

## Kokoro – Sensei’s Testament – Parts 37 to 46

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

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We withdrew to our respective rooms and saw each other no more. K was as quiet as he’d been all morning. I was lost in thought.

It did occur to me, of course, that I should open myself to K. At the same time, though, I felt that I’d missed my chance. It seemed to me now that I’d failed grandly. Why had I not been able to stop him, to cut him off and counter him? I should at least have followed his example and related, without hesitation, my own feelings. Now that the moment had passed, to broach the subject anew seemed awkward. I could think of no way forward. My head was swimming in regret.

I hoped that K might open the partition and engage me again. As I saw it, he’d blindsided me earlier. I’d been caught unprepared. My heart now schemed how to recoup the morning’s loss. From time to time I lifted my gaze to the fusuma. I looked in vain, however, as it never moved. K held his silence.

After a time, the silence began working mischief in my mind. I wondered, in desperation, what K was thinking on his side of the partition. Ordinarily, we lived in our own silent worlds, with only this thin partition between us. Under usual circumstances, the quieter he kept the less I sensed his presence. It’s fair to say, though, that at this time I was far from my usual self. Even so, I couldn’t bring myself to open the fusuma from my side. Having once missed my chance, there was nothing to do but wait to be re-engaged.

I finally found myself unable to stay still. The longer I held my ground, the greater my urge to burst in on K. I had to get up, and after doing so I made my way onto the veranda. From there I went to the hearth room and, having nothing better to do, poured out a cup of hot water from the iron kettle and sipped it. Then I went to the entry hall. Having gone to great lengths to avoid K’s room, I now found myself out on the street. There was nowhere, of course, that I needed to go. I was there because I couldn’t stay still. I wandered aimlessly through the town, regarding its New Year’s adornments. However much I wandered, my thoughts remained on K. Shaking him off was not the intent of my stroll. On the contrary, I was set, as I wandered, on coming to grips with who he was.

First of all, he struck me as enigmatic. Why had he hit me out of the blue with such a revelation? And how could it be he’d fallen so hard as to have no choice but to confess? Had his former self been thoroughly swept away? The answers to all of these questions eluded me. I knew him as iron-willed. I knew him as earnest. There was much more about him, though, that I felt I needed to learn. Only then could I determine how to approach him. At the same time, I was strangely unsettled by the thought that we should be rivals. As I wandered the town in a daze, I pictured him in my mind’s eye, sitting there quietly in his room. A voice in my head told me I walked in vain, that I had no power to affect K. Perhaps in my mind he was larger than life, monstrous. I had a sense, even, that he would torment me all my days.

I returned home exhausted. K was quiet as ever. There was no sound at all from his room.

Shortly after my return, I caught the sound of a rickshaw. Wheels back then weren't rubberized like they are now. They made a terrible racket, and it carried for quite some distance. Finally, the cart came to a halt before our gate.

I was called to dinner some thirty minutes later. The adjacent room was colored by bright clothing that Okusan and her daughter had hastily thrown off on their return. They had hurried home, they said, to prepare us a timely dinner. Their effort, however, was largely in vain. I sat at the table like a man guarding his words, offering only curt responses. K was even more reticent still. Our moods were in sharp contrast to those of the two ladies who, having made a rare outing together, had returned in the best of spirits. Okusan asked me if something was wrong. I told her I was feeling a bit out of sorts. I was, in fact, feeling out of sorts. The daughter, in turn, asked the same thing of K. K didn't follow suit and say he was out of sorts. He simply said that he didn't feel like talking. She asked him why he didn't feel like talking. In that moment, I perked up my heavy eyelids and looked his way. I wanted to know how he would respond. His lips, as they were wont to do, trembled a bit. To the unknowing eye, it could only seem that he was stuck for an answer. The daughter smiled and remarked that he must be lost again in his thoughts. K's face reddened a shade.

That evening I went to bed early. I'd said at dinner that I wasn't feeling well, and Okusan, concerned, came to my room around ten with soba broth. My room, however, was fully in darkness. She remarked her surprise as she cracked the fusuma a bit. Light from K's desk lamp pierced the darkness at an angle. Apparently he was still up. Okusan seated herself at my bedside. She thought I must have caught cold and, saying that I should warm myself, she pushed a cupful of broth my way. I had no choice but to down the thick broth in her presence.

