

Introduction

I

Natsume Sōseki, with whom the modern realistic novel in Japan reached its full maturity, was born Natsume Kinnosuke in the year 1867 in Tokyo. He later adopted the pen name of Sōseki, which replaced, as is the custom in Japan, his given name.

The Natsumes were a well-established bourgeois family, but after the Imperial Restoration of 1868 their fortunes declined rapidly. When Sōseki was born, his father was fifty-three and his mother forty. There were already other children in the family, all much older than Sōseki. Perhaps because the Natsumes felt they could not afford to bring up another boy, or perhaps because they were embarrassed at having a baby at their age, they soon gave the baby away to a childless couple whom they knew well. That Sōseki could never quite forgive his parents for having done this becomes clear in the novel. And in a reminiscence which he wrote shortly before his death, he has this to say:

I was born to my parents in their evening years. I was their youngest son. The story that my mother was ashamed of having a baby at her age I hear even now. . . . At any rate, I was sent soon afterward to a certain couple as their adopted son. . . . I was with them until the age of eight or nine, when one begins to understand things. There was some trouble between them, so it was arranged that I should be returned to my parents. . . . I did not know that I had come back to my own home and I went on thinking as I did before that my parents were my grandparents. Unsuspectingly I continued to call them "grandma" and "grandpa." They, on their part, thinking perhaps that it would be strange to change things suddenly, said nothing when I called them this. They did not pet me as parents do their youngest children. . . . I remember particularly that my father treated me rather harshly. . . . One night, the following incident took place. I was sleeping alone in a room when I was awakened by someone calling my name in a quiet voice. Frightened, I looked at the figure crouching by my bedside. It was dark, so I could not tell who it was. Being a child, I lay still and listened to what the person had to say. Then I realized that the voice belonged to our maid. In the darkness, the maid whispered into my ear: "These people that you think are your grandfather and

grandmother are really your father and mother. I am telling you this because recently I heard them saying that you must in some way have sensed that they were your parents, since you seemed to prefer this house to the other one. They were saying how strange it was. You musn't tell anybody that I told you this. Understand?" All I said at the time was "All right," but in my heart I was happy. I was happy not because I had been told the truth, but because the maid had been so kind to me.

But at least, Sōseki's parents cannot have prevented him from getting a decent enough early education, for he entered the University of Tokyo without difficulty and graduated from there in 1893 with a very good degree in English literature. In 1896 he was given an appointment at the Fifth National College at Kumamoto in Kyushu. In the same year he married Nakane Kyōko, whose father was then the Chief Secretary of the House of Peers. (When Sōseki in the novel refers to "the provinces" where he and his wife had lived, he means Kumamoto.) In 1900 the government sent him to England so that he might improve his knowledge of English. He went alone, and spent two unhappy years in London. Upon his return to Japan in 1903, he was appointed to the First National College in Tokyo and the University of Tokyo. In 1905 he published his first full-length novel, *I am a Cat* (*Wagahai wa neko de aru*). In 1907 he gave up his academic career, which he had never liked very much, to devote himself to writing. He died in 1916. In all he wrote a dozen novels, of which *Grass on the Wayside* (*Michikusa*), his only autobiographical novel, was the last to be completed.

By the time of his resignation from the university, Sōseki had won recognition as a novelist through the publication of two comic novels and a minor lyrical masterpiece, *Pillow of Grass* (*Kusamakura*), which he aptly called "a novel in the manner of a haiku." But it was after he stopped teaching that he began to write his most characteristic novels, which are without exception very somber, concerned for the most part with man's loneliness and his effort to escape from it. In *The Gate* (*Mon*), one of the most moving of these, the lonely hero goes to a Zen temple in an attempt to find solace in religion, but fails.

He had come to the gate and had asked to have it opened. The bar was on the other side and when he knocked, no one came. He heard a voice saying, "Knocking will do no good. Open it yourself." He stood there and wondered how he could open it. He thought clearly of a plan, but he could not find the strength to put it into effect. . . . He looked behind him at the path that had led him to the gate. He lacked the courage to go back. He then looked at the

great gate which would never open for him. He was never meant to pass through it. Nor was he meant to be content until he was allowed to do so. He was, then, one of those unfortunate beings who must stand by the gate, unable to move, and patiently wait for the day to end.

One Sunday shortly after he returns home from the temple, he goes to the local public bath and overhears two men discussing the weather. They have each heard a nightingale sing and agree that the song was still rather awkward and unpracticed. When he gets home he remembers to tell his wife about the nightingales. She looks at the sun streaming in through the glass window and says cheerfully, "How nice! Spring has finally come." The novel comes to an end as he replies, "Yes, but it will soon be winter again."

When we read the autobiographical *Grass on the Wayside*, we see how much of himself Sōseki had put into the heroes of the preceding novels.

II

Sōseki was a sick man when he wrote *Grass on the Wayside*. After 1910, when he very nearly died from stomach ulcers, he seems to have felt that death was not far away. He wrote the novel in 1915, when he was forty-eight; the following year, before he could complete *Light and Darkness* (*Meian*), he died.

