

Kokoro – Sensei’s Testament – Parts 10 to 18

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

10

With ample funds at my disposal, I thought to quit my boisterous lodgings and set up a home for myself. However, for numerous reasons this was easier said than done. I’d have to procure household wares, and I’d need to bring on an old woman as caretaker. I’d have to be sure that my old woman was trustworthy, that I could go away and leave the house in her care without worry. One day I set out for a walk and, somewhat whimsically, decided to hunt for a house as I went. From Hongōdai I descended to the west, then climbed the hill from Koishikawa toward Denzūin Temple. The area has changed completely since the rail line came through, but back then there was just the earthen wall of the artillery arsenal on the left and empty, uncultivated grassland on the right. I stood in the grass and let my mind wander as I surveyed the opposing bluffs. It’s a nice view even today, but the appearance of that west side was quite different then. There was thickly grown verdure as far as the eye could see, and its effect was soothing. I wondered if I might not find some suitable place thereabouts. Without hesitation, I waded through the grass and then headed north up a narrow lane. The area, even today, is still not a proper town. Its houses are ramshackle, and back then they were even more so. I walked the neighborhood, through alleyways and side streets. Finally, I ducked into a corner sweets shop and asked the proprietress if there wasn’t some modest house for rent. She inclined her head in thought for a moment, then indicated that nothing came to mind. Accepting that there were no immediate prospects, I made to leave. As I did so, she asked if I would be interested in a boarding house. My thinking changed a bit. I began to see the advantage to this. As a solitary lodger in a quiet boarding house, I’d be spared the troubles of running my own place. I took a seat in the shop and asked the proprietress for details.

It was the family of a military man, or rather the surviving family members, who lived in the house. The husband, the proprietress told me, was said to have perished in the time of the Sino-Japanese War. Up until the prior year, the family had remained near the military academy in Ichigaya. The grounds were too large, though, with a stable and such, so they’d sold the place and moved. However, they now found their new surroundings lonesome, so they’d put out a request for introduction of a suitable lodger. I learned from the proprietress that there were only the widow, her daughter, and a maidservant residing there. I thought to myself that this could be ideal - a quiet setting. I was also concerned, though, that if one like myself suddenly appeared on their doorstep, they’d regard me as just some unknown student and reject me outright. I thought about giving it up. On the other hand, for a student my appearance was hardly shabby, and I was sporting my university cap. You may find it amusing, the idea that this cap would mean anything. Unlike the present, however, university students in those days were greatly respected. In this situation, I drew confidence from my four-cornered cap. Following the instructions of the sweets shop proprietress, I called on the family cold, with no introduction.

I met the widow and explained my reason for coming. She questioned me about my background, the school, my area of study. Seemingly satisfied with the exchange, she responded on the spot that I was welcome to move in at any time. The widow was a proper woman, candid in her manner. If all military wives were like

this, then I counted myself impressed. I was impressed, but also surprised. Nowhere in her temperament, I thought, was there any suggestion of loneliness.

11

I moved in right away. I rented the room that the widow and I had talked about during my initial visit. It was the best room in the house. This was at a time when they were building upscale boarding houses in the Hongō area, so I was familiar with the finest of rooms that could be had by a student. This room I now presided over was better by far. For a while after moving, I thought it too much for a student such as myself.

It was an eight-mat room. Next to the alcove was a rack of staggered shelves, and opposite the veranda was a large closet. There were no windows, but the veranda was south-facing and received ample sun.

On my move-in day, I found in the alcove an arrangement of flowers with a koto propped next to them. Neither of these were to my liking. Having grown up with a father who fancied poetry, calligraphy, and the art of tea, my tastes from a young age were tuned to Chinese tradition. Likely due to this same influence, I'd grown to disdain frivolous adornments.

My father's curios collection had largely been laid to waste by my uncle. However, some small number of articles remained. Before leaving home, I'd had my old middle school friend take them into his charge. From the collection, I'd then chosen the several scrolls that I liked best and brought them with me, packing them loosely in the bottom of my baggage. As soon as I moved in, I'd planned to hang these in the alcove where I could appreciate them. On seeing the flowers and koto, though, my resolve failed me. When I later learned that the flowers had been placed there on my behalf, I smiled a bitter smile to myself. The koto had always been kept there. There was no other place for it, so there it had to remain.