I ruminated in the darkness until it grew late. Of course I was chasing the same problem in circles, getting nowhere. Suddenly, I felt the need to know what K was doing in the adjacent room. Half unconsciously, I called out to him. From the other room, he called back. He was still awake. Through the partition, I asked if he hadn't gone to bed yet. He answered simply that he was about to. I asked next what he was doing. There was no answer. Instead, I clearly discerned, five or six minutes later, the sound of his closet opening and the sound of him laying out his bedding. I called out again to ask what the time was. He replied that it was twenty past one. After that, I heard him blow out his lamp, and all in the house was dark and still.

There in the darkness, though, my eyes were open wide. Still only half consciously, I called out to K again. He called back in the same manner as before. Finally broaching the subject, I asked if we could further our conversation of that morning. I had no intention, of course, of talking through the partition, but I expected at least his agreement. His response this time, however, was not so forthcoming. He murmured back quietly, his voice steeped in reluctance. I was seized with a sense of dread.

K's tepid response was reflected in his behavior the next day and the day after. He showed no interest in touching on the subject at hand. Then again, the chance didn't present itself. Unless Okusan and her daughter left the house for the day, the two of us couldn't talk heart to heart or at length. I was keenly aware of this.

I was aware of this, but agitated nonetheless. As a result, I changed my tact. I'd been scheming in the shadows, waiting for K to approach me, but I decided now to broach the subject myself at first chance.

At the same time, I carefully observed the members of the household. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, however, in either Okusan's manner or in her daughter's bearing. If there was no notable change in their behavior following K's confession, then I had to conclude that he'd only confessed to me. It seemed certain that the crucial person in question and Okusan, who was effectively her caretaker, were still unaware. This thought helped calm my mind. If that were the case, then I didn't need to rush things. Rather than force the conversation, I decided to bide my time and seize the opportunity when it arose. I let the matter lie for a while.

As I've described this, it may sound simple, but my heart heaved through myriad highs and lows in the process, akin to the ebb and flow of the tides. I kept my eye on K, and I assigned various significance to his lack of initiative. I observed the words and actions of Okusan and her daughter, and in the end I couldn't help but question their authenticity. I wondered if the complex mechanisms at work in the human heart were capable, like the hands of a clock on a numbered face, of faithful outward expression. In short, you should understand that I satisfied myself only after multiple fits and starts. In all honesty, "satisfied" is hardly the right word to apply here.

Before long, classes resumed. On days when our schedules coincided, K and I left the house together. Whenever possible, we walked home together too. To an outside observer, we would seem close as ever. Deep down, however, we were no doubt each scheming in our own separate worlds. One day, as we walked on the street, I suddenly confronted K. My first question was whether his confession of the other day was to me alone, or whether he had also conveyed his feelings to Okusan and her daughter. My approach henceforth, I'd decided, hinged on his answer to this question. He assured me that he'd confided in on one else. The situation was as I'd surmised, and in my heart I was duly elated. I knew that between the two of us, K was the more brazen. I could never match him in audacity. Strangely, though, at the same time I trusted him. He'd let his adoptive family fund his education for three years under false pretenses, but this, in my eyes, in no way diminished his credibility. On the contrary, I admired him all the more. Despite my distrust of humanity, I readily took him at his word.

I turned to him again and asked where he intended to go with his feelings. What I wanted to know was whether his confession was the end of the matter or, having confessed, did he hope to take things further to fruition. On this point, though, he provided no answer. With downcast eyes, he resumed walking. I beseeched him to keep no secrets, to tell me everything. He answered simply that he had nothing to keep from me. The information I sought, however, did not cross his lips. We were standing in the road, and I couldn't hold my ground indefinitely. For the time being, I let it go.

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One day I found myself, for the first time in a long while, in the school library. I sat at the corner of a large table, sunlight from the window warming half of my body, flipping through a newly-arrived foreign periodical. My instructor had assigned me a research topic in my area of study that was due the next week.

Not finding the information I needed, I'd been back and forth with several different periodicals. In the end, I'd finally found a relevant article and begun reading intently. At that moment, from across the large table, I was quietly called by name. I lifted my eyes, and there was K. He leaned over the table and brought his face close to mine. As you well know, a loud voice that disrupts others is not allowed in the library, so there was nothing unusual in K's behavior. Nevertheless, on this occasion it somehow struck me as odd.

