

Sanshirō – Chapter 5

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

As Sanshirō walked through the gate, the soaring bush clover plant that he remembered from his prior visit was casting a dark shadow over its own roots. The shadow crept along the ground until it disappeared into the thicket. From within, it seemed to rise up and fill the space behind the overlapping leaves. Such was the intensity of the sunlight that struck its outer surface from the front. Next to the wash basin was a nanten plant, also grown extraordinarily high. Three stems wrestled each other on their way up. Their topmost leaves were above the bathroom window.

A section of the veranda was visible between the bush clover and the nanten plant. Starting by the nanten, the veranda cut an angle as it ran deeper into the property. Its furthest extremity was obscured by the bush clover, which shielded it from in front. Yoshiko was seated on the veranda in the bush clover's shade.

Sanshirō stopped beside the bush clover. Yoshiko rose from the veranda. Her feet were on a flat stone. Sanshirō found himself surprised anew at her height.

“Welcome.”

As before, she addressed Sanshirō as though she'd been expecting him. Sanshirō remembered their meeting at the hospital. He continued around the bush clover and approached the veranda.

“Have a seat.”

Sanshirō sat down as directed, still with his shoes on. Yoshiko fetched a seating cushion from inside.

“Use this.”

Sanshirō put the cushion down and reseated himself. Since walking through the gate, he hadn't uttered a word. This unassuming girl simply spoke her mind to him, without the least expectation of an answer. Sanshirō imagined himself in the presence of a guileless queen. One simply followed orders. No flattery was required in return. Even a single word, spoken to acknowledge her intentions, would have instantly broken the spell. He was comfortable following her lead, like a mute servant. Yoshiko, who was child-like herself, was treating him as a child in turn. However, Sanshirō felt not the slightest offense to his pride.

“Did you come to see my brother?” Yoshiko asked next.

He hadn't come to see Nonomiya. Then again, he hadn't not come to see Nonomiya. Sanshirō didn't really know why he was there.

“Is Nonomiya-san still at the university?”

“Yes. He doesn't come home until late in the evening.”

Sanshirō knew this. He struggled with what to say next. He saw a paint set and a partly finished watercolor work on the veranda.

“Are you learning to paint?”

“Yes, I enjoy it.”

“Who’s your teacher?”

“I’m not good enough yet to take a teacher.”

“Can I see?”

“This? It’s not done yet.” She showed him what she’d painted so far. It was a painting of their garden. The sky, the persimmon tree in the neighboring yard, and the bush clover were finished. The persimmon tree was drawn in an intense red.

“It’s quite well done,” Sanshirō commented as he looked at the painting.

“It is?” Yoshiko seemed a bit surprised. It was genuine surprise. Her words were not at all affected or forced like Sanshirō’s.

At this point Sanshirō could neither withdraw nor defend his complement. Either course would only invite Yoshiko’s contempt. Still looking at the painting, he flushed inwardly in embarrassment.

From the veranda he surveyed the living room. All was quiet. It seemed that the house was empty, both the hearth room and the kitchen.

“Has your mother returned to the country?”

“Not yet, but she’ll probably leave before long.”

“Is she here?”

“She’s out shopping.”

“Is it true that you’ll be going to live with Satomi-san?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Why? -- Only because there was talk of it the other day at Professor Hirota’s.”

“We haven’t decided yet. It’s possible, but it still depends.”

Sanshirō was closing in on his topic of interest.

“Have Nonomiya-san and Satomi-san know each other for long?”

“Yes. They’re friends.”

Sanshirō wondered about the nature of their friendship. Just a casual male-female friendship seemed unlikely. However, he had no way to probe this further.

“I hear that Professor Hirota taught Nonomiya-san.”

“Yes.”

Her short affirmations impeded the flow of conversation.

“How do you feel about lodging at the Satomi place?”

“Me? I suppose I wouldn’t mind it. But I hate to impose on Mineko’s older brother.”

“She has an older brother?”

“Yes. He graduated the same year as my brother.”

“Then he’s also a scientist?”

