

# Peculiar Sounds

Natsume Sōseki – 1911

## Part One

Just as I'd felt I was dozing off, I found myself awake. A curious sound was emanating from the next room. At first, I had no idea what sort of sound it was or where exactly it came from. As I listened further, though, my ears began to make sense of it. Someone, no doubt, was using a wasabi grater to slowly scrape down a daikon or such. I was convinced that was it. At the same time, I couldn't fathom why anyone, at this hour, would need to be grating a daikon in the adjoining room.

I've neglected to mention that I was in a hospital. The kitchen was a good ways off and down a floor, and that was where the cooks were. Preparation of food, of course, was not allowed in the rooms. Even sweets were forbidden. Why would anyone, then, be grating a daikon at this odd hour? It had to be something else, and my ears were deceiving me. Having reasoned thus, I was still at a loss to place or explain the sound.

Leaving it alone, I resolved to divert my thoughts to things more meaningful. This enigmatic sound, though, having once touched my ears, vexed me to no end. As long as it continued, its pulses agitating my eardrums, it demanded my attention. All else was quiet and still. The patients of this ward were by and large bedridden and, as if by unspoken consent, refrained from speaking. Whether they slept or were lost in thought, words were seldom spoken. Even as the nurses walked the halls, their slippers made no sound. In the midst of such silence, this odd reverberation, of something slowly and methodically scraped away, weighed on my mind.

I was in one half of a deluxe two-room suite that the hospital had repurposed into individual rooms. The auxiliary room, where the brazier would have been, had as one wall a partition that blocked it off from the bedroom. Set into the eastern wall of the six-mat bedroom were several meters of shelves and cabinetry, next to which was a fusuma of fibrous weave. The fusuma, if slid open, allowed easy access from one room to the other. Were I simply to fling it open, I'd know in an instant the goings on of the other room. The sound reaching my ears, of course, in no way warranted such gross breach of etiquette.

The summer season was upon us, and the veranda doors were kept open to air the rooms. The veranda had originally been built to run uninterrupted the full length of the wing. Later however, to afford the patients due privacy, hinged wooden doors had been installed, one between each pair of rooms. The doors were elegantly crafted, with fine wooden strips set crosswise over a base plank. Each morning, when it was time to sweep, the custodian would come up with his key and unlock these doors one by one as he worked his way along. I rose from my bed and stood on the threshold. The sounds in question seemed to originate

from just beyond the wooden door. There was a gap at the base of the door, but not enough to reveal anything.

From then on, this same sound was often repeated. On some occasions, it would carry to my ears for five or six minutes, while on other occasions it would break off after lasting but half so long. However, the opportunity to ascertain the nature of this sound never presented itself. The patient next door was a quiet fellow. From time to time he would call out softly in the night for the nurse. The nurse, admirably fulfilling her duty, when called once or twice would rouse herself and respond back in a gentle and comforting voice. She would then attend to the patient.

One day, as the doctor's rounds brought him to the next room, he seemed to remain longer than usual. After some time, a hushed conversation began. There were two or three voices, and their talk seemed somehow weighted and slow. Finally, the doctor spoke with words that carried clearly. "You just have to give it time. A quick recovery's not in the cards." Several days later, there were furtive comings and goings in said patient's room. They seemed to be taking great care in deference to the patient. Then the patient himself, like a shadow, was suddenly gone. Only one day later, a new name tag, scribed in customary white characters on a black background, adorned the door post. The patient had left the hospital, and that curious sound remained a mystery. By and by, I too left the hospital. My curiosity, with regard to that sound, faded away with the passage of time.

## Part Two

Three months hence I was readmitted to the same hospital. My room number differed by only one from my prior stay. I was one room to the west. I wondered who was now on the other side of the wall, in my prior place of residence. I listened all day for some indication but heard not a sound. The room was vacant. One room further down was the room from which that sound had emanated. I didn't know who might be in there now. My health took a precipitous turn for the worse. I'd been reflecting of late on my life, and those reflections now, in endless succession, assailed my mind. Wasabi graters, or other such similar things, found no room in my thoughts. I took more interest, rather, in the experiences of fellow patients whose fates mirrored my own. I asked the nurse how many of us were housed in these private rooms. She told me there were only three others. I asked if their conditions were grave. It seemed they were. Over the course of the next several days, I learned from her the nature of their ailments. One had esophageal cancer. Another had stomach cancer, and the final one stomach ulcers. None seemed long for this world, the nurse stated, lumping their fates in a single prognosis.