As you read this, no doubt the notion of a young lady will be playing in your mind. My curiosity on this matter, even before I'd moved in, had already been aroused. Perhaps the anticipation of her had worked to unsettle me, or perhaps it was a general discomfort with strangers, but my greeting on our initial encounter was far from composed. The young lady too, for her part, blushed.

Based on the widow's appearance and manner, I'd constructed an image in my mind of her daughter. The image I'd constructed, however, was none too flattering. I'd built it sequentially - the wife of a military man was such, and the daughter of the wife of a military man was so. With one glance at the young lady's countenance, my exercise in conjecture was thoroughly put to shame. My mind was infused with a new and heretofore unimagined admiration for the opposite sex. From that moment, the flowers in the alcove ceased to offend me. The koto stored alongside them, likewise, was no longer intrusive.

Those flowers, when their time had passed, were regularly refreshed. The koto too was often carried off to another room, around the corner and diagonally opposite mine. I would sit at my desk, chin propped in my hands, and listen to its sound. I couldn't judge whether it was played well or not. Based on the simplicity of technique, however, I had to believe it was nothing masterful. I had to conclude it was no better than the flowers. I do know something about flowers, and the young lady's arrangements were certainly nothing worth noting.

Be that as it may, a succession of flowers unapologetically adorned my alcove. The arrangements, of course, were always in the same style. The vase, too, was always the same. Of the flowers and music, though, the music was far more eccentric. All one could hear were twangs of the strings. The vocals were absent. It wasn't that she didn't sing, but she sang in a soft voice, almost a whisper. When reproved in her playing, her voice would fade entirely.

I took pleasure in the sight of these uninspired flowers, and I took pleasure in the sound of this unpracticed koto.

12

By the time I'd left my hometown, my outlook on life had grown quite dark. The conviction that others cannot be trusted, it seemed, had firmly taken root in my bones. I'd come to regard my uncle and aunt and other relatives, who in my mind were adversaries, as proxies for all mankind. Even on the train, I'd found myself unwittingly scrutinizing my fellow passengers. Any who ventured to engage me merely stoked my suspicions. My soul was beaten down. It often felt heavy, as though I'd swallowed lead. At the same time, as I've just described, my nerves were keenly on edge.

I think this is largely what drove me to quit my lodgings after returning to Tōkyō. I can make the case that financial freedom spurred me to set off on my own, but my former self, even with the means to do so, would never have gone to such lengths.

Even after relocating to Koishikawa, this tension within me persisted. I felt shame at the way I nervously surveyed my surroundings. Curiously enough, only my mind and my eyes functioned keenly. My mouth, in contrast, grew less and less active. Sitting silently at my desk, I observed the others in cat-like fashion. I sometimes felt bad for them, subjected to my constant mistrust. I felt like a thief in their midst, albeit one who refrains from theft. At times I fell to self-loathing.

This must strike you as odd. How could I, in such a state, feel affection toward the young lady? How could I gaze happily at her uninspired flowers? In the same vein, how could I listen with pleasure to her unpracticed koto? All I can say in response to such questions is that the feelings I've described to you were genuine. You can work out the explanation in your own mind, but I will add here just one more thought. My trust in humanity was gone with regard to money, but not with regard to love. This may come across as strange, and I too was aware of the inconsistency, but in my heart these feelings coexisted nonetheless.

I came to address the widow as Okusan, so from here on I'll refer to her thus. Okusan regarded me as quiet and mild-mannered. She also praised the diligence with which I applied myself to my studies. All the same while, she never once mentioned my anxious eyes or shiftiness of manner. I don't know if this was restraint or simply failure to take notice, but at any rate it seemed not to concern her. Not only that, but on one occasion, with a hint of admiration in her voice, she even declared me largehearted. Honest as I am, I blushed a bit and refuted her words. She proceeded to explain, in all seriousness, how I was unaware of my own virtues. Initially she had not intended to take in a student such as myself. When she'd asked the neighbors for an introduction, her intention had been to let out a room to a worker from a government office or some such place. The image she'd held in her mind was a man of limited means, a man with no other option but

to dwell as a boarder. When she praised me as largehearted, she was comparing me to this boarder of her own imagining. Compared to this man living hand to mouth, at least where money was concerned, I may have been largehearted. Money and temperament, however, are two different things, the one having no connection to the other. Okusan, as women are wont to do, was intent on extending a single notion to apply to my entirety.