“No, he graduated from the college of law. There was also an eldest brother, who was a friend of Professor Hirota, but he passed away at an early age, so now there’s only Kyōsuke.”

“And their parents?”

“They have none.” Yoshiko laughed lightly, as though the idea of Mineko having parents was somehow absurd. Apparently they’d passed away years before, and Yoshiko had no memory of them.

“That’s how Mineko is acquainted with Professor Hirota then?”

“Yes. They say that her eldest brother was very close to the professor. And Mineko is interested in English, so she sometimes goes to him for lessons.”

“Does Satomi-san visit you here?”

Without his noticing, Yoshiko had resumed her watercolor work. She seemed fully comfortable with his presence, and she was more talkative when painting.

“Mineko?” While asking, she shaded in the thatched roof below the persimmon tree. “It’s a little dark, don’t you think?” She held it out for him to see.

“Yes, it’s too dark.” This time Sanshirō answered her honestly.

Yoshiko wetted her brush and dabbed the dark area. “She does come over.” She finally returned to Sanshirō’s question.

“Often?”

“Fairly often.” Yoshiko’s attention was back on her drawing paper. Since she’d resumed her painting, Sanshirō found the pace of their conversation comfortable.

Yoshiko was quiet for a spell as she focused on her painting and worked carefully to thin down the dark shading of the thatched roof. Unfortunately, she applied too much water, and her technique with the brush was unpracticed. In the end, the dark color diffused in all directions, turning her sweet red persimmons the color of the shade-dried tart variety. She rested her brush hand, stretched her arms, and craned her neck back to gaze at the work from a distance. Finally she said in a low voice, “It’s a lost cause.”

It really was. There was no saving it. Sanshirō felt bad for her. “Set this one aside and try again.”

Still facing her painting, she looked at him from the corner of her eye. The eye was large and moist. Sanshirō pitied her sincerely.

All of a sudden she laughed. “I’m an idiot. Two hours gone to waste.” With that, she wiped out her painting with thick strokes across and down. Then she emphatically closed the lid of her paint set.

“Enough of that. Come inside. I’ll make tea.” She stepped up into the living room as she spoke.

Sanshirō, reluctant to take off his shoes, remained seated on the veranda. Inwardly, he found it most curious that she should suddenly offer him tea after all this time. He had no intention of amusing himself over her failure at decorum, but he couldn’t help feeling a sense of exhilaration as she suddenly sprang into motion. It wasn’t the sense one typically feels when interacting with a member of the opposite sex.

He could hear voices from the hearth room. No doubt the maidservant had been home. Finally, the fusuma screen slid open, and Yoshiko appeared with the tea service. As he watched her approach, Sanshirō was struck by the extraordinary femininity of her facial features.

Yoshiko prepared his tea and brought it to the veranda. Then she seated herself in the room on the tatami. Sanshirō had thought to return home, but he didn’t mind staying a while longer in her company. At the hospital he’d made her self-conscious by observing her too closely and had hastily taken his leave. Today was different. They took the opportunity to converse further over their tea, he on the veranda and she in the living room. After touching on various subjects, Yoshiko asked him a curious question. She wanted to know what he thought of her older brother Nonomiya. On first blush this seemed like a simple question that a child might ask, but Yoshiko had something deeper in mind. An intellectual, passionate about research, is prone to research everything in a detached and objective manner. When subjective human feelings enter the mix, like and dislike are their only possible forms. The researcher mindset is thus a burden. Her brother was a scientist, so he’d placed her off limits. If he were to study her, the more he did so the less he would care for her, and that would make him callous. In fact, he did care for her deeply, despite being an ardent

researcher. When she thought of it this way, she concluded that there was no nobler man than her brother in all of Japan.

Sanshirō followed the logic of her reasoning, but he also felt it was somehow flawed. He mulled it over but couldn't put his finger on what was wrong. In the end, he didn't voice any critique of her thinking. Privately though, it bothered him greatly that as a boy he was too timid to challenge the reasoning of a mere girl. At the same time, he could appreciate now that Tōkyō schoolgirls were not to be taken lightly.