The period dealt with in *Grass on the Wayside* is very short. It begins soon after the author's return from London in 1903 and ends as his career as a writer is about to begin. (*I am a Cat* was published in 1905.) Kenzō (the name Sōseki gives himself) is at this time in his middle thirties, and his wife in her middle twenties. It was then, presumably, that relations between Sōseki and his wife became strained and he began to be acutely conscious of his loneliness.

The novel has its shortcomings. It is not devoid of self-pity or naïveté, and it is so introspective that the reader may find it at times rather slow-moving. Nevertheless, it is all in all his most serious work. And of the countless number of autobiographical novels that have been written in Japan since the early 1900's, it is perhaps the most distinguished.

One of the most curious aspects of the history of modern Japanese fiction after the turn of the century is the important place occupied by the autobiographical novel, which was made fashionable by the so-called naturalists who flourished at about

the same time as Sōseki. In their attempt to introduce realism into the Japanese novel, these “naturalists” were inclined to regard the novel as a means of describing their own experiences, to think of it more or less as an extended essay form.

Sōseki’s conception of realism was not so literal, and much of what is most imaginative and daring in modern Japanese fiction is due largely to his example and influence. In his entire career, he wrote only one autobiographical novel. And when he did, he brought to the genre qualities which had never been seen in it before.

What *Grass on the Wayside* manages to avoid is the rather obvious lyricism of most Japanese autobiographical novels, their annoying reticence and vagueness. Its people are alive and refuse to get lost in the misty Japanese scene. No modern Japanese novelist before Sōseki ever wrote so movingly about his childhood, or created so real a woman as Kenzō’s wife. And Kenzō himself remains one of the most fully developed characters in Japanese fiction.

III

Perhaps I ought to say a few things about Japanese family relationships and obligations, since they form such an important part of the novel’s background.

The reader will see the ambivalence in Kenzō as he allows himself to become involved with the unpleasant Shimada, who was once his foster father but who now has no legal claim on him whatsoever. Of course, Kenzō is not so inhuman as to want to ignore entirely this man who had once taken care of him. This very human side to Kenzō’s feeling about Shimada, his wife and relatives cannot understand. They are more conventional than Kenzō, more legalistic in their attitude: as far as they are concerned, Kenzō, having ceased to be Shimada’s adopted son years ago, now owes him nothing. At the same time, they are more frightened of Shimada, for somewhere at the back of their minds is the fear that the law, with its sanction of Confucian principles in the matter of filial obligation, just may support Shimada’s claim. They are wrong, of course, and Kenzō knows this. But also, in the guilt that he feels toward Shimada, there is a residue of Confucian morality.

Adoption of the sort described in the novel has for long been a regularly practiced custom in Japan. Indeed, it has been about as

important a part of Japanese life, as much of an accepted institution, as marriage. So in giving away Kenzō to Shimada, his parents were not being quite as heartless as it may seem. Or it may be more correct to say that though they were in effect being unkind to their youngest child, they were not doing anything that society would have disapproved of. Formally speaking, Kenzō's father was not getting rid of an unwelcome addition to his already large family, but was granting a favor to a subordinate to whom he, as his superior and past benefactor, owed certain obligations. The subsequent annulment of Kenzō's adoption was very much like a divorce, and an extremely serious affair. And when we remember that Japan is a country where the place of old people in society depends largely on their identity as parents, we can imagine what a blow it was to Shimada.

Lastly, Kenzō's frustration at being surrounded by helpless relatives has to be seen in the light of the great importance attached by the Japanese to their concept of family. His capacity as head of his own household is formally no more important than his membership in the family into which he was born, and as the most successful member, he must assume some responsibility for the welfare not only of his brother and sister but of their respective households too. Such responsibility would seem particularly onerous to a modern individualist like Kenzō, for whom "family" meant his wife and children, and who wanted most of all to be allowed to go his own way.

IV

The original title of this novel is *Michikusa*, the literal meaning of which is "grass on the road." But when used idiomatically, as in *michikusa o kuu*, "to eat grass on the road," it means to waste one's time or to be distracted. The title seems to suggest, therefore, that the novel is about distractions. But perhaps Sōseki intended it to be understood in another sense, that his private life had been that of an outsider, like a weed growing beside the main road.

The book is divided into one hundred and two chapters. This is because, like so many other famous modern Japanese novels, it was first serialized in a newspaper—in this case the *Asahi shimbun*.

EDWIN McCLELLAN

*E*XACTLY how many years, Kenzō wondered, had he been away from Tokyo? He had left the city to live in the provinces and then had gone abroad. There was novelty in living in his native city once more; but there was some loneliness in it too.

The smell of the alien land that he had left not so long ago seemed still to linger about his body. He detested it, and told himself he had to get rid of it. That he was also rather proud of it, that it gave him a certain sense of accomplishment, he did not know.

Dutifully, and with the uneasiness of the recently returned exile, Kenzō would walk day after day from his house in Komagome to his place of work and back.

A light rain was falling steadily the day it happened. With only an umbrella to shield him from the rain, he was walking at the usual time, along the usual route, toward Hongō. It was just beyond the rickshaw stand that the unexpected encounter took place. The other man had presumably come up the hill behind the Nezu Gongen shrine. He was perhaps twenty yards away when Kenzō, happening to raise his eyes, first saw him approaching. Quickly Kenzō looked away.