I passed time gazing at the delicate flowers of the begonia plant on my veranda. The intent was to buy a chrysanthemum, the fellow who brought me the begonia had explained. The vendor had wanted sixteen kan, and he'd offered him five. Five was out of the question, so he'd upped his offer to six, but still no doing. It was a bad year for chrysanthemums, on account of the rain, so prices were high. As I

remembered this story, I saw my mind's eye the temple fair, the boulevard packed with vendors, and the bustle of evening crowds.

In the end, the fellow with esophageal cancer was discharged. The fellow with stomach cancer, saying he'd made his peace and was ready to die, passed away with utmost grace. The fellow with ulcers grew worse over time. On some nights, as I lay awake, I could hear his attendant crushing ice at the east end of the hall. The patient died, and the sound of the ice was heard no more. I entered the following in my diary. -- "Of the three of us, two are now gone. With respect to the two who have passed, to live on seems, in some sense, an affront. The one had been nauseous and wretched continually. The sound had carried from one end of the hall to the other. These last several days he'd gone silent, and I'd imagined perhaps his nausea had subsided. In fact, as it turned out, he was simply too weak to produce any sound."

Thereafter, various patients came and went in turn. With the passing of days, my own condition improved. By and by, I began to stroll the wide hallways in slippared feet. As it happened, I came to be on speaking terms with a certain attendant nurse. One warm afternoon, to take some exercise after lunch, I took a potted daffodil to the sink to freshen its water. As I ran the spigot, the nurse approached, carrying teacups from her rooms that she'd come to wash. She greeted me in the usual manner, looked for a moment at the pot in my hands and the large bulb root that crowded its center, then lifted her gaze to view my face in profile. "Your complexion looks much better now than the last time." She was contrasting my appearance of three months ago with my appearance at present.

"By 'last time,' you mean you were attendant here then too?"

"Yes, just next door. I was caring for your neighbor at that time. You may not have known it."

This neighbor was the man in the room adjoining my own to the east, the source of that curious sound. I looked at the nurse. It was she who, when called to in the middle of the night, responded in that gentle voice and woke to attend her patient. I never would have guessed it. Though that sound had piqued my interest to no end at the time, I was not inclined now to ask after its nature. "I see." I replied simply and wiped the outside of my pot. As I was doing so, she suddenly broached a new subject, shifting her tone a bit.

"During those days, on occasion, we heard a peculiar sound from your room ..."

Feeling suddenly blindsided, I turned her way. She elaborated further.

"It was early mornings. Around six, I believe."

"Ah, that," I replied heartily, realizing now what she meant. "That was my Auto-Strop. I shave each morning. I have a safety razor, and I strop the blade to keep it sharp. I'm doing it even still. You're welcome to come and see for yourself."

The nurse simply voiced her surprise. As it turned out, the patient next door had taken great interest in the sound of that strop. He'd asked his nurse, on numerous occasions, what it could be. When she'd said she didn't know, he'd surmised that his neighbor, in better physical health than himself, was exercising each morning. He'd decided it was some sort of fitness contraption, and more than once had expressed his envy.

"Be that as it may, what was that sound from your side?"

"That sound from our side?"

"Yes. There was often this sound, like someone grating daikon, was there not?"

"Ah, that. That was cucumber. The patient complained of a burning sensation in his legs. He asked me to soothe them with cucumber juice, so I was often in there with cucumber and grater."

"So I wasn't entirely wrong, imagining the grating of daikon."

"True."

"It all fits now. -- Tell me, what was the patient's affliction?"

"Rectal cancer."

"Then his prospects were not at all good."

"I'm afraid not. He was taken back home, but he passed away shortly thereafter."

I returned silently to my own room. In my mind, I thought through the contrast between one man, now deceased, who'd vexed his neighbor with the sound of grated cucumber, and another man, now convalesced, who'd made his neighbor envious with the sound of his leather strop.