Sanshirō returned to his lodgings with newfound respect and affection for Yoshiko. A postcard had arrived. "Going to see the chrysanthemum dolls around one tomorrow afternoon. Come join us at Professor Hirota's place. Mineko."

The writing resembled that that he'd seen on the envelope protruding from Nonomiya's pocket. He examined it several times over.

The next day was a Sunday. Sanshirō set out for Nishikatamachi as soon as he finished lunch. He was wearing a new uniform, and his shoes were finely polished. As he entered the quiet lane and stopped in front of Professor Hirota's place, he could hear the sound of voices.

On entering through the main gate, the garden was immediately on the left, so one could bypass the entryway and reach the living room veranda directly via means of the garden path. As Sanshirō found the gap in the hawthorn hedge and reached to unlatch the wooden gate, he could discern clearly now a conversation from the garden. The voices belonged to Nonomiya and Mineko.

"Anyone who tries will just fall to earth and die." This was Nonomiya's voice.

"I think it's better to die than to never have tried." This was Mineko's answer.

"The only fitting end for such daredevils is a crash from the heights."

"You're terrible!"

Sanshirō opened the gate. Nonomiya and Mineko, who were standing in the middle of the garden, both looked his way. Nonomiya greeted him in his usual manner with a "Hey!" and a nod. He was sporting a new brown fedora. Mineko asked when the postcard had arrived. They didn't continue their conversation.

The master of the house was seated on the veranda in western dress, smoking with a philosophical air. In his hand was a foreign periodical. Yoshiko was next to him. She had both hands planted behind her and was propping herself away from the house at an angle, extending her legs and gazing down at her thick straw sandals. -- It seemed they'd all been waiting on his arrival.

The professor tossed his periodical aside. "Shall we go, then? You've finally coerced me into an outing."

"We applaud your fortitude," Nonomiya replied.

The two young ladies exchanged glances and discreet grins. As they left single file from the garden, Mineko remarked from behind Yoshiko, “You really are tall!”

“A beanpole,” Yoshiko replied simply. When they came side by side at the house gate she explained, “That’s why I always wear straw sandals.”

As Sanshirō was following out the gate, the upstairs shōji suddenly opened. Yojirō came out to the railing. “Are you off?” he asked.

“Yes. Are you coming?”

“Not me. What’s the point of gazing on crafted chrysanthemums? Foolishness.”

“Come on. What’s the point of staying in the house?”

“I’m writing an essay. It’s an important piece of work. No time for outings.”

Sanshirō laughed as though greatly surprised and set off after the other four, who were already well down the narrow lane and approaching the broad avenue. The scene formed by this group, as he watched them moving under the vast sky, made him feel that his present life was of much greater significance than his previous life in Kumamoto. Of the three worlds he’d considered earlier, the second and third were manifested in the scene before him. Half of the scene lay in shadow, and half was bright, like a field of flowers. In Sanshirō’s mind, the two halves meshed together into a harmonious whole. Furthermore, he felt himself being woven into this fabric as a natural matter of course. There was something, though, that didn’t fit. Something that made him anxious. He thought this over as he walked. The immediate cause was in the conversation that Nonomiya and Mineko had been having in the garden. To clear the air and ease his mind, he decided to probe further into the background of their discussion.

The four of them arrived at the first corner. They stopped and looked back. Mineko held her hand up to shade her eyes.

Sanshirō caught up in under a minute. As he did, they continued on quietly. Finally, after a while, Mineko broke the silence. “You’re a scientist. That’s why you talk that way.” She was picking up on the earlier conversation with Nonomiya.

“Scientist or not, if you want to fly high then you have to devise a machine that’s equal to the task. Isn’t it obvious that thoughts need to come before action?”

“That’s fine for methodical types with no great passion for flight.”

“And it’s fine for any type who cares to stay alive.”

“Then you’re suggesting we should all stay safely on the ground? That seems rather dull.”

Nonomiya didn't respond, but instead turned to Professor Hirota. "There are a lot of female poets," he remarked with a grin.

"The great flaw in men is that they can never be true poets," the professor responded in a curious manner that left Nonomiya silent.