He wanted to pretend he had not recognized him. But as the man came nearer, he felt he had to look at him again to make sure he had not been mistaken. He looked, and found the man staring at him.

The street was quiet at the time. Through the fine, almost invisible drizzle they could see each other clearly. Again Kenzō averted his glance and walked on. The man stood absolutely still and stared in silence as Kenzō walked past. Kenzō noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that with every step he took the man's face moved a little.

Kenzō could not have been any more than twenty when they had last met. For fifteen, perhaps sixteen years, they had not seen each other.

In that time, his own position in life had changed so much. He saw himself as he was now, with his moustache and bowler hat; am I, he wondered, the same person as that young innocent fellow with the close-cropped hair? But the man in the street seemed hardly to have changed at all. Surely he must be at least sixty-five by now. But his hair was as black as ever. And he was still walking about hatless, as he always had done. The lack of physical change in him made Kenzō strangely apprehensive.

Kenzō had not wanted to see him, of course. And he had always hoped that if by some chance they were to run into each other, the man would at least appear more prosperous than himself. But anyone would have immediately guessed that he was not in easy circumstances. His not wearing a hat—well, that could be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy. It was his shabby clothes that bothered Kenzō. Even his umbrella was made of some cheap, heavy-looking sateen. At best he seemed an ageing, lower middle-class townsman engaged in some dull occupation.

All that day Kenzō tried in vain to forget him. Even at home that evening he felt pursued by those staring eyes. He said nothing about it to his wife, however. It was always his habit when upset to say very little to her. She, too, when her husband was in this sort of mood, would say no more than was necessary.

2

THE next day Kenzō walked up the same street at the same hour. And again the next day. For five days, like an unfailing machine, he went back and forth. But the man did not appear.

Then, on the sixth day, he suddenly appeared once more, like a threatening shadow from the hill behind the shrine. The hour was the same, and they would pass each other almost on the same spot.

Kenzō sensed the man's desire to accost him and took care not to slacken his steady pace. This time the man was more bold. With a terrible concentration he fixed his dull, tired eyes on

Kenzō. He was watching for an opening, for some sign of relenting in Kenzō. Kenzō walked past, with all the nonchalance he could muster. He thought fearfully, this is only the beginning. That evening again, he could not bring himself to mention the man to his wife.

When he married her—which was about seven or eight years ago—he had long ceased to have anything to do with him. Besides, they had married in the provinces, so she could hardly have had any opportunity of meeting him. Of course, she might have heard about him from relatives or from Kenzō himself. But the question of whether or not his wife knew of his existence was really of little importance.

There was one incident, however, which had taken place after their marriage, that he remembered periodically. One day about five years ago, when he was still working in the provinces, a thick envelope addressed to him in a woman's hand was placed on his desk at the office. With some uneasiness he began to read the letter. It was incredibly long—twenty pages packed with very small handwriting—and after reading about a fifth of it he gave up. He took it home with him and handed it to his wife. He felt obliged to explain to her who this woman was that had written him such a long letter. And in so doing he could not avoid bringing the man into the picture.

He remembered quite clearly now that it had been necessary then to mention him. But he was aware of his own capriciousness, and he had no notion now of how much he might have told her. No doubt his wife would remember exactly what he had said at the time. But he was not inclined at this point to ask her how much she remembered. At any rate, he thoroughly disliked having to think of the woman who had written the letter in association with the man. For to think of them together was to bring back the unhappy past.

Fortunately he was too busy to allow himself to remain preoccupied with such matters. He changed his clothes as soon as he got home and immediately went into his tiny study. The thought of all the work that was waiting to be done constantly oppressed him. It was not the kind of work he would have chosen to do, he felt; consequently, he was always in a state of nervous irritation. He thought of the time when he first opened the crates of books he had brought back from abroad. For two weeks he had simply left the English books lying in untidy piles all over the floor of

6 this cramped study, and had sat in their midst doing nothing. He would pick up a book at random and read two or three pages, then put it down and pick up another. The books would have remained on the floor indefinitely had not a friend, who could not stand the mess any longer, simply decided one day to put them on the shelves himself. Of course, there was no order whatsoever to the way he arranged the books. Many people who knew Kenzō said that he was suffering from some kind of nervous breakdown. But he believed that it was simply his nature to behave this way.

3 **K**ENZŌ was always busy. So much work was being forced on him that not a day went by when he did not feel harried. Even at home he could not allow himself to relax for a moment. Besides, there were all those books he wanted to read; and he needed time to think, to write the kind of things he wanted to write. His mind no longer knew what it was like to rest.

That he might leave his desk once in a while and indulge in some sort of recreation never occurred to him. A well-meaning friend once suggested that he might take up Nō recitation as a hobby. He had grace enough to refuse politely, but secretly he was quite shocked at the man's frivolity. How can the fellow, he asked himself incredulously, find the time for such nonsense? He could not see that his own attitude toward time had become mean and miserly.

He was forced by circumstances to cut himself off from the company of other men. His loneliness as a human being increased as his mind became more and more occupied with the written word. At times he was vaguely aware of his loneliness. And he knew that his way of life must seem arid to others. But he was confident that it was the proper one for him, that no matter how outwardly desolate his daily existence might become, the passion deep inside him would not wither away.

