A Translation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke's <Chichi>

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This is the story of when I was in the fourth grade of middle school.

In the fall of that year, a school trip of three nights was held, beginning in Nikko and going as far as Ashio. “Assembly at 6:30am in front of Ueno Station, departure at 6:50...” This stipulation was set on the mimeographed copy given to us by the school.

When the day arrived, I rushed out of the house without even a bit of breakfast. Going by train won’t even take 20 minutes. Somehow even thinking this I felt anxious. Standing in front of the red pillar at the station waiting for the train, I continued to feel uneasy.

Unfortunately, the sky was cloudy. It seemed as if the sound of the steam whistles from the surrounding factories might scatter gray steam and turn it into a misty rain. Under such a dull sky, trains pass on the overhead railway. Wagons go by on their way to Hifukusho1. One by one stores open their doors. Two or three people were already standing at the station I was at, lack of sleep expressed on their gloomy faces. It’s cold... Just then, the reduced-fare train2 arrived.

After pushing through the crowd and finally getting a strap to hold on to, I felt somebody from behind tapping me on the shoulder and turned around in a hurry.

“Good morning”.

I saw that it was Nosei Isou. He was, like me, wearing a navy blue school uniform of mohair with an overcoat bundled up and hanging from his left shoulder, gaiters3 of hemp on his legs, and a lunch box and water flask dangling at his waist.

Nosei was a boy who had gone to the same elementary school as I and entered the same middle school. Although he was not particularly strong at any subject, he was not particularly weak at any either. And yet, he was clever at little things. He would hear popular songs and the like once, and remember the lines in no time. And then he would proudly perform, like in the evening at our lodgings on school trips. Shigin, satsumabiwa, rakugo, storytelling4, mimicry, juggling - he could do everything. Moreover, he had a particular knack for making people laugh with a gesture or facial expression. Consequently, he was not unpopular among his classmates and neither was he unfavored by his teachers. Although Nosei and I spent the most time with each other, we were not what you would call very close.

“Oh, you’re early, too.”

“I’m always early.” Nosei said this wriggling his nostrils slightly.

“But you were late the other day.”

“The other day?”

“I mean in language class.”

“Oh, when Baba scolded me? Well, even Homer5 sometimes nods.” Nosei had the habit of dropping the honorific “sensei” when referring to teachers.

“I was scolded by that teacher, too.”

“For being late?”
"No, because I forgot a book."

"Oh, Jintan is awfully strict." Jintan was the nickname Nosei had given our teacher, Baba. In the middle of this conversation, we arrived at the station.

Once again we pushed our way through the crowd and when we finally got off the train and entered the station, only 2 or 3 from our class were there as the hour was early. We exchanged good mornings, tried to be the first to get seats on the wooden benches in the station and then burst into spirited conversation as usual. We were at an age where we were eager to refer to ourselves as ore instead of boku. From the mouths of these boys who referred to themselves as ore came an outburst of expectations about our trip, comments on our classmates' character, unfavorable criticism of our teachers and the like.

"Izumi is sly. He has the Choice teacher's manual so he hasn't once prepared for his classes."

"Hirano is even slier. You know, apparently he writes all the history dates on his fingernails during exams."

"Come to think of it, the teachers are sly themselves."

"Yeah, they sure are. Honna doesn't even know which comes first in receive, the i or the e but he pulls off teaching by using the teacher's manual."

To the end, slyness was the sole topic of conversation and not one other subject of gossip came up. Just then, Nosei labeled the shoes of a man looking like an artisan and sitting on the bench next to him reading a newspaper, "Gapinray". This was because at the time Mackinray was the latest style in shoes but this guy's shoes had lost their shine and besides that, had a gaping hole in the front of them.

"Gapinray - that was a good one!" Everyone laughed at the same time.

By this time we were in high spirits and we began looking for all sorts of people coming in and out of the station. Then, one by one we put in brash comments about them in the way that only middle school students from Tokyo could do. In that respect, there was not one quiet student to be outdone among us. But of all, Nosei's descriptions were the most biting and moreover, the most humorous.

"Nosei, Nosei. Look at that lady."

"That woman has a face like the stomach of a pregnant globe fish."

"This porter looks like something, too. Doesn't he, Nosei?"

"He's Karl the 5th."