Yoshiko and Mineko began their own conversation, finally giving Sanshirō the opportunity to ask his question. "What were you two talking about?"

"Flying machines." Nonomiya answered off-handedly. Sanshirō felt like he'd been thwarted with some punchline from a comedy.

There was little in the way of further conversation. And they were too far into the thick of the crowd to converse at length. In front of the Ōgannon Temple they saw a beggar. He was prostrating himself to the ground and crying out incessantly, striving his utmost to garner sympathy. He occasionally lifted his gaze, showing a forehead powdered in dirt. No one gave him a second thought. The five of them passed by unconcerned. About ten meters further on, Professor Hirota suddenly turned and asked Sanshirō, "Did you give that beggar a coin?"

"I didn't." Sanshirō looked back and saw the beggar, now with his hands clasped beneath his dusty forehead, still crying in a loud voice.

"He doesn't inspire pity," Yoshiko added immediately.

"Why?" Nonomiya questioned his younger sister. His question carried no hint of reproach, only a sense of detached curiosity.

"It's his non-stop begging. It's ineffective if it's overdone." Mineko offered her opinion.

"Actually, he's chosen the wrong place." This time Professor Hirota weighed in himself. "There are too many people here. If you met that man on a lonely mountain, you'd be moved immediately to help him."

"On the other hand, he could wait there all day and not meet a soul," Nonomiya chuckled.

Sanshirō felt that their attitudes toward this beggar were somehow an affront to his long-nurtured notion of morality. He himself, however, had not been inclined to throw the beggar even a single sen as they'd passed. If the truth be told, he'd instead felt a growing sense of unease. Reflecting on this truth, it occurred to him that it was the other four who were sincere to their own feelings. They were people who had lived and breathed the air of this vast city, where sincerity to oneself was standard fare.

As they moved on, the crowd grew thicker. After a bit, they came across a lost child. It was a young girl of seven or so. She was crying as she ducked this way and that under people's sleeves, yelling all the while for her grandma. Everyone seemed moved by the sight. Some stopped in their tracks. Some spoke words of pity. However, no one intervened. The child drew attention and sympathy from all sides as she cried and searched for her grandmother. It was a curious situation.

“Another case of choosing the wrong place?” Nonomiya asked as he looked back after the child.

“An officer is certain to help her, so no one wants to get involved.” Professor Hirota explained.

“If she approached me, I’d take her to the police box,” Yoshiko replied.

“Then go after her and take her,” Nonomiya suggested.

“I don’t want to go after her.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Because there are so many others. How is it my job?”

“See, no one wants to get involved,” the professor said.

“See, she’s chosen the wrong place,” Nonomiya said. The two of them shared a laugh.

A sea of black heads was milling around the police box at the top of the Dangozaka slope. An officer had taken charge of the lost child.

“No worry, she’ll be fine now,” Mineko turned back to Yoshiko.

“Glad to see it.”

Looking down from the top of the hill, the main thoroughfare curved away like the tip of a katana blade. It was also decidedly narrow. As it curved around, the two-story buildings on its right side partially obscured the taller exhibition sheds on its left side. Further behind, numerous vertical banners fluttered on their tall masts. It seemed as though people were being drawn down into the valley. Those who went down intermingled with those scrambling up, forming a solid mass that filled the street. Toward the bottom of the valley, where the road seemed too narrow, the movement was uncanny. The disorderly movement of the writhing mass was enough to tire one’s eyes.

The professor gazed down from the top of the hill. “Can you believe this?” He looked like he wanted to go home. The other four followed from behind, carrying the professor down the slope with them. Part way down, where the road bent off and leveled a little, large exhibition sheds stood on both sides. They were fronted with reed screens and towered above the narrow road, making even the sky above seem cramped. They squeezed together so close that they darkened the road below. Within each shed were ticket takers who bellowed out at the top of their lungs. “Those voices aren’t human. They must be the voices of dolls,” the professor commented. They were, indeed, distinct from any normal human sound.

The party entered a shed on their left. They saw the attack of the Soga brothers. Gorō and Jūrō and General Yoritomo all wore similar cloaks of chrysanthemum flowers. Their faces and hands and feet were all carved from wood. Next was a scene in the snowy cold, with a young woman convulsing in pain. This too was constructed from a core frame grown over with flowers, their petals and leaves forming a flawless layer of clothing.

Yoshiko gazed intently at the dolls. The professor and Nonomiya found endless points for discussion. As they were discussing a unique method of chrysanthemum cultivation, Sanshirō was cut off by the other sightseers and separated from them by several meters. Mineko was even further ahead than Sanshirō. Most of the sightseers were merchant class folk. Educated sightseers were few and far between. Mineko stood in their midst and turned round. She craned her neck to look in Nonomiya's direction. Nonomiya had his right hand over the bamboo railing and was explaining something in earnest as he pointed at the chrysanthemum roots. Mineko turned forward again and was swept along by the crowd toward the exit. Sanshirō left the other three behind and pushed his way toward her through the throng.

Sanshirō finally made his way to Mineko and called her name. She was leaning against a handrail of green bamboo, and she turned her head just slightly to look his way. She didn't speak. Within the railing was a scene of Yōrō Falls. A round-faced man with a hatchet about his waist was stooping over the plunge basin, bottle gourd in hand. After seeing Mineko's face, Sanshirō paid no further notice to the objects beyond the railing.

"Are you alright?" he asked immediately. Mineko still said nothing. She fixed her dark eyes on his brow with a tired look. In that moment, Sanshirō recognized something profound in her handsomely contoured eyes. Part of what he recognized was a weariness of the spirit. The flesh was also slack, all but exposing an inner anguish. Sanshirō forgot that he'd been waiting on her answer and lost himself entirely in the space between her pupils and her eyelids. As he did so, she broke her silence.

"Let's go outside."

Her pupils and lids seemed to draw together. As they converged, a conviction grew within Sanshirō that they had to get out of there for Mineko's sake. Just as his conviction peaked, she turned away, released the handrail, and moved toward the exit. Sanshirō followed immediately after.

Once the two of them were outside, Mineko stooped and pressed her right hand against her downturned forehead. The crowds milled about them. Sanshirō drew his mouth close to her ear. "Are you alright?"

She began moving through the swell of sightseers toward Yanaka. Sanshirō, of course, accompanied her. Half a block on, she stopped in the midst of the crowd.

"Where are we?"

"This way leads to Tennōji, in Yanaka. Home is the opposite direction."

"I see. I'm really not feeling well ..."

Sanshirō felt pained as he stood there in the middle of the road, at a loss as to what he should do.

“Is there some place quiet?” she asked him.

Yanaka and Sendagi formed a valley at their common border, and a small stream ran through the bottom of the valley. Following the stream with the town to one’s left led to open fields. The stream flowed due north. Sanshirō had often walked this stream, both the far side and the near side, since his arrival in Tōkyō. He was intimately familiar with the area. Mineko had stopped near a stone bridge, where the stream cut through Yanaka and flowed on toward Nezu.

“Can you walk another block or so?” he asked her.

“Yes, let’s go.”

The two of them crossed the stone bridge and turned left. They walked twenty meters to the end of an alleyway that led to a private residence. Just before the gate, they crossed back to the near side on a plank bridge and continued upstream by the water’s edge. They were out in the open now, away from the crowd.

As they emerged into the quiet of autumn, Sanshirō suddenly felt talkative. “How are you feeling? Do you have a headache? Maybe it was the crowds. Some of those men viewing the dolls were quite vulgar -- did they do something to upset you?”

Mineko didn’t answer. Finally, she lifted her gaze from the stream and looked at him. The spirit in her well-formed eyes had rekindled itself. Sanshirō was relieved just by her look.

“Thank you. I’m feeling better,” she answered.

“Would you like to rest?”

“Yes.”

“Can you walk a little further?”

“Yes.”

“If you can, let’s walk a little more. It’s not very nice here. Up ahead is a good place to rest.”

“Okay.”

They walked a hundred meters further to the next bridge. This one was nothing more than an old plank, not very wide, that had been laid over the stream. Sanshirō crossed with broad steps, and Mineko followed. She stepped lightly, in her usual manner, as though treading on solid ground. Her feet were steady as she placed one before the other. She didn’t feign female vulnerability, and thus offered no pretext for chivalrous assistance.