His relatives regarded him as an eccentric. This did not bother him. "After all," he would say to his wife, "they haven't had my education." And his wife would retort, "You've got a swelled head, that's your trouble."

Unhappily, Kenzō was not quite able to ignore such comments from his wife. He would feel not only irritation but disgust at her lack of understanding. Sometimes he would get really angry and scold her into silence. But this did no good. She would simply take his bad temper as just another indication of his vanity. Quite unrepentant, she would go away thinking what a pompous windbag she had married.

He had only two close blood relatives, an elder brother and an elder half-sister. Unfortunately he had little contact even with these two. Sometimes he felt it was not quite right of him to ignore them as he did. But in the end there was no doubt in his mind that his work was far more important than keeping in constant touch with them. Besides, the fact that he had seen them three or four times after returning to Tokyo eased his conscience a little.

Had he not come upon that man, he would have kept to his normal routine and stayed at home the following Sunday, either at his desk or lying in exhaustion on the floor of his study. But that Sunday, as he began thinking of the man again, he decided he would visit his sister for a change.

She lived on a small sidestreet in Yotsuya. She had married a cousin, roughly the same age as herself. They were many years older than Kenzō. The husband had at one time been employed at the local ward office, and though he did not work there any more, they continued to live in their shabby house in Yotsuya. "It's awkward for my husband, I know," she would explain, "but you see, our friends all live around here."

4

THE sister suffered from asthma. She was an extremely restless woman, however, and only a most severe attack of it would keep her still. All day long she rushed about the house, wheezing away, in search of something to do. Her restlessness seemed to Kenzō quite undignified and somehow pitiful.

She was a great talker. Moreover, there was not a hint of breeding in her speech. After a few minutes of her company Kenzō would invariably become silent and disapproving. And he would tell himself bitterly, "This woman, alas, is my sister."

When he reached the house, he found her with her sleeves tucked up, cleaning out the cupboard. "What a surprise," she said. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable." She pushed a cushion toward him, then went away to wash her hands.

Kenzō looked around the room. On the latticework above the door hung a framed piece of calligraphy. He remembered his brother-in-law telling him—it must have been fifteen years ago—that it was very good calligraphy, that it was by someone who had been a retainer of the Shogun. Despite the considerable difference in age between them, the brother-in-law had allowed Kenzō to treat him like a brother. He remembered how they used to wrestle like children in the house, much to the annoyance of his sister. Once they had climbed onto the roof and, sitting there, gorged themselves on figs. The next-door neighbor was furious when he discovered that they had thrown the skins into his yard. And how he had sulked when his brother-in-law failed to produce the compass in a wooden box that he had promised him. He remembered too the time when he had that bitter quarrel with his sister. He was determined never to forgive her. He waited expectantly nevertheless for her to come to him with apologies. When she did not appear, he swallowed his pride and decided he would have to go to see her. Feeling very foolish he had stood awkwardly outside her house until she called out, "Why don't you come in?"

As Kenzō gazed at the calligraphy and thought of the couple who had been so good to him, he began to wish, with some bitterness, that he could feel more affection for them now.

"And how are you these days?" he said to his sister as she sat down in front of him. "The asthma is still giving you trouble, I suppose."

"I'm all right, don't you worry. The weather's been quite decent, thank goodness. I can still do the housework, as you see. Mind you, I'm not young any more, and I can't rush around the way I used to. I was a real worker in those days, wasn't I? Why, I used to scrub the outside of all my pots and pans. I'm not up to that sort of thing now, I can tell you. But of course, I drink milk every day, thanks to you. . . ."

Kenzō was then sending her a small monthly allowance. "You seem to have lost a little weight," he said.

"I've always been thin, Kenzō. I've never been fat in my life. I'm the nervous type, and you can't get fat on nerves."

She rolled up her sleeve, and stuck out her skinny arm. Beneath her large, sunken eyes loose folds of dark skin hung lifelessly. In silence Kenzō looked at the dry palm of her hand.

“But what a good thing you’ve turned out to be such a success,” she was saying. “You know, when you went abroad, I really didn’t think I would see you again. But here you are, safe and sound. How happy father and mother would have been to see you as you are now!”

She was becoming tearful. With some amusement Kenzō remembered the boisterous woman he had known as a child. “When I get rich,” she would say if in a good mood, “I’ll buy you anything you like.” Or, if annoyed, “You pigheaded child, you’ll never amount to anything.”

5

KENZŌ looked at his sister and thought, she really has aged since then. He said, “By the way, how old are you?”

“Fifty-one. Pretty ancient, eh?” She smiled, showing her yellow, straggly teeth.

Kenzō had not expected her to be quite so old. “I had completely forgotten,” he said. “I was under the impression that you were at most ten years older than I.”

“Don’t be silly. There’s a difference of sixteen years between us. Let’s see now—my husband is the year of the sheep, and three blue; I’m four green, and I’m sure you’re seven red.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. All I know is that I’m thirty-six.”

“Look up your horoscope. You’re seven red, you’ll see.”