13

Okusan's manner, in due course, began to work on my mood. After a time, my eyes relaxed themselves and were less shifty. My mind, I began to feel, was again rooted in the present. In short, by paying no heed to my jaundiced eyes and mistrustful demeanor, Okusan and the rest of the household did great wonders for my well-being. My nerves, with no feedback to vindicate their misgivings, gradually calmed.

Okusan was a woman of understanding, and it's possible that she consciously treated me as she sensed I needed to be treated. Then again, it's also possible that she really did regard me as largehearted, just as she professed. My anxiety was a phenomenon of my mind, and it's conceivable that its outward expression was muted. Perhaps Okusan failed to see it.

As my spirit calmed, I grew close to the family. I came to converse with Okusan and her daughter. Some days, they would call me to their room for tea. On other evenings, I would bring home sweets and invite the two of them to join me. I felt my sphere of social intercourse had suddenly expanded. To this end, precious time for study was whiled away. Curiously, though, I didn't rue the intrusion in the least. Okusan was a woman of leisure. Her daughter, however, had flower and koto classes on top of her schoolwork and should have been pressed for time, yet somehow never seemed hurried. The three of us, whenever the situation allowed, would gather together and enjoy each other's company.

It was usually the daughter who came to call me. Sometimes she would follow the veranda around the corner and stop in front of my room, and sometimes she would cut through the hearth room and appear at the fusuma that opened to the adjoining room. She would pause for a moment, then call my name and ask if I was studying. I usually had my eyes on some difficult text that lay open before me on my desk, giving the appearance of industrious study. Truth be told, however, I wasn't engaged so earnestly in my texts. My eyes would be on the page, but my thoughts were in waiting for her to come call me. When she didn't come, I felt compelled to get up myself. I would stop outside the other room and call in the same way, asking if she was studying.

The daughter had a six-mat room adjacent to the hearth room. Okusan was sometimes in the hearth room and sometimes with her daughter. In short, while the rooms were distinctly partitioned, mother and daughter occupied both, moving freely between them as though they were one and the same. When I called from without, it was always Okusan who invited me in. Even when present, the daughter seldom replied.

Over time there came to be occasions when the daughter would come to my room alone on some errand and stay to talk. On those occasions, I found myself ill at ease. I could not, I decided, attribute my unease solely to the presence of a young lady. I'd begin to fidget. I'd imagine my manner was strained, and I'd fear it might betray me. The other party, however, seemed utterly unconcerned. Seeing her so carefree, it was hard

to believe she was the same girl who sang so softly with her koto. If she stayed too long, her mother would call to her from the hearth room. Sometimes she would answer back but still remain fixed where she was. Even at this, she was anything but childish. This was quite clear to me. It was also clear that she wanted me to know this.

14

Once the young lady was gone, I would finally relax. At the same time, I would rue her absence profoundly. Perhaps I was effeminate in my manner. To a modern young man like yourself, it must certainly seem so. However, I was typical of those of my time.

Okusan rarely left the house. On occasions when she did leave, she never left me alone with her daughter. I can't say whether this was by chance or design. It may be pretentious to say so, but it appeared to me, based on my observations, that she was working to bring her daughter and me closer. At the same time, there were certain occasions when she seemed to have her guard up against me. When I first caught on to this, I struggled with how to react.

I wished for Okusan to make her intentions clear. Her thoughts and actions were clearly inconsistent. With my uncle's deception still fresh in my mind, though, I couldn't help harboring deeper doubts. One aspect of her behavior, I decided, must be genuine, and the other must then be a ruse. That was as far as my reasoning took me. I could draw no further conclusion, nor could I offer up any rational explanation for her behavior. Failing to unearth any pretext, all I could do was attribute it all to feminine flaws. That's just the way women are. Women, after all, are foolish things. Whenever reason failed me, this was where my thoughts invariably landed.

My disparagement of women did not extend to the young lady. In her presence, my theorizing fell flat and ceased to serve me. The affection I felt toward her bordered on faith. It may seem strange to you that I should apply this word, borrowed from the realm of religion, to a young lady, but even today I still feel this way. I'm firmly convinced that true love and religious devotion are kindred spirits. Every time I set eyes on this young lady's face, I felt myself cleansed. Every time I thought of her, a rush of noble feeling washed through me. If this wondrous thing we call love has two sides, with spiritual connections on the high side and carnal desires on the low side, then my affections were surely anchored to its uppermost point. I was, of course, a human being embodied in the flesh. However, in the eyes that regarded this young lady, and in the soul that yearned for her, thoughts of the flesh were none to be found.

Even as I harbored animosity toward the mother, my affections for the daughter grew deeper. Compared to my early days as a lodger, the relationship between the three of us was becoming complex. This complexity was of course internal and didn't show on the surface. At some point, however, I began to wonder if I hadn't misjudged the mother. I began to see that maybe there was no falsehood in her conflicting views of me. Furthermore, I began to think that these conflicting views did not rule her spirit in turn, but rather that both coexisted at all times within her breast. It seemed contradictory that Okusan would strive to bring me close to her daughter while putting up defenses against me. Then again, even when her defenses were up, I could see that she still sought to draw us closer. I believe she was simply averse to the idea of the two of us

becoming overly intimate. As I had no intention of accosting the daughter in any carnal fashion, I thought her concerns unwarranted. At the same time, though, I was able put my ill will toward her to rest.

15

Regarding all facets of Okusan's behavior as a whole, I finally concluded that within her household I was duly trusted. I even had reason to believe that I'd been deemed trustworthy from our initial encounter. To one like me, who harbored a general mistrust in his bosom, this revelation was quite surprising. I decided that women, in comparison to men, must be that much more intuitive. At the same time, I wondered if that wasn't how men managed to deceive them. In retrospect, it's funny that I could regard Okusan so while blindly trusting my own intuition with respect to her daughter. While pledging in my heart to trust no one, I trusted Okusan's daughter absolutely, all the while wondering at Okusan's trust in me.

I didn't talk much of home. I said nothing at all of what had transpired there. It pained me even to think of it. As much as I could, I let them talk while I listened. However, I couldn't keep this up. They wanted to know about my home and what it was like. I finally told them all. That I was never going back. That there was nothing there for me now, nothing save the graves of my parents. When I told them all this, Okusan was visibly moved. Her daughter wept. I decided I'd done right in divulging my past. I was glad to have done so.

After hearing my story, Okusan's expression all but told me that I'd validated her intuition. From that point on, she treated me no differently than she would her own younger kinfolk. I took no offense at this, and in fact it rather pleased me. The mistrust in my heart, however, was before long rekindled.

My doubts about Okusan began with the smallest of things. The smallest of things, however, as they recur over time, can give rise to serious doubts. Somewhere along the way, I began to wonder if Okusan wasn't pushing her daughter on me, just as my uncle had done. This woman, whom I'd thought a person of kindness, all of a sudden appeared to me a cunning schemer. Contempt welled from within me.

Okusan had made it known from the start that her house was too quiet and she wished, therefore, to take in a boarder. I didn't doubt this. After we grew close and I'd learned more about her, this motive still seemed valid. On the other hand, her financial situation was far from secure. In the interest of her own material comfort, I was not an unattractive prospect.

Once again I put up my guard. Being on guard against the mother, however, was of little avail, as my affections toward the daughter continued unattenuated. Inwardly, I derided myself. I cursed my own foolishness. This conflict in my heart, though, however foolish, was nothing to caused me pain. It was doubts of the daughter, that she might be as much the schemer as her mother, that first brought on my anguish. The thought that the two of them, behind my back, were scheming this all, was at once unbearable. I wasn't merely displeased. I was utterly and hopelessly despondent. Even at that, there was a part of me that firmly believed in the daughter. I was caught halfway between devotion and distrust, frozen in place. Both were unreal, and at the same time both were the truth.