Finally, the role of badmouthing was left up to Nosei alone. Just then, one of us noticed a strange man standing in front of the timetable checking the time in detail. He had on a rust-colored suit and his legs which were like the rods used in gymnastics were covered in gray wide-striped pants. Judging from the amount of gray hair sticking out from under the wide brim of his old-fashioned black felt hat, he was quite old. In spite of this, he had a showy black and white checkered handkerchief around his neck and, tucked under his arm, the kind of long bamboo walking stick that might be taken for a whip. From everything - his clothes, his behavior, one could only think that he must be an illustration torn out of Punch and put standing in the middle of this crowd in the railroad station. The member of our group who had discovered him was so happy to again find new material to make fun of that his shoulders shaking with laughter, he pulled Nosei by the arm.

"Hey, how about him?"

All of us looked at the strange man. Sticking out his chest slightly, he pulled a large nickel pocket watch attached to a purple braided cord out of his vest pocket and carefully compared it with the figures on the timetable. Seeing only his profile, I soon realized that this was Nosei's father.

However, not one person in our group knew this. So everyone was watching Nosei, anticipating what he would have to say to suitably describe this comical figure. Fourth year middle school students had no way of
understanding Nosei's feelings at this time. I was about to say, "That's Nosei's father", but just then...

"Oh, him? He's a London beggar." These were Nosei's words. It goes without saying that everyone burst into laughter at once. There was even someone going so far as to imitate Nosei's father by sticking out his chest and taking a pocket watch out of his pocket. Without thinking, I looked down. This was because I lacked even the courage to see Nosei's expression at this time.

"Oh, that's good!"
"Look at that hat."
"Must be from Hikagechou."
"You wouldn't even find that in Hikagechou!"
"A museum, then."

Once again, everyone laughed.

The dull station was as dark as nightfall. In that dimness, I furtively peered at that London beggar.

Then, almost before one could be aware of it, a soft beam of light began to stream in dimly through the skylight of the high ceiling, a narrow ray of light faint and oblique. Nosei's father was in the middle of that ray of light. Around him everything was moving. Everything in and out of eyesight was moving. Sound and voice became indistinguishable in this movement and seemed to envelope the inside of this large building in mist. And yet, Nosei's father alone was not moving. This old man with no connection to the modern world, wearing clothes with no connection to the modern world was in the middle of a bustling flood of moving people; wearing a black felt hat on the back of his head - this too above the modern world, holding a pocket watch on a purple braided cord in the palm of his right hand, he remained standing in front of the timetable as immobile as a pump.

Later I heard indirectly that without telling Nosei, his father, who was at the time commuting to the university pharmacy, thought he would stop on his way to work and see his son as he left with us on our school trip.

Soon after graduating from middle school, Nosei Isou fell ill with tuberculosis and died. At his memorial service in the school reading room, it was I who stood in front of the photo of Nosei wearing his regulation school cap and read the memorial address.

"May you be good to your parents" - I added these words to the message.

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Notes: 本に『芥川龍之介全集』（岩波書店）の注解を利用した

1 Factories producing clothing for the Japanese army during the Meiji era.
2 Tokyo city's trains were divided into 3 companies but merged in 1906, forming Tokyo Railway Co., Inc. The fare was 4 sen. Until 7am there was a reduced-fare for students and laborers. This company was purchased by Tokyo city in 1911.
3 Narrow strips of cloth which were wrapped around the legs and worn when wearing western clothing, from the French word guêtre.
4 Chinese poem recitation done in a kind of chant.
Satsumabiwa - a type of music that originated in the western part of Kagoshima prefecture (then Satsuma) in the latter part of the Muromi period and which became popular in Tokyo during the Meiji era.
Rakugo - a popular form of comic monologue in which the storyteller, dressed in a plain kimono, sits alone before the audience and using no scenery and very little props, represents characters in his imaginary drama.
Storytelling - in the original, "koudan" which means war stories or stories of bravery.
Even Homer sometimes nods——in the original, “Koubou ni no fude no ayamari sa”. This translates directly to “Even Koubou makes a mistake with his brush”. Koubou was a high Buddhist priest in the Heian era who is also known as the father of the Japanese calligraphy world

6 The name of an oral tonic that was put on the market in 1905.

7 Both ore and boku are used by boys or men to mean “I” but ore is a coarser form.

This teachers' manual is "the choice for teachers" in the original. Choice was the name of an English textbook for middle school students at the time this short story was written. There were 2 such textbooks — "Standard Choice Reader" and "New Century Choice Reader". It is uncertain which of these texts was used in the middle school Akutagawa attended.

Makinnrey was the trