

Kokoro – Sensei’s Testament – Parts 28 to 36

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

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K was not the traveling type. It was the first time for me, too, in Bōshū. Not knowing the territory, we climbed ashore where the boat made first land. I believe that was Hota. I don’t know how it might have changed since, but in those days it was an utterly wretched fishing village. The whole place reeked of fish. Each time in the sea, we were beaten down by the waves, emerging with scrapes on our hands and feet. Fist-sized stones were tossed about by the breakers there in a never-ending churn.

I’d soon had enough. K said nothing, however, either for or against the place. His face, too, was pure indifference. At the same time, he seldom came back unscathed from the sea. Finally, at my urging, we moved on to Tomiura. From Tomiura, we went to Nako. The entire coast was a gathering place for students back then, so wherever we went a suitable bathing beach awaited. K and I would perch ourselves on the rocks above the shore and gaze at the color of the distant sea or survey the shallows. From our vantage on the rocks, the views of the water were splendid. Small fish of crimson or indigo, colors not seen in the marketplace, were on brilliant display as they darted about in the clear waves.

I often had a book open before me. K was wont to just sit there in silence. For all I knew, he may have been deeply pensive, may have been drinking in the sights, or may have been daydreaming fancifully. I sometimes lifted my gaze to ask what he was doing. He simply replied that he was doing nothing. I often thought how nice it would be if the young lady of our house, rather than K, were the one seated quietly beside me. That in itself was fine, but I also suspected on occasion that K, as he sat there on those rocks, might perhaps be harboring exactly the same wish.

In those moments, my appetite for quiet reading would suddenly disappear. I’d abruptly jump to my feet and yell with abandon at the top of my lungs. I lacked the composure to bring forth any studied verse or intelligible tune. All I could do was scream like a savage. On one occasion I seized K’s neck from behind. What would he do, I asked, if I pushed him off and into the sea. He didn’t stir. His back still to me, he replied that it would suit him fine, that I should go ahead and do it. I immediately withdrew my hands from his neck.

K’s frayed nerves, by that time, seemed to be greatly improved. My own, in contrast, were more and more on edge. Seeing K so self-assured, I couldn’t help but envy him. I loathed him too. Maybe it was his evident disinterest in my affairs. I saw this disinterest as a sign of his newfound confidence. This confidence he showed by no means warmed my heart. My doubts had the best of me, and I needed to know what lay behind it. Had he recovered his old optimism, his sense of a bright future to be gained through study and exertion? If it were just that, then his and my interests were in no way at odds. In fact, I should feel pleased for having helped him so. However, if his peace of mind involved the young lady of our house, then I would never forgive him. Oddly enough, he seemed fully unaware of my affection toward her. Of course, I was not one to parade my passions. And K, by his nature, was obtuse in such regards. It was partly for this reason that I had brought him into the house without concern.

I thought to open up and tell K everything. This wasn't the first time, of course, that I'd had this thought. I'd harbored such intent in advance of our travel but had been unable to find or create the right opportunity. Looking back now, my acquaintances of those days were a curious lot. In conversation, the topic of women was never broached. There were many, no doubt, who had no experience to draw on, but even those who did, it seemed, routinely held their tongues. To your generation, who breathe a freer air, this must certainly seem odd. Perhaps we were slaves to the ethics of times past, or perhaps we were fettered by inhibition. I leave it to you to judge.

K and I could discuss anything. Love and romance were no exception. They didn't fail to come up on occasion, but they came up as abstractions, and we always fell to theorizing. And even this was only seldom. Our discourse, for the most part, was occupied by talk of books, or studies, or our future livelihoods, or our aspirations, or of ways to cultivate one's mind. However close we might have been, there was no breaking through the dispassionate tone of those days. The bond between us was premised on dispassion. Since resolving that I should disclose to K my feelings for the young lady, I'd been tormented time and again by awkward indecision. I wished that just once I could pry open his head and pass a tender breath into his mind.

Things that to you may seem fully absurd, were to me, at that time, a source of genuine consternation. During our travels, just as at home, I was overly timid. My eyes were always on K, watching for a chance, but I was helpless against his highbrow demeanor. It was as if, to my mind, his heart were hard-coated with a heavy coat of black lacquer. The passion I sought to pour out would only be repelled. His heart would accept not a drop.

There were times when K's rugged and distant demeanor reassured me. At those times, I would scold myself for harboring suspicions and apologize to K in my mind. While growing apologetic toward K, I regarded myself as a lowlife, and I was hit with a sudden sense of shame. Before long, though, my prior suspicions would return with a vengeance, commanding my thoughts and skewing everything to my own disadvantage. K's looks, it seemed, were the kind that women favored. Unlike my own fidgety disposition, his demeanor was appealing to the opposite sex. What faults he had, he compensated for with rugged masculinity, appearing superior, on the whole, to myself. Our areas of study were different, but I knew, of course, that I could never match him in scholarship. -- All his merits assaulted my thoughts at once, and my brief assurance soon gave way to anxiety.

Seeing me so unsettled, K suggested we should return to Tōkyō if I wasn't enjoying myself. This steeled my resolve to stay. The truth, perhaps, was that I didn't want K back in Tōkyō. We circled the Bōshū headland and emerged on the opposite side. Under a blistering sun, we forced ourselves on through Kazusa, whose modest distances proved deceptively arduous. I saw no purpose anymore in trudging so. I voiced this half-jokingly to K. He stated in response that we were born with feet, and thus we walk. He added that we should cool ourselves in the sea, and he didn't hesitate to do so, regardless of place or time. Afterward, though, the merciless sun would beat us back down, leaving us languid and worn.

Walking on thus, worn down in the heat, one begins in time to feel out of sorts. It's not as though one is ill. It's as though one's soul were suddenly cast into an unfamiliar body. I conversed with K as always, but it seemed somehow different. The intimacy and enmity I felt toward him took on a special constitution, a flavor of the road as it were. In short, the heat, the salt, the waves, and the walking established a connection between us heretofore unknown. We were like a pair of traveling merchants fallen together on the road. We talked at length, but touched not once on our usual weighty topics.

We continued on in this manner to Chōshi, with just one exception that left on me a lasting impression. Before leaving Bōshū, we stopped at a place called Kominato and toured Tai no Ura. It's been many years now, and I didn't take much interest in it at the time, but they say that Nichiren was born there. Legend has it that on the day of his birth, two tai were tossed up onto the shore. Since that day, the local fishermen have refrained from taking tai, and they've thrived in the bay there. We hired a small boat and set out to view them.

I was intent the whole while on watching the waves. My eyes were transfixed by the site of the tai, tinged in purple, darting through the surf. K, however, failed to share my interest. His mind, it seemed, was less on the tai and more on Nichiren. There was a temple nearby called Tanjōji. It was no doubt named so in honor of Nichiren's birth, and its buildings were grand. K proposed that we stop there and call on the priest.

To tell the truth, we were a strange-looking pair. This was especially true of K, who had lost his hat to the sea in a strung gust and was wearing a bamboo replacement he'd purchased along the way. Our clothes, of course, were filthy, and on top of that we both reeked of sweat. I suggested we shouldn't go meet with the priest. K was obstinate and wouldn't hear it. If I didn't want to go with, he said, then I could wait for him outside. Seeing no better alternative, I accompanied him through the entryway, thinking to myself we'd likely be turned away. Priests, however, are surprisingly civil. We were shown to a grand parlor and promptly joined there. K and I had dissimilar interests at the time, and I only half listened to his conversation with the priest. K wanted to know all about Nichiren. The priest explained how Nichiren was so skilled in the grass script that he was known as "grass Nichiren." I still remember K, who's own brushwork was sub-par, returning a dismissive look. He wanted something more, something of deeper significance. I don't know that the priest managed to satisfy him, but once outside the grounds he turned to me and began to expound on Nichiren. I was too worn down by the heat to care much. I simply humored him with mechanical replies. When these became burdensome, I stopped responding altogether.