I attended my classes as usual. However, the voices of the lecturers, standing on the dais, seemed to echo from far away. The same went for my studies. I took in words with my eyes, but they vanished like smoke before they could settle in my mind. I also grew reticent. Several friends misunderstood this. They assumed I was indulging in contemplations, and even conveyed this to others. I didn't try to disabuse them, but rather was grateful for the convenient façade. There were times, though, when I was not content to let this stand and would deliberately confound them with bouts of fitful revelry.

Guests were rare in the house where I lodged. The family seemed to have few relations. Sometimes the daughter would have a friend from school over, but they would always talk so quietly that one hardly knew they were there. It didn't occur to me, of course, that their discretion might be out of deference. Those who called on me were hardly unruly, but neither did they show particular deference to others in the house. In this sense, I was a lodger living as though I owned the place, while the young lady of the house behaved like a humble guest.

I write this because it comes to mind, but it's really of no consequence. There is one thing, however, that is of consequence. I suddenly discerned one day, from the hearth room or the young lady's room, the sound of a male voice. Unlike my own visitors, this voice was exceedingly soft. I couldn't make out what was said. Not knowing what they were up to put my nerves on edge. I sat there strangely agitated. I wondered if it was a relative, or perhaps just some acquaintance.

Next I considered whether it might be a young man or someone older. Sitting where I was, I had no way of knowing. At the same time, I couldn't very well get up, walk over, and open the shōji for a look. My nerves were more than agitated. They knocked me about from inside. After the guest had departed, I made certain to ask who it was. Neither Okusan nor the daughter gave anything more than the briefest of answers. While my dissatisfaction was plain for all to see, I lacked the audacity to probe further. They were under no obligation, of course, to inform me. I maintained my self-respect, a self-respect instilled by an upbringing that emphasized dignity. At the same time, I wore with abandon a wistful look on my face. They both laughed. It may have been good-natured and fully free of derision. Then again, it may have been just the guise of good nature. I'd so lost my composure that, in the moment, all was unclear. Even after the fact, I couldn't make up my mind as to whether I'd been ridiculed.

I was a free man. I could quit my studies at any time, go and live wherever I pleased, or marry whomever I liked. There was no one whose blessing I needed. More than once, I'd resolved to approach Okusan and ask for her daughter's hand. Each time, however, I'd wavered and held back my words. It wasn't for fear of rejection. I didn't know how rejection might alter my fate, but I imagined it would simply set me on a new course, with the fresh wide world once again open before me. This was nothing I couldn't face. The one thing I couldn't face, though, was entrapment. Nothing was more mortifying than the thought of being manipulated. After my uncle had deceived me, I'd sworn that, come what may, I'd never be taken again.

Seeing me buy only books, Okusan suggested I should have some clothes made as well. All I owned, in fact, were my country-woven cottons. Students in those days did not wear silk. A friend of mine was from a family of merchants or whatnot in Yokohama who lived the lavish life. On one occasion, he received a fine silk vest by courier. We all made sport at the sight of it. He became self-conscious and tried to defend it, but in the end he tossed this vest, procured at some expense, into the bottom of his trunk. A bunch of us then pressured him into putting it on. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the vest had attracted lice. My friend, playing this in his own favor, wadded up the offending article and tossed it into a large ditch in Nezu while out walking. I was with him on his walk and watched this all from the top of the bridge with amusement. Nowhere within me was the least tinge of regret at the wastefulness of his act.

I'd matured a good deal since that time. However, I was still not so discerning as to feel the need for visiting attire. Until much later, when I'd finished my studies and was sporting a mustache, I retained the eccentric view that clothes weren't worth my worry. I replied to Okusan that books were a necessity and clothing was not. Okusan knew how many books I was buying. She asked if I'd read them all. Among my purchases were dictionaries, and there were also some books that I'd intended to look at but whose pages had never been cracked. I struggled for an answer. It occurred to me then that since I was buying things I didn't need, clothes were no worse than books. I also wanted, on the pretext of return for kindness received, to buy the daughter something nice - an obi or a length of fabric that would be to her liking. I entrusted all this to Okusan.

