I was convinced that these others were treacherous as well. If true of my uncle, whom my father had held in such high regard, then much more so of these others. Such was my logic.

They did, on my behalf, pull together all that was duly mine. When everything was appraised, it was far less than I'd expected. I could accept it without objection, or I could challenge my uncle publicly in court. These were my two options. I was indignant. I was lost as to what I should do. Litigation, I feared, would prove a lengthy process. I was in the middle of my studies, and I hated the thought of losing precious time. After much consideration, I asked my old middle school friend, who lived in town, to liquidate everything for me. My friend advised against this, but I didn't listen. I'd already decided I was leaving and not coming back. I swore to myself I would never again see my uncle's face.

Before departing, I went once more to the graves of my father and mother. I haven't seen these graves since. Nor will I ever see them again.

My friend handled things according to my wishes. This all happened, though, a good while after my arrival in Tōkyō. Selling farmland and such in the countryside is no easy task. Prospective buyers are apt to take advantage of the situation. In the end, the amount I received was significantly less than market value. In all honesty, my assets were nothing more than some public bonds I'd left home with and the later remittance from my friend. My parents' bequest, without a doubt, had been greatly diminished. The fact that this was in no way my own doing made it all the much harder to swallow. At the same time, I had more than enough to sustain my studies. In truth, I didn't spend but half of my interest income. This abundance during my student days, as it turned out, would have wholly unforeseen consequences.