Kenzō had no notion of how one went about looking up one’s horoscope. He decided to change the subject. “Where’s Hida?” he asked.

“He was on night duty again last night. Actually, he really doesn’t have to go on night duty more than two or three times a month. But his colleagues are always asking him to take their place. Besides, we can always use the extra pay. I suppose he spends as many nights away as he does at home—maybe more.”

Kenzō said nothing, and looked at Hida’s desk in the corner. Arranged very neatly on it were inkstand, envelopes, and writing

paper, and next to these stood three ledgers with red-leather backs. At the foot of the ledgers lay a small, shining abacus.

Kenzō had heard that Hida was having an affair with some trollop and that he had set her up near his place of work. Kenzō wondered how many of Hida's nights away were passed in the company of his mistress. "How is Hida these days? He must surely have become less frivolous in his old age."

"Not at all. He has always had just one purpose in life, and that's to have fun. As long as the money lasts, he spends all his time going to vaudeville shows, the theater, wrestling matches, and so on. One odd thing about him though—he does seem to have become somewhat gentler. Perhaps that's a sign of old age, I don't know. You remember how violent he used to be—beating and kicking me, dragging me around the room by the hair. . . ."

"You weren't exactly passive yourself."

"What do you mean? I never laid a hand on him. Never."

Kenzō could not help smiling. The fights these two used to have were by no means one-sided. And when it came to a verbal battle, Hida was no match for her. It struck Kenzō as pathetic that this once high-spirited woman should now be so ready to believe her husband's lies. "Let me take you out somewhere to eat," he said.

"Thanks, but I've already arranged to have some sushi brought over, so we'll stay here, if that's all right with you. The sushi is nothing special, mind you."

Whatever the time of day, no guest was ever allowed to leave her house without having had some food forced down his throat. Kenzō decided he might as well resign himself to staying for a while; besides, he really did want to talk to her about the other matter.

6 **P**ERHAPS because of overwork and mental fatigue, his stomach was giving him trouble these days. On very few occasions, when he was feeling particularly optimistic, he had tried exercising, but this had only increased the heaviness around and below his chest. Now he was merely taking the precaution of eating nothing besides his three main meals a day.

“Don’t worry,” his sister said. “It’s only plain sushi. You’ll be all right. I got it especially for you, so I’ll be very hurt if you don’t eat it. You do like it, don’t you?”

In the face of this brutal insistence Kenzō had no choice but to give in. Reluctantly he put one of the tasteless lumps into his nicotine-coated mouth and began to chew laboriously.

She continued to chatter. To be forced into silence when he had something to say to her annoyed him considerably. But she was too insensitive to notice.

Giving things away to her guests afforded her as much pleasure as seeing them eat. She was now offering him the moth-eaten picture of Dharma that he had unwittingly praised during a previous visit.

“It’s of no use to us. By all means take it. Hida won’t mind. What would he do with a shabby thing like that anyway?” Kenzō smiled, and refused to commit himself. She then lowered her voice conspiratorially and said, “There’s a certain matter I’ve been wanting to talk to you about ever since you got back. I knew you were busy, and I didn’t want to ask you to come out here just to listen to my problems. I might have come to your house, I suppose, but I really couldn’t talk about it in front of your wife. And you know how difficult it is for me to write letters.”

There was a touch of comedy, Kenzō thought, in her long, solemn preamble. From early childhood she had had a hopeless memory for characters, and even now, at the age of fifty, she was incapable of writing the simplest sentence literately. He was sorry for her; but he was also a little ashamed of her. He said, “What is it that you want to tell me? I have something to tell you myself.”

“Is that so? In that case, let’s hear what you have to say first. Why in the world didn’t you speak up sooner?”

That her own garrulousness would prevent others from talking was a fact she had always managed to ignore. He said, “I haven’t been able to put a word in edgewise.”

“You could have interrupted me, you know,” she said. “No need for politeness between brother and sister, that’s my motto!”

“Quite so. Well, I’m ready to listen.”

“It’s terribly difficult for me to say this, but as you know, I’m getting older and weaker, and you know what my husband is like—he is happy so long as he himself is all right, he doesn’t care how I am. Besides, he doesn’t make very much money,

and he has certain social obligations. You could say it's none of your business, and you would be right, of course. . . ."

Kenzō wished women wouldn't be so devious. Why couldn't she say what she wanted to say and be done with it? She was asking for more money, obviously. He had heard that the allowance he was already sending her often went into her husband's pocket. He tried hard not to be angry, reminding himself that it was all very sad really.

She ended her entreaty with these words: "Do say you'll help your sister. This poor little body isn't going to last much longer anyway."

Kenzō could not bring himself to refuse.

7

THERE was work he had to do that night. His sister was the sort to whom time meant absolutely nothing, and he could not go on forever listening to her chatter. He decided to leave at the first opportune moment. But he had to mention the man before he left. "I bumped into Shimada the other day," he began.

"Really! Where?" This was said in almost a shriek. Like so many uneducated Tokyo women, she was given to dramatics.

"Near Otanohara."

"Why, that's near where you live. What did he do? Did he say anything?"

"Hardly. He wasn't given the chance."

"Quite right. It would have been real cheek if he had spoken to you first."