It was on the following evening, if I remember right, after we'd reached our inn, dined, and were preparing for bed, when our conversation suddenly took a sour turn. K was still fuming from the prior day, when he'd tried to engage me on Nichiren and I'd responded with disinterest. Those who don't seek to better the spirit, he remarked, are mere simpletons. He was clearly rebuking me, implying that I was fickle. My spirit at the time, however, was occupied with thoughts of the daughter of our house, and I wasn't about to let his disrespect go unchallenged. I took up my own defense.

I used the word “humanity” extensively. K contended that I was using this word as cover for my own shortcomings. Looking back later, I could see that he’d been right. My purpose in using it, however, had been to force K to confront his own deficiency. Having once charted this argumentative course, I could not readily retreat. I asserted my opinion all the more forcefully. K asked in return where it was that I found him lacking in humanity. I told him -- “You’re human enough. Maybe too human. But your words, and your actions too, are void of humanity.”

When I told him this, he didn’t refute it. He simply replied that if he did come across so, it was only because he had not yet mastered his own soul. I began to feel bad for him, and this served to disarm me. I pressed the matter no further. K grew more and more somber. He remarked, with a tinge of sadness, that if I knew those men of old, like he did, I would not censure him so. The men of old he referred to were neither heroes nor great achievers. They were sufferers, men who tormented their flesh and scourged their bodies for the sake of their souls. K added with disappointment that I didn’t understand how he himself had suffered so in order to walk in their shoes.

K and I left it at that and slept. From the following morning, we were once again like traveling merchants, sweating as we trudged on our way. However, I often thought back on that evening as we journeyed along. I’d been presented the ultimate opportunity, and I regretted greatly that I hadn’t seized it. It occurred to me that instead of abstract talk on humanity, I should have divulged to K in simple terms the things I was feeling.

In fact, my fixation on “humanity” was indeed grounded in my feelings for the daughter of our house. Instead of assaulting K’s ears with theories distilled from that truth, I’d have been better served in revealing it to him directly. The bond between us, however, was built on erudition, and it had come to possess its own form of inertia. I’ll confess here that I lacked the courage to upset that inertia. I didn’t dare to perturb it with sentiment. I could say that pretentiousness got the better of me, or I could say that vanity worked its mischief. Please note that I use the terms “pretentiousness” and “vanity” here in not quite their usual sense. As long as you understand my meaning, then with that I’m content.

We returned to Tōkyō burnt black by the sun. By that time my demeanor had changed. I had lost all interest in splitting hairs over what was or wasn’t humanity. K too had shed his sage-like aura. By that time, I expect, his thoughts were free from problems of the spirit and problems of the flesh. Like aliens with darkened faces, we watched as Tōkyō teemed with motion around us. At Ryōgoku, despite the heat, we dined on game fowl. Newly energized, K suggested we walk home to Koishikawa. I could generally better him in matters of physical endurance, so I readily agreed.

Okusan was shocked at the sight of us when we arrived home. In addition to our dark complexions, we were both gaunt from our endless trekking. All the same, Okusan complimented us on how fit we both looked. The daughter couldn’t help but laugh at her mother’s glaring inconsistency. Her laughter, though, which had annoyed me on occasion prior to our journey, this time brightened my mood. Perhaps because of the circumstance, or perhaps due to our long absence.

On another front, I perceived a subtle shift in the young lady's manner. In returning home from a long journey and resuming normal routine, there were many things that required a woman's care. Okusan and her daughter both helped us out, but the young lady seemed to be treating me with preference over K. Had she done this overtly, I might have been uncomfortable. I think it likely, in that case, I'd have found occasion to object. In this regard, though, I was happy to note how she carried it off with perfection. That is to say, she apportioned her grace in my favor, but in subtle ways that only I would notice. As a result, K was none the wiser, and he showed no signs of resentment. I'd gained the upper hand, and a song of triumph rang through my mind.

Summer finally passed, and in mid-September we resumed our studies. K and I once again came and went according to our respective schedules. Three days a week, I returned home later than he did, but not once did I see any further instance of the young lady visiting his room. He would glance my direction as always, and ask if I'd just now come home. I would give in return a simple, mechanical nod, fully devoid of meaning.