Okusan did not propose to go alone. She insisted that I come with. She also wanted her daughter along. To those like myself, brought up in earlier times, it was not a student's place to walk in public in the company of a young lady. I was much more a slave to custom than I am now, and I wavered a bit before mustering the courage to acquiesce.

The daughter was dressed in her best. She'd applied a generous layer of powder over her already fair skin, making her quite the sight. She caught the eye of all who passed us by. After looking at her, they would next direct their gaze toward me. I found it disquieting.

The three of us bought what we needed at Nihonbashi. It took longer than expected, as we were slow to decide. Okusan would call out my name and ask my opinion of things. Sometimes she would drape fabric down from her daughter's shoulders and ask me to step back and look. I would signal my approval or distaste. To my credit, I always managed some decent manner of reply.

We took our time in this way, and it was already dinnertime when we left for home. Okusan offered to treat me somewhere, and she led us into a narrow lane. There was a theater there called Kiharadana. The lane was narrow, and its eating establishments were likewise confined. The area was completely unfamiliar to me, and I was impressed how Okusan knew where to go.

We returned home late in the evening. The next day was Sunday, and I spent the day holed up in my room. On Monday morning I went to class and was chided first thing by a classmate. He made a point of asking when I'd taken a wife. He then went on to praise her as a rare beauty. He'd seen the three of us, no doubt, during our outing in Nihonbashi.

When I returned home, I shared this with Okusan and her daughter. Okusan laughed. Then, however, she looked at me and asked if I hadn't been annoyed. This, I thought to myself at the time, is how women sound out men for their feelings. Okusan's eyes held a look that confirmed as much. I perhaps should have told her candidly, then and there, exactly what my feelings were. Within me was a lingering lump of suspicion, though, that held me in check. I started to speak and then stopped myself. I proceeded instead to deflect the conversation onto a tangent.

I extracted my all-important self from the picture, probing for Okusan's thoughts on her daughter's marriage. Okusan did not hide the fact that there'd been several suitors. She explained, though, that she felt no need to rush things. After all, her daughter was still young and still in school. While she never stated it, she seemed to place great faith in her daughter's beauty. When the time came, she told me, she could certainly find a match. At the same time, she only had one child, and she was loathe to give her away. She seemed undecided between marrying off her daughter or taking in a son-in-law.

I felt I'd learned much from this exchange. In doing so, however, I'd effectively squandered an opportunity. I couldn't slip in a single word now on my own behalf. I sought a suitable stopping point to break off and retire to my room.

The daughter, who'd been nearby and laughed off my friend's comments as nonsense, had at some point removed herself to the far corner and was sitting with her back to me. I saw her there as I turned my head in rising to leave. From the backside, a person's heart is opaque. I had no idea what her thoughts might be. She was sitting before the closet. Its door was open a bit, and she seemed to be looking at something that she had taken out and placed on her lap. Through the gap in the door, my eye caught a glimpse of the fabrics we'd purchased two days prior. Mine and hers were stacked together in the same corner.

As I silently rose from my seat, Okusan suddenly asked in a serious tone what I thought. Her manner was so abrupt that I had to ask in return what she meant. After she clarified that the question concerned her daughter, and whether she should marry her off sooner versus later, I replied that I thought she should take her time. She confirmed that she, too, was of the same mind.

At this point in my relationship with Okusan and her daughter, another young man, by necessity, entered the picture. His inclusion in the household would alter my fate most profoundly. Had his path not intersected with mine, it is unlikely I would be writing you, as I now am, to leave behind this lengthy account. You could say, in a sense, that the devil passed before me, casting a shadow on the whole of my existence, as I stood there unawares. I should confess that it was I who brought this young man into the house. I did so, of course, with Okusan's consent. Initially, even after I explained everything to her in broaching the idea, she opposed me. I had ample reason for bringing this young man in, while Okusan had no sound argument in support of her opposition. In the end, I prevailed. I pressed my case with resolve, and proceeded as I thought best.