It seemed to Kenzō that she was doing her best to say what she thought he wanted to hear. She was not entirely without pity for Shimada, however, when she was told that he had been shabbily dressed. "He can't be having a very easy time, then," she said.

She started reminiscing about him, and her tone once more became vindictive. "Now, there's the meanest man I've ever seen. I remember him sitting here, refusing to budge. He wouldn't listen to any of my excuses, and kept on insisting that payment was overdue and he wasn't going without it. Finally, I lost my temper and told him I didn't have a penny, but if he didn't mind being

paid in kind, he could take my iron cooking-pot. And do you know what the so-and-so said? 'All right,' he said, 'I'll take it.' I was flabbergasted, I can tell you."

"But surely, the cooking-pot must have been far too heavy for him to carry away?"

"Don't you believe it. That man is capable of anything. What he had in mind, of course, was to make us go without rice that day. So he's having a hard time now, eh? It serves him right."

Her account of the ludicrous incident failed to amuse Kenzō. After all, he thought sadly, I play a part in all this, I cannot forget my own past. "I saw him twice, you know," he said. "It's likely I'll see him again."

"Keep on ignoring him, that's all, no matter how often you see him."

"It's possible that he was going somewhere, and we met accidentally. But don't you think that he might actually have been looking for me?"

She had no answer. She kept on talking inanities. It became increasingly clear to Kenzō that all she was trying to do was to flatter and soothe him.

"Has he come here at all since then?" he asked.

"No, he hasn't shown up for the last two or three years."

"And before that?"

"He used to come occasionally, not often. And do you know, he always dropped in at about eleven in the morning. I couldn't get rid of him until he'd been fed. Eel casserole, and that sort of thing. I suppose he couldn't bear to miss the chance of a free meal. But he can't have been stingy about his clothes—he was always nattily turned out in those days."

She was flying off on a tangent again. But at least Kenzō did gather from all she was saying that after he had left Tokyo, she and Shimada had continued to meet to discuss money matters. Other than this, he could find out nothing from her.

“*I* S Shimada still living in the old house?” he asked.

His sister could not answer even this simple question. He was surprised; he had expected her to know at least that much about Shimada. Of course, he was not particularly anxious to know. If after this, he told himself, he did try to find out where Shimada lived, it would be simply out of curiosity; and this kind of idle curiosity was a luxury a busy man like himself could not afford.

He could still remember very clearly Shimada’s house where he had lived as a child.

It faced a wide moat that was over a hundred yards long. The water in the moat was quite stagnant. Sometimes patches of green scum would appear on the surface, giving out an evil stench. On the other side stood a great mansion belonging to some nobleman. Lined up alongside the outer stone wall was a row—it looked endless—of retainers’ houses. Each of these houses, he remembered, had one square window, dark and forbidding. The mansion itself was completely hidden from view.

Modest bungalows of assorted shapes and sizes, separated here and there by empty lots, stood on his side of the moat. They looked rather like an old man’s teeth.

Shimada had bought himself a small piece of land there and built his house—exactly when, Kenzō did not know. But he remembered that it was still new when he went to live with Shimada. It was tiny, with only four rooms. But to his boyish eyes it seemed to have been built with care and taste. The rooms were well arranged. The six-mat living room faced the east, and overlooked a small garden covered with pine needles. One corner of the garden was dominated by an incongruously grand stone lantern.

Shimada was a man of neat habits. He seemed always to be polishing the wooden floor of the verandah with a wet cloth, or pulling out the weeds in the yard on the south side of the house, or cleaning out the ditch by the front gate with a hoe.

Next to this house Shimada built an even smaller one to rent. Between the two houses was an alley which led to an open field at the back. Actually it was more of a swamp than a field. There was not a dry spot anywhere. Indeed, the hollow parts were so full of water that they might quite properly have been called ponds. It was apparently Shimada’s intention to build another

house to rent in this part of the property, but he never did. "Wild duck come down here in the winter," he once said to Kenzō. "I'll catch one for you."

How changed the place must be, Kenzō thought. Yet somehow he could not quite believe that everything would not be exactly as it was twenty years ago.

"It's possible that Hida sent him a card last New Year," his sister said. She was trying to persuade him to stay until her husband returned. Kenzō, however, did not think it necessary to wait for him simply to find out Shimada's address.

He had originally intended to go to his brother's house afterward, partly to see how he was and partly to ask him about Shimada. But it was getting late; besides, his brother was not likely to know very much. He decided to go straight home.

That night he immersed himself in work that had to be done by the next day. Shimada was completely forgotten.

9 **H**E returned once more to his usual routine, and found himself able to devote most of his energy to his work. The hours passed quietly for the most part. Yet he felt beset by one worry after another. His wife remained aloof and watched him from afar. She had long ago decided that she could do nothing to comfort him. Her seeming indifference angered Kenzō. Had she forgotten she was his wife? She, on her part, reasoned that if he was content to spend all his time in the study, then she was not to blame for their estrangement.

She left him alone with his books and came to seek the company only of their children. The children too left him alone. Sometimes they were allowed to come into the study, but such visits always ended in disaster. Kenzō knew that his children were now staying away from him because of his bad temper. It was not their fault, but still, he was disappointed.