One morning, I think around mid-October, I overslept and rushed off to school in Japanese dress. I didn't have time for my high-lace shoes, so I jumped into my straw sandals and darted out. According to our schedules, my return home should have preceded K's. That being the case, I pushed open the latticework entry door with a clatter. As I did so, I was surprised by the sound of K's voice. At the same time, the young lady's laughter reached my ears. I didn't have to deal with my usual shoes, so I immediately entered the house and slid aside the partition. The young lady, however, was already gone.

I caught just a flash of her back side, a retreating figure that seemed to take flight from K's room. I asked K why he was back so soon. He told me hadn't been feeling well and had stayed home. I went to my own room and sat down, and before long the young lady appeared with tea. It was then that she finally welcomed me home. A world-wise man would have smiled and asked why she'd run away. I didn't do this. Inside, though, the matter weighed on me heavily. After a moment, she rose and returned via the veranda. However, she paused in front of K's room and exchanged a few words with him through the partition. This was some continuation of their previous conversation. Not having been privy to what preceded, I couldn't follow what they were talking of now.

Over time, the young lady grew more and more nonchalant. Even when K and I were both in the house, she would approach his room from the veranda and call his name. Then she would visit with him at leisure. At times, of course, she was giving him his mail or returning his laundered clothes. Such interaction between two people in the same house was by no means unreasonable. To one such as myself though, who so strongly desired to possess this young lady exclusively, the extent of their interaction was excessive. It even seemed to me, at times, that she was avoiding me to frequent K's room. You may wonder why I didn't just turn K out. I'd invested great effort to bring him in, and were I to turn him out, my efforts would all come to naught. I couldn't let this happen.

It was a day in November, when a cold rain was falling. I returned home by my usual route, cutting through the Konnyaku Enma temple and ascending the narrow lane. My overcoat was dripping with rain. K's room was empty, but his brazier glowed warmly with a newly kindled flame. Eager to warm my cold hands over coals, I quickly slid aside the partition to my own room. I found a cold brazier with nothing but pale ash. No fire remained. Discontent washed over me.

It was Okusan who heard me come in and came to greet me. She saw me standing in silence in the middle of the room, and she was kind enough to help me out of my coat and into Japanese attire. When I told her I was cold, she went into the next room and returned with K's brazier. I asked if K was already home, and she told me he'd come back and then departed again. This was a day when K's schedule had him coming home later than me, and I gave her a puzzled look. She supposed he must have had some business to attend to.

I sat for a while and read. The house was silent, with no voice to be heard. Early winter's cold and dreary sting was palpable. I immediately put aside my book and rose to my feet. I needed to get to livelier quarters. The rain had finally lifted, but the sky still weighed heavy, like cold lead. I shouldered my umbrella as a precaution and headed out. I moved east along the earthen wall in back of the armory, descending the hill. This was in the days before the roads were improved, and their pitch was much steeper than now. The road was narrow, and by no means straight. At the bottom, tall buildings flanked the south side, hindering the drainage of water, and the road was awash in mud. The narrow span between the stone bridge and the Yanagi-chō thoroughfare was worst of all.

Even those in stilted sandals or high boots were forced to tread carefully. All were intent on adhering tightly to a narrow path down the middle of the lane, a place from which the mud had been pushed away to either side by the foot traffic. The width of this narrow path was no more than half a meter, so it was almost like walking on a ribbon that had been unfurled down the lane. All moved slowly, and in single file. Walking this ribbon, I suddenly encountered K. I'd been preoccupied with my feet, and I didn't notice his presence until we were face to face. Only in the moment when I found my way blocked and happened to lift my gaze did I first recognize him standing there. I asked him where he'd been, and he replied simply that he'd just been out for a bit. The manner of his reply was terse as always. K and I maneuvered around each other on the narrow ribbon. As we did so, I saw there was a young lady behind him. I'm nearsighted, so it wasn't apparent to me at first, but after moving past K and seeing her face, I was quite surprised to recognize her as the young lady of our house. She greeted me with a slight blush on her cheeks. Hairstyles then were different than today, with no extending brim. Instead, her hair was coiled like a serpent over the center of her head. I gazed vacantly at her hair for a moment, before realizing that one of us would have to yield the way to the other. Resolutely, I stuck one foot in the muck, making way for her to pass with relative ease.