K asked in a quiet voice if I was studying. I told him I had a small research assignment. Continuing in the same quiet tone, he asked if I'd join him for a walk. I answered that I could walk with him if he waited a bit. He said he would wait and sat down in the empty seat across from mine. Once he did so, though, I lost all ability to concentrate. I was sure he'd come to me to get something off his chest. I felt compelled to close the periodical I'd been reading. As I made ready to go, K asked, in a fully composed voice, if I'd finished already. I told him it could wait till later. I returned the periodical, and we left the library together.

Wandering at will, we passed through Tatsuoka-chō to Ikenohata, then entered the park at Ueno. At this point, K suddenly broached the subject. Taking in the situation as a whole, it's quite clear that this was why he'd invited me out. However, he still had no idea where to go with his feelings. He turned to me and asked, in the vaguest of terms, what I thought. What he wanted to know was what I thought of his falling in love. In short, he sought my critique of his present state. This confirmed to me that he was far from his usual self. As I've often noted before, he was not one to bend his will to the whims of others. He was stronger than that. If he thought something right, he had the courage and grit to do it, on his own if need be. The affair with his foster family had impressed upon me the strength of his character. It should be no surprise then, that I regarded him now as changed.

I turned to K and asked him why he sought my opinion on this occasion. He replied, in an uncharacteristically disconsolate tone, that he was truly ashamed of his own weakness. He was in a quandary and had lost his way, he added, and saw no recourse but to turn to me for objective advice. I asked him, first off, what he meant by "losing his way." He explained that he wasn't sure whether to advance or withdraw. I immediately moved a step forward. Was he capable of withdrawal, I asked, if that were his chosen course. His words stuck in his throat. All he could say was that he found it unbearable. His anguish, in fact, was written on his face. Had the other party been anyone other than our young lady, I would have been moved to comfort him, to quench his pain with merciful words. If you'll allow me to say so, I believe I possess such noble compassion. In that moment, though, that is not who I was.

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I regarded K as though preparing for combat. All of me, my eyes, my heart, my body, everything that was mine, was directed at him fully. K was without sin and vulnerable. Perhaps vulnerable is not the right word. He was utterly and completely open and exposed. I could take from his hands the very plans to the stronghold housing his soul, and I could study those plans at leisure, in front of him in plain sight.

I'd found him wavering, lost between ideals and actuality, and I fixated now on taking him down with a telling blow. In an instant I'd set my sights. I turned to him anew with a solemn and steely air. It was tactical posturing, of course, but there was enough tension in my mood to mask all sense of absurdity or shame. I

let loose first with, “Those not seeking betterment of the spirit are nothing but simpletons.” These were the words K had spoken to me as the two of us traveled through Bōshū. I threw them back at him, in the same manner and in the same tone. This wasn’t just retaliation. I’ll confess that it was more. There was an undertone of cruelty. With these words, I sought to stamp out the spark of his affections.

K had been born to a Shinshū priest. However, his leanings from middle school on were hardly aligned with the tenets of his birth home. I’m no expert in doctrine, and I’ll admit that I’m poorly qualified to comment on the subject, but nowhere were the differences clearer than with respect to the relationship between the sexes. K had always spoken of his “devotion.” This term, as I understood it, implied abstinence. However, I’d learned from him over time, to my surprise, that it went much further. First and foremost, he believed firmly that all was subservient to “the way.” All indulgences must be suppressed, and even an unconsummated desire would hinder one’s progress. In those days when K had supported himself, he’d often shared with me his convictions. My mind being occupied with thoughts of the young lady, I’d contested his assertions with vigor. In return for my argument, he would give me a pitying look, though richer by far in contempt than in sympathy.

Given this shared history between us, the words, “Those not seeking betterment of the spirit are nothing but simpletons,” were no doubt a slap in K’s face. As I’ve stated before, though, it was not my intent to tear down that which he’d worked so hard to build up. On the contrary, I wanted to see him to build it higher. Whether this led him to “the way,” or whether it led him to nirvana did not concern me. I simply feared any abrupt swing in his worldview that would bring his interests into conflict with mine. In short, my words were purely self-serving.

“Those not seeking betterment of the spirit are nothing but simpletons.”

I repeated these same words again, then watched to see their effect.

“A simpleton,” he finally answered. “That’s all that I am.”

K came to a stop where he was. His eyes were cast downward. A chill ran through me. I feared I’d pushed him too far and braced myself for a backlash. However, I’d also noted the lack of any vitality in his voice. I wanted to read his eyes, but he didn’t turn to face me. He slowly resumed walking.