The following Sunday he stayed in his house. At about four in the afternoon he had a hot bath, in the hope that this might change his mood. He felt surprisingly relaxed when he came out. He lay down on the floor and fell into a very deep sleep. When his wife came in to announce dinner, he was still lying there like a man in a coma.

He went to the table feeling refreshed, but as soon as he sat down he began to feel a slight chill down his back. He sneezed violently, twice. His wife, sitting beside him, said nothing. Neither did he, but he resented her lack of concern. She remained silent, hating his pride and reserve, and thinking: it's his fault that I can't behave like a wife.

Later that evening he decided he had a cold. He knew he should go to bed early, but work kept him up till midnight. The rest of the family had all gone to sleep. Had his wife been awake, he would have asked for some hot gruel to make him sweat. Resignedly he crept into his cold bed. He felt thoroughly chilled and at first found it difficult to go to sleep. But he was much too exhausted to stay awake for long.

When he awoke the next morning, he felt rested. He wondered whether he had shaken the cold off after all. In the bathroom, however, the usual rubdown with cold water proved a great ordeal. Every muscle in his body seemed to have gone limp. Martyr-like he forced himself to appear at the breakfast table. He could not enjoy the food. He had only one bowl of rice instead of the usual three. He put a pickled plum in his empty bowl, then poured hot tea over it. Noisily and ostentatiously he began to sip the brew. Had he been asked why he was doing this, he would have been at a loss for an answer. His wife watched him quietly. Again he became irritated at her aloofness, which seemed particularly calculated this morning. He coughed loudly two or three times for her benefit. But she was quite unmoved.

He changed into his Western clothes quickly and was ready to leave the house at the usual time. As always, his wife came to the front hall to hand him his hat and see him off. She's very careful to observe the formalities, he thought bitterly.

The chill persisted all day. His tongue felt heavy and dry, his whole body seemed dulled with fever. Once, in his office, he felt his pulse, and was shocked. The quick beat registered itself almost audibly on his fingertips. He could hear too the loud ticking of his pocket watch. Fearfully he listened to the macabre duet.

He pulled himself together and went on with his work.

WHEN he got home his wife appeared with his lounging clothes and stood by, waiting to help him change. Sourly he looked away. "Get my bed ready," he said, "I'm going to lie down."

He made no reference to his cold. And she behaved as though nothing was the matter with him. Privately each found the other's conduct unforgivable.

He was dozing when she came to his bedside and said, "Will you have dinner?"

"Of course not."

She would not go away. After a while she said, "Aren't you feeling well?"

Instead of replying he pulled up the quilt until it covered half his face. Gently she placed her hand on his forehead to feel his temperature.

That evening, after the doctor had left, she gave Kenzō the medicine. Apparently he had nothing more than a cold.

His fever was worse next morning. Following the doctor's instructions, she put a rubber icebag on his forehead and held it there until the maid came back from the hardware store with a nickel-plated suspender for the bag.

He was delirious for two days. On the third day the fever left him. He opened his eyes, feeling quite recovered, and stared at the ceiling blankly. Then he looked at his wife; and he suddenly realized that she had been taking care of him. Without saying a word to her he turned his face away. In doing this, he lost his chance of telling her how he really felt.

"What's the matter with you now?" she said.

"According to the doctor, I've caught a cold."

"Thank you for telling me."

The conversation ended there. In disgust she left the room. Kenzō clapped his hands to summon her back.

"All right," he said, "what's wrong?"

"I sat here for two days looking after you. And all you could say during that time was 'go away, leave me alone.' It's too much. . . ." She stopped abruptly.

"I don't remember saying anything like that to you."

"I don't suppose you do, since you were delirious. But if

you truly didn't feel that way, you wouldn't have said it, no matter how ill you were."

On such occasions as this, it was Kenzō's habit to argue his wife down. It never occurred to him to wonder whether there was not some truth in whatever she was saying.

Once again, he proved her mistaken—at least theoretically. He insisted that when delirious, or when under the influence of drugs, or when having a nightmare, a man might say all kinds of things he really didn't mean. But she was not convinced.

"Have it your own way," she said. "I'm used to being treated like a maid. All you care about is yourself."

Angrily he stared at her back as she walked away. He had not the slightest suspicion that in winning an argument one might end up fooling oneself as well as the opponent. And no doubt from the standpoint of a trained academic like himself, his wife's refusal to listen to reason was quite inexcusable.

11

THAT night his wife came in with a pot of rice gruel and sat down beside him. She ladled some into a bowl and said, "Why don't you try to sit up."

His whole mouth was furry and swollen, and he had no desire to eat. Yet for some reason he sat up obediently and reached for the bowl. The few grains of rice in the liquid felt rough and very large as they passed over his tongue. He could taste nothing. After one helping—it was all he could manage—he lay down.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked.

"I can't taste a thing."

She brought out a visiting card and gave it to him. "I had the maid tell him you were too ill to see anybody."

Kenzō failed to recognize the name. "When did he come?"

"It must have been the day before yesterday. I wanted to mention it to you sooner, but I thought I'd better wait until your fever went down."

"I don't know the man at all."