I continued on to the Yanagi-chō thoroughfare, but from there had no idea where to go next. Nothing was of any interest. I tramped through the mud with abandon, paying no heed where it splashed. Then I turned and headed home.

I asked K if he and the young lady had gone out together. He told me that wasn't the case. He'd met her by chance in Masago-chō, he explained, and accompanied her back home. I could find no opening for querying further. However, I couldn't resist asking the same question of the young lady at dinner. She responded with that laugh of hers that I so disliked. Then she asked me to guess where she'd been. My temper was short in those days, and I didn't take kindly to her trifling with me. Of those at the table, though, only Okusan seemed to notice this. K was fully indifferent. As for the young lady's attitude, I couldn't decide whether she was provoking me intentionally or merely knew no better. She was more discrete than most of her peers, but she was not immune to the common flaws of her cohort. Moreover, these flaws seemed more apparent since K had entered the house. I wasn't sure whether to attribute this to my jealousy of K or to her toying with my emotions. I have no intention, even now, of denying the jealousy I harbored at the time. As I've noted many times, I was keenly aware of these other emotions that lurk alongside affection. Furthermore, these other emotions were easily triggered by occasions that, to an impartial observer, were nothing at all. If I may digress a bit, it seems to me that jealousy may well be the reverse side of affection. Since marrying, I've felt this feeling slowly lose its grasp. At the same time, my affection too is no longer as intense as it once was.

I thought I might thrust my heart, till now so indecisive, with full abandon into the other party's bosom. By other party, I refer here not to the young lady in question, but Okusan. I thought to ask Okusan outright for her daughter's hand. Having resolved to do so, however, I failed, day after day, to act. In hearing this, you may well view me as spineless. That's fine if you do, but you should understand that my failure in action did not arise from weakness of intention. Before K's arrival, dread of deception had held me in check, precluding any initiative. After K moved in, I was shackled by misgivings, wondering if the young lady didn't perhaps prefer him over me. If she did prefer him then there would be no point, I concluded, in professing my affection. It wasn't so much fear of losing face. However I might yearn for her, if she deep down cherished another, then I was loathe to have her. There are men in this world who will happily wed the woman they fancy by hook or by crook. Such men, I believed at that time, were nothing other than ruffians tainted by worldly wear. Either that or they were dullards to whom the finer points of love were beyond reach. In my passion, I rejected the line of reasoning that a bride once taken would warm to one over time. In short, I subscribed to the theory of noble love. At the same time, I was hopelessly circumspect in pursuing of such love.

Over the course of our time together, I had ample opportunity to bare my soul directly to the young lady in question, but I took care not to. That this ran counter to the conventions of Japanese society was firmly ingrained in my mind. This wasn't, however, the only thing that restrained me. I was convinced that no Japanese woman, much less a young lady, would dare to speak candidly under such circumstances. Her feelings, no doubt, would be veiled by words of deference.

Thus I stood, frozen in place, incapable of movement in any direction. There are times when one is unwell and requires rest. The eyes alone are alert, and all around is plain to see, but the hands and feet are utterly void of volition. Unbeknownst to others, I often felt a similar form of distress.

The old year drew to a close, and New Year's was upon us. One day, Okusan asked K to bring a friend over for karuta. She was taken aback when K promptly replied that he had no friends. In fact, there really was no one whom he could truly call a friend. There were those whom he greeted in passing on the street, but that by no means implied that he was close enough to invite them over for games. Okusan tried again with me, asking if I could invite someone I knew. Regrettably, I was in no mood for merrymaking. I sidestepped her request, giving a noncommittal and lukewarm response. However, when evening came both K and I were coerced out by the young lady of the house. Playing karuta with just us members of the household, and no guests, the scene was quite subdued. Furthermore, K was unaccustomed to games and could do no better than observe idly. I asked him if he even knew the hundred karuta verses. He replied that he really didn't. The young lady, apparently, decided I was deriding him. Thereafter, she made a point of coming to his assistance. In the end, the two were like a team, with me as their chosen adversary. One false move from K, and I would have confronted them both with harsh words. Fortunately though, his manner was unaffected. There was no show of triumph in his demeanor, and the situation passed without incident.