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I walked along with K, but my heart hung back in shadow, waiting on this next words. Perhaps “lying in wait” is the better way to express it. In the state I was in, I wouldn’t have put it past me to stab him from behind. At the same time, I did possess a conscience becoming of my upbringing. If someone, anyone, had whispered in my ear how mean I’d become, I’d likely have caught myself on the spot. If that someone had been K, I’d have certainly reddened for shame. But K was too true to rebuke me. He was too pure. He was too noble of character. All this in him that I should have respected, in my rage I used against him. I exploited his virtues to cut him down.

After a while, K spoke my name and turned to me. This time it was I who reflexively halted. Finally, I was able to look him in the eye. K was taller than me, so I was necessarily looking up. My wolf's heart, thus positioned, eyed the guileless sheep.

“Let's talk on this no further,” he said. In both his eyes and his voice was an inexplicable sorrow. I could give no response. “Please, let's talk on this no further.” This time he entreated me.

The answer I gave him was harsh. The wolf had spotted an opening and lunged in for the kill. “It wasn't I who started this, was it? It was you. If you want to stop, then fine, but you can't just mask it in silence. Are you prepared, in your heart, to truly let it go? And what of those tenets you've held so tightly? Where on earth are they now?”

K's stature seemed to diminish before me as I spoke. He was, as I've often noted, exceedingly set in his worldview. He was also, at the same time, a man of utmost integrity, and it upset him no end to be reproached for hypocrisy. As I watched him, I felt confident that my words had finally found their mark.

“Prepared?” he suddenly asked. “Prepared -- why would I not be prepared?” he added before I could answer. His words seemed meant for himself. He spoke as though in a daze.

We both fell silent and continued on toward the residence in Koishikawa. It was a comparatively calm and mild day, but it was winter nonetheless, and the park was deserted. When I looked back at the cedars, robbed of their verdure by harsh frosts, towering reddish-brown against the dusky sky, I felt an acute chill down my spine. We hurried on through the twilight, traversing Hongō Hill and descending into Koishikawa valley toward the next hill beyond. By this point, my body was finally warming itself under my overcoat.

Due in part to our rapid pace, we hardly spoke the whole way back. Once at home and gathered at the table for dinner, Okusan asked what had kept us. I told her that K had invited me out and we'd walked in Ueno. Okusan expressed her surprise that we'd walked in the cold. Her daughter wanted to know what had drawn us to Ueno. I answered her that nothing had drawn us. We'd simply gone walking. K, who was never talkative to begin with, was even less so than usual. He hardly reacted to Okusan's questions or the daughter's laughter. He gulped down his food and was gone, retreating to his room while I remained at the table.

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In those days, we did not yet speak of “personal awakening” or “new take on life.” It wasn't for lack of modern thinking, though, that K clung tight to his past and held his passions at bay. He'd simply invested too much. He'd lived thus far with singular purpose. His failure to run headlong after the object of his desire, therefore, could not be attributed to lack of ardor. However fierce his passions might burn, he could not be given to rash pursuit. Unless events should somehow tear him from his roots, he was compelled to hold his ground and respect the path he'd trodden. The only way he could honor his past was by holding firm to this same path. On top of this was his great penchant for obstinacy and perseverance. I felt that I possessed, in knowing his past and understanding his temperament, a window into his soul.

That evening after Ueno, I found myself comparatively at ease. After K retired to his room, I followed after and seated myself by his desk. I made a point of engaging him in idle talk. I could sense he was annoyed. I imagine my eyes held a glimmer of triumph, and I imagine my voice rang proud. After warming my hands over his hibachi for a while, I returned to my own room. K was my better in all things, but this time, I felt, it was I who held the winning hand.

Before long I was sound asleep. However, I woke abruptly to a voice calling my name. The fusuma was open, and I could see K's dark silhouette in the gap. His lamp was still burning, just as earlier in the evening. Suddenly aroused from the realm of sleep, I was too dazed to speak. I looked up at him blankly.

K asked if I was asleep. He was never one to retire early. I turned toward the dark shadow and asked in return if he needed anything. He replied that it was nothing in particular. He'd been up to use the toilet and was simply wondering whether I was still awake or had gone to bed. The light from his lamp fell on his backside, so I couldn't see his face or gauge his eyes. His voice, however, seemed fully at ease.

After a moment, K slid the fusuma closed. My room sank back into darkness. Preferring my dreams to the darkness, I again closed my eyes. The next moment it was morning. When I thought back on the night before, it all seemed strange. I wondered if I hadn't been dreaming. At breakfast, I asked K. He confirmed that he had indeed opened the fusuma and called my name. When I asked him why, he didn't provide a clear answer. He asked me then if I'd been out of sorts lately and not sleeping well. I found his question odd.

Both of our lectures began at the same time that day, so we left the house together. The incident of the previous evening had been bothering me all morning, so along the way I pressed him again. However, I still received no satisfactory explanation. I asked him if he needed to tell me something, perhaps on the matter of late. He replied emphatically that such was not the case. I sensed reproach in his tone. He was reminding me that we'd agreed to speak of it no further. In such situations, K was defiantly proud. As I remembered this, I suddenly reflected on his use of the word "prepared." This single word, to which I'd paid little heed before, began suddenly to exert a strange power in my mind.

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I knew very well that K was decisive by nature. It was clear to me too that on the matter at hand he was wavering. In short, my familiarity with the usual gave me confidence in discerning the exception. However, as I ruminated further on his use of "prepared," my confidence faded and before long was utterly shaken. I began to think that maybe there was no exception. I began to suspect that, deep within, he was embracing some decisive measure, a measure that would banish at once the entirety of his doubt, anguish, and agitation. As I considered the word "prepared" in this new light, I was left unsettled. I wish now that I'd stepped back from my agitation, just for a moment, for a second impartial take on what he truly meant. Regrettably, I was half blind. I could only think that K was "prepared" to make his move with respect to the daughter. He was prepared, I convinced myself, to act decisively in pursuit of his passion.

A voice in my heart told me it was now or never. In response, I began to steel my resolve. I had to take things in hand, before K did, and before he even caught wind. I waited in the wings for my chance. However, two days passed, and then three, with no chance presenting itself. I sought to engage Okusan when K and

the daughter were both away. The days continued on, though, and if one was gone the other was there to impede me. There was never an opportune time. I was beside myself.

After a week, I could take it no longer and feigned illness. Okusan and her daughter, and even K himself, pressed me to get out of bed. I gave but cursory answers, and I stayed under my quilt till close to ten. I waited until K and the daughter were both gone, and the house was silent, and only then did I get out of bed. Okusan, on seeing me, asked first if I wasn't unwell. She advised me to get more rest and offered to bring a tray to my bedside. There was nothing physically wrong with me, and I had no intention now of going back to bed. I washed my face and took my meal in the hearth room as usual. Okusan sat on the other side of the long brazier and served me. Sitting there with bowl in hand, something between breakfast and lunch, my thoughts were fixed on how to state my case. As such, I can well imagine I did look a little unwell.

I finished eating and started a smoke. I didn't make to get up, so Okusan too was obliged to remain. She called the maidservant to clear away my dining tray. Then she added water to the iron kettle and wiped down the rim of the brazier, keeping me company as she did so. I asked if she had any particular plans for the day. She said she didn't, then asked in return why I'd wanted to know. I replied that there was a matter on which I'd hoped we could talk. She looked at me and asked what it was. She asked with a casual air, unaware of the gravity of my feelings, and I struggled a bit with how next to proceed.

Having no other recourse, I beat around the bush for a time before finally asking if K had said anything to her of late. "Regarding what?" she asked in return as though caught off guard. Before I could answer, she followed with a second question. "Did he say something to you?"

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"No," I replied. I had no intention of conveying K's confession to her. As soon as I spoke, though, I felt I was wrong in deceiving her. Having no other recourse, I restated my answer. I told her there was nothing in particular he'd asked me to convey, that my matter of concern was not about K. Accepting this, she waited on me to continue. There was now no going back. "Okusan, I'd like your daughter's hand," I said without further hesitation. This didn't seem to surprise her as much as I'd thought it would. Even so, she was momentarily speechless. She studied my face in silence. Having said what I'd said, I was in no position to fret over her scrutiny. "Please," I said, "I beseech you. Let me take her as my wife." Okusan, with her experience of years, was more composed than I was. "I don't see why not, but isn't this rather sudden?" she replied. "Sudden is what I want," I blurted back in return. My answer was met with a smile. "Are you sure you've thought this through?" she asked me again to gauge my resolve. I answered emphatically that however sudden my supplication might seem, my thought process was nothing if not deliberate.

Some degree of exchange followed, but I've forgotten now what was said. Okusan was not your typical female. She spoke decisively like a man, and this was a saving grace in situations such as this. "Very well then, you may take her," she said. "In fact, it's presumptuous of me to say you may take her. Please be good enough to take her. As you know, her situation is unfortunate, with her father no longer with us." She ended thus in entreating me.