"He apparently told the maid he came to see you about Shimada."

She looked questioningly at him. Kenzō thought that "Shimada" had been said with undue emphasis. The image of the

hatless figure standing in the middle of the road flashed through his mind. For some days now he had managed to forget the man. "Do you know about Shimada?" he asked.

"You once talked to me about him. It was when you got the long letter from that woman—Otsune was her name, I remember."

Kenzō said nothing. He picked up the card and looked at it again. He wondered how much he had told her then. "When was that?" he asked. "It was a long time ago, surely." He smiled wryly to himself as he remembered how he had felt when he showed his wife the letter.

"Let me see—it would be about seven years ago. We were still living in Senpendōri then." She was referring to a suburb of a provincial town. "I have also heard about him from your brother."

"What did he tell you?"

"Well, among other things, that he wasn't a particularly nice man. Is that true?"

She seemed to want to hear more about Shimada, but Kenzō broke off the discussion by closing his eyes. Taking the hint, she picked up the tray with the pot and bowl on it and stood up. "By the way," she said, "the man told the maid he would like to come again when you were better."

Kenzō was forced to open his eyes. "Of course he'll come. So long as he is acting as Shimada's emissary, he's bound to come."

"But are you going to see him if he does? Surely it would be better not to." She sounded almost adamant.

Kenzō did not want to see him at all, but he said, "Why shouldn't I see him? I'm not frightened of him."

He's being perverse again, she thought. Kenzō knew what she was thinking. But as far as he was concerned, he had no choice. It was only proper that he should receive the stranger when he came; whether he wanted to or not was irrelevant.

KENZŌ recovered quickly and found no difficulty in getting back to his daily routine. He read and scribbled in his study for some days without interruption. Then the stranger who had tried to see him when he was ill showed up again without warning.

He took the visiting card from his wife and looked at it. It was made of the same heavy paper, and the name, Yoshida Torakichi, was now familiar. Almost in a whisper his wife said, "Are you going to see him?"

"Yes, I am. Show him to the living room."

She hesitated, but sensing her husband's mood, she left the study obediently.

Yoshida turned out to be a well-built, impressive-looking fellow of about forty, dressed rather dashing in Japanese clothes. His jacket was of natty striped stuff, and the casually tied sash around his kimono was of white crepe. A glittering watch chain hung from the sash. Not only his clothes but his speech indicated that he was a downtown type. Yet no one would take him for one of those strait-laced city merchants. There was something too eager, too theatrical, about his manner.

Kenzō had decided that it would be entirely proper for him to ask the visitor exactly who he was. But the glib Yoshida needed no prompting; without being asked, he began at once to explain himself.

He used to live in Takahashi, he said. His business then was to supply the army barracks there with provisions. "I had the honor," he said, "to come to know the officers quite well. Yes indeed, the gentlemen were very kind—particularly Mr. Shibano."

Kenzō recognized the name. The daughter of Shimada's second wife, he now remembered, had married a soldier named Shibano. "So that is how you know Shimada," he said.

They talked for a while about Shibano. He had left Takahashi some years back, Yoshida said, for a post farther west. He had continued to drink heavily and was having money trouble. All this was news to Kenzō, but it was of no particular interest to him.

He bore no ill will toward the Shibanos. He sat and waited politely for Yoshida to get down to business. At last Yoshida began to talk about Shimada.

With mounting distaste Kenzō listened to Yoshida's repeated

references to Shimada's poverty. "He's such a decent, trusting fellow," Yoshida said, "he's constantly being cheated. Lord knows how many wild ventures he's been talked into backing."

"Perhaps," Kenzō suggested, "he's just greedy." He found it impossible to believe that the old man had become poor because of his good nature. Indeed, he doubted very much that he was poor at all.

Yoshida seemed not in the least offended by Kenzo's suggestion. "You may be right," he said, and laughed. But the next moment he blandly asked Kenzō if he would agree to send Shimada some money every month.

Kenzō was by nature without guile. To this stranger he began to explain in great detail the exact state of his finances. He pointed out that his monthly salary was a hundred and twenty yen, which was barely enough to make ends meet. He described his various expenses, and tried hard to convince the visitor that at the end of the month not a penny of his salary remained. Yoshida listened solemnly, occasionally throwing in sympathetic comments in his stagy way. But Kenzō wondered how much of his lengthy explanation was really being believed.

He detected not the slightest hint of aggressiveness in Yoshida's manner. Here's a smooth customer, he thought; he's going to play the humble petitioner to the end.

13

KENZŌ, thinking that no further discussion was necessary, waited for his guest to get up and go. He was disappointed. Yoshida did not mention money again, true, but he showed no sign of going, and continued to talk idly about matters of no interest to Kenzō. After a while, however, he manipulated the conversation back to the subject of Shimada. "He's getting on in years, as you know, and he's beginning to feel rather lonely and helpless. I wonder, would it be at all possible for you to associate with him as you used to?"

Kenzō did not quite know what to say. He looked at the tobacco tray he had placed in front of the visitor, and thought of the old man with the shoddy umbrella staring at him through the rain. Kenzō could not help hating him. He remained silent, torn between his sense of indebtedness and his hatred.

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