A few days later, Okusan and her daughter left home in the morning, telling us they were off to visit a relative in Ichigaya. Classes hadn't resumed yet, so K and I remained behind as house sitters. I didn't feel like reading, nor like taking a stroll, so I simply rested my elbows on the edge of the brazier, propped my chin in my palms, and allowed my mind to wander. There was no sound from K, who was in the adjoining room. It was so quiet that neither registered the other's presence. This was nothing out of the ordinary for us, and I didn't give it a second thought.

Around ten, K suddenly opened the fusuma and appeared before me. Standing on the threshold, he asked what I was thinking about. I hadn't really been thinking about anything. Or if I had been, then I suppose the young lady of the house, as usual, was the object of my musings. If I were dwelling on her, then I was also dwelling on Okusan, and my thoughts of the ladies, of late, were no longer separable from K himself, whom I couldn't push out of the picture. I'd come to regard K, in some sense, as a nuisance, but I couldn't very well report this to his face. Rather, I continued to look back at him in silence. As I did so, he determinedly entered my room and seated himself before the brazier. I immediately removed my elbows from the edge and nudged it a bit in his direction.

Uncharacteristically, K initiated conversation. Where in Ichigaya, he wondered, had Okusan and her daughter gone. I told him I thought they were visiting an aunt. K asked in turn who this aunt was. I informed him that this aunt, too, was married to a military man. Then he asked why they'd gone so soon, as women customarily waited until the fifteenth before making New Year's rounds. All I could say to this was that I didn't know.

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K kept on with questions about Okusan and her daughter. In the end, he probed beyond my capacity to answer. Rather than bother me, his probing struck me as curious. Thinking back on the times I'd tried to engage him on the topic of the ladies, I couldn't help but notice the shift in his manner. I finally asked him why suddenly, on this day, he was so interested. He immediately fell silent. However, I could see the flesh around his closed lips quivering. He was reticent by nature. When he was thinking to say something, he

would always chew his words over first. When his lips defied his will and refused to open, it meant he was pondering weighty words. Then, when his voice finally broke free, it would roar forth with twofold force.

As I watched his mouth, I could tell that something was coming, but I had no idea what. Hence I was blindsided. Imagine my surprise when he opened his mouth and solemnly professed a heartrending love for the young lady of the house. I instantly froze, as though he'd cast a spell and turned me to stone. I emitted not a murmur. My mouth lost all faculty for speech.

You could say that my being was reduced to pure dread, or perhaps it was pure anguish. At any rate, I was reduced to a single emotion. Like stone or like steel, I went rigid from head to toe. I was too rigid to even draw a breath. Fortunately, I wasn't long in this state. A moment later, I'd regained my sensibilities. The first thing I did was kick myself. I realized I'd been beaten.

At the time, an appropriate response eluded me entirely. I expect I lacked the capacity to even consider one. Even as a clammy sweat seeped from my armpits and into my shirt, I sat there stoically, without stirring. K continued on in his signature solemn voice, pouring his heart out a bit at a time. My anguish was unbearable. I imagine this anguish must have been written across my face, like the bold clear print on a large handbill, for all to see. Even K should have seen it clearly, but he was too absorbed in his own affair to lend me any regard. His confession continued on, from beginning to end, in the same vein. It was slow and heavy, and it impressed me thus as firmly rooted, not something easily dismissed. My thoughts were in a frenzy, wondering what I should do, and I only half listened to his words. The details of what he said might just as well have fallen on deaf ears, but the tone with which he spoke reverberated forcefully through my being. In addition to the anguish I've described, I began to also sense a certain kind of fear. In short, the fear of facing a stronger rival was starting to grip my mind.

When K finished speaking, I had nothing to say in response. My silence wasn't one of calculation. I wasn't weighing whether I should best counter with a similar confession or keep my feelings hidden. I simply had nothing to say. Nor did I feel any desire to speak.

When it was time for lunch, K and I sat face to face at the table. The maidservant waited on us. Never had I experienced a less appetizing meal. The two of us exchanged hardly a word. We didn't know when Okusan and her daughter would return.