In the distance was a thatched hut. Beneath its roof was a solid wall of red. Drawing closer, they saw that the red was chili peppers hung out to dry. At this distance, where the peppers were just discernible, Mineko stopped.

“Beautiful!” As she spoke, she sat down on the grass. The grass grew only on a narrow strip at the edge of the stream. It was no longer green as in the height of summer. Mineko showed no concern for her colorful kimono.

“Can you walk a little further?” Sanshirō remained standing and pressed her a little.

“No, thank you. This is far enough.”

“You’re still not feeling well?”

“I’m feeling worn down.”

Sanshirō joined her by seating himself in the coarse grass, about a meter away. The small stream flowed by below their feet. It was shallow in the dry of autumn. A wagtail had lighted on an exposed corner of stone protruding from the water. Sanshirō gazed into the current. The water gradually clouded, and he saw that a farmer was rinsing daikon upstream. Mineko gazed into the distance. Beyond the stream was a wide field. At the far end of the field were woods, and over the woods hung the sky. The hue of the sky was slowly shifting.

In what had been a monotonous canopy, a number of new colors intruded. The transparent indigo background gradually faded from sight as white clouds assembled themselves leisurely in front. Then the assembled clouds melted and dispersed. After a while, the distinction between background and foreground was lost in a languid blur. A touch of yellow spread itself softly across the entire surface.

“The colors in the sky are muddied,” Mineko remarked.

Sanshirō diverted his gaze from the stream and looked up. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen such a sky, but it was the first time he’d heard the term “muddied” used to describe it. When he thought about it, there was no better term to describe this coloration. Before he could offer a response, Mineko continued.

“A heavy feeling. It looks like marble.”

Mineko narrowed her handsome eyelids and gazed into the heights. Then she quietly turned her gaze to Sanshirō, with her eyelids still narrowed, and asked, “It does look like marble, don’t you think?”

Sanshirō couldn’t help but agree. “Yes, it does look like marble.”

Mineko remained silent. After a bit, Sanshirō spoke. “Under a sky like this, the heart feels heavy but the spirit feels light.”

“How do you mean?” Mineko asked in response.

Sanshirō couldn't explain what he meant. Without answering, he added, "This sky looks like it's comfortably dreaming."

"Things seems to move, yet hold their ground." Mineko had directed her gaze back toward the distant sky.

Calls from the chrysanthemum doll show, drawing in sightseers, occasionally reached the two of them where they sat.

"Amazing how far they carry."

"Impressive that they can call like that from morning to night." As he said this, Sanshirō suddenly thought of the other three that they'd left behind. He was going to say something, but Mineko continued their conversation.

"It's their trade. No different from the beggar at Ōgannon."

"Could it be that they've chosen the wrong place?" Sanshirō enjoyed a laugh at his own uncharacteristic joke. Professor Hirota's comments on the beggar had struck him as quite unusual.

"The Professor's known for making remarks like that." Mineko said this lightly as though reminding herself. Then her tone suddenly took on passion as she added, "Sitting out here, in this place, we'll make do just fine." This time it was Mineko who laughed at her own remark.

"Just like Nonomiya-san said, we could wait here all day and not meet a soul."

"Perfect, isn't it." She replied without hesitation, but then followed with, "Since we're not really seeking alms." Her latter statement seemed intended to ensure that her former statement not be misconstrued.

At this point a stranger suddenly appeared. He'd emerged from the shadows of the house with the drying chili peppers and apparently crossed the stream just above them. He moved nearer to where the two of them were sitting. He wore a suit and sported a beard, and he looked similar in age to Professor Hirota. As he drew up even, he turned and glared straight at them. His look was clearly one of strong disapproval. Sanshirō grew uncomfortable and was ready to leave. Finally, the man continued on his way.

Watching the man walk away, Sanshirō said, as if realizing for the first time, "Professor Hirota and Nonomiya-san must be looking for us."