Our discussion was simple and clear-cut. From start to finish, it lasted no more than fifteen minutes. Okusan brought forth no caveats. There was no need to consult with relations. It would suffice to notify them later. Her daughter's acceptance, she assured me, went without saying. On this point, as an educated man, I was more wont to stand on protocol. I wasn't concerned with relations, but I advised that it would be proper to discuss with her daughter and receive explicit agreement. Okusan replied that this was unnecessary. She was not committing to anything to which her daughter might object.

Back in my room, reflecting on how easily things had gone, it struck me as almost surreal. Doubts even entered my mind. Was all of this duly settled? At the same time, I knew that my future fortune, for the most part, had now been decided. I felt as though renewed to my core.

Around noon I went back to the hearth room and asked Okusan when she intended to tell her daughter. Okusan saw no urgency. As long as she herself knew, the matter was settled. At this point, Okusan struck me as the more masculine one of us, and I prepared to withdraw. As I did so, she stopped me. If I wished it to be soon, she would tell her daughter today when she returned home from her lessons. I told her I thought this best and then went back to my room. However, sitting there silently at my desk as the two of them talked in private, I decided on further reflection, would be too much to take. I put on my hat and headed out. At the bottom of the hill, I once again met the daughter. Not knowing what had transpired, she was surprised to see me. I removed my hat and greeted her. She asked with a curious look if I was better already. "I am better, much better," I answered before bearing off briskly toward Suidōbashi.

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I made my way through Sarugakuchō, came out on the boulevard at Jinbōchō, and then headed toward Ogawamachi. Usually, when I strolled these environs it was in search of used books, but on that particular day I felt no interest in hand-worn tomes. All the while I walked, my mind was back at the house. I relived my conversation of the morning with Okusan. Then I imagined the scene playing out between her and her daughter. These two sets of thoughts, in a sense, were the driving force of my feet. Then from time to time, unwittingly, I would stop in my tracks in the middle of the street. About now, I would think, Okusan must be talking to her daughter. Again later, I thought that they must by now have finished.

As I continued on, I crossed Mansei Bridge, ascended the hill at Myōjin, topped the Hongō Heights, descended Kiku Hill, and finally made my way down into the Koishikawa valley. The extent of my walk drew a circle through three districts, albeit a far from perfect one. All the while on this long walk, I gave hardly a thought to K. When I think back now and ask myself why, I have no answer. All I can say is that it still strikes me as odd. I can tell myself that I was simply overwrought by events at hand, but even at that my conscience should have intervened.

It was only after I returned home, when I slid open the latticework door and made my way from the entry hall to my own room, passing through K's room in the usual way, that my conscience reawakened. K was at his desk, reading as always. And as always, he raised his eyes from his book to regard me. However, he didn't give his standard greeting, asking if I had just now returned. Instead, he asked if I was better, and if I'd been out to see the doctor. In that moment, I wanted to prostrate myself before him and ask his

forgiveness. The impulse to do so, at the time, was by no means lacking in intensity. Had the two of us stood alone in the wilderness, I'd surely have followed my conscience and apologized to him then and there. However, there were others in the house with us, and their presence served to hold me in check. Regrettably, I remained in check forevermore.

K and I were together again at dinner. K seemed lost in his own thoughts. Unaware, he in no way regarded me with suspicion. Okusan, also unaware, was in higher spirits than usual. I alone knew everything. My dinner went down like lead. On that occasion, the daughter didn't join us at the table as usual. When Okusan called her, she would only answer from the next room that she was coming. K seemed to find their exchange curious. He finally asked Okusan if something was amiss. Okusan, with a glance my way, answered that her daughter must be feeling abashed. K found this all the more curious, and proceeded to ask what had made her feel abashed. Okusan looked my way with a grin.

On my arrival at the table, I could surmise from Okusan's expression how things had gone. However, having her tell K, by way of explanation, with me there present, would have been excruciating. Okusan was not a woman to mince words, and I didn't put it past her to do so, so I sat there on pins and needles. Fortunately, K reverted to his previous reticence. Okusan, though in a cheerful mood, in the end refrained from offering up the discussion I so dreaded. I returned to my room with a sigh of relief. However, I was compelled to wrestle with the problem of how to deal with K going forward. In my heart, I conjured up myriad justifications to defend myself before him, but none seemed adequate. Spineless as I was, I grew loath to explain myself at all.