Mineko, for her part, seemed unconcerned.

"Let them look, then. We're just two big lost children."

"That's why they'll be looking for us." Sanshirō reiterated his previous conclusion.

Mineko replied with even more indifference than before. "If one doesn't care to get involved, then what trouble could we be?"

“Who’s that? You mean Professor Hirota?”

Mineko didn’t answer.

“You mean Nonomiya-san?”

Mineko still didn’t answer.

“Are you feeling better now? If you’re better, then shall we head back?”

Mineko looked at Sanshirō. Sanshirō, who was getting up, sat back down on the grass. In that moment, Sanshirō realized that he was no match for this young lady. At the same time, he knew too that she could see right through him, and this knowledge cost him some degree of dignity.

“Lost children.” She looked at him and repeated these words. Sanshirō didn’t respond.

“Do you know the English term for lost children?”

The question caught Sanshirō by surprise, and he couldn’t say whether he knew or not.

“Would you like me to tell you?”

“Please.”

“It’s ‘stray sheep’ -- Do you know what I mean?”

Sanshirō never had the right answer in situations like this. Later, when the chance had passed and he could think calmly, he would reflect with regret on the things he wished he’d said. Nevertheless, he was too sincere to circumvent this inevitable regret. He couldn’t just spew out an offhand answer with feigned confidence, so instead he remained silent. Yet he was keenly aware of the inadequacy in his silence.

He felt he understood what “stray sheep” meant. At the same time, he didn’t understand. His hesitancy was less about the meaning of these words, but rather about the meaning in Mineko’s use of these words. To push back a little, Sanshirō remained silent and looked directly into her eyes.

Mineko suddenly grew serious. “Do I come across as affected?”

In her tone was a sense of exculpation. Sanshirō was struck by an unexpected sensation. Until now he’d been wandering in a mist, wishing he could see clearly. Her words had cleared away the mist, and before him was a woman in plain view. The clarity left him dissatisfied.

He preferred Mineko as she’d seemed before, intriguing and mysterious, clear and yet muddy, like the sky above their heads that defied description. However, he knew that no clever words on his part could restore what was lost.

Mineko said abruptly, “We should be going.” There was no bitterness in her voice. Her tone was modest, as though resigned to the fact that her spell over Sanshirō had been broken.

The sky had changed again. A wind had blown up from the distance. Under the weak light that fell on it, the field looked cold and barren. The dampness of the ground, rising up through the grass, brought a chill. Sanshirō wondered how they’d stayed in this place for so long. If he’d been alone he certainly would have moved on sooner. Mineko too -- or maybe Mineko would have stayed.

“It’s getting a little cold. Let’s get off the grass so we don’t catch a chill. Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, I’m much better now,” she answered clearly and quickly rose to her feet. As she rose, she repeated slowly and deliberately, as though to herself, “Stray sheep.” Sanshirō, of course, offered no reply.

Mineko pointed in the direction from which the man in the suit had appeared earlier. If there was a path, then she’d like to go that way and pass by the chili peppers. The two of them set off in that direction. Behind the thatched-roof house there was indeed a narrow path, about a meter in width. Halfway down the path, Sanshirō asked her, “Is Yoshiko going to come live with you?”

“Why do you ask?” she asked in response with a wry smile.

As Sanshirō struggled for an answer, a muddy patch appeared in the path. The ground was low there, and water had collected in the depression. In the middle was a stone that someone had grabbed from nearby and placed as a step. Sanshirō jumped straight across, without the aid of the step. Then he turned back to Mineko. Mineko planted her right foot on top of the stone. The stone was not secure, and she had to use both her legs and her arms for balance. Sanshirō extended his hand to her.

“Take hold.”

“I’m fine,” said with a smile. While his hand was out, she recovered her balance but remained on the stone. Sanshirō withdrew his hand. Mineko shifted her weight to her right foot and leapt deftly over the puddle onto her left. Determined to clear the mud, she jumped too hard and stumbled forward from the excess momentum. She stopped herself with both hands against Sanshirō’s arms.

“Stray sheep,” she whispered again to herself. She was so near that Sanshirō could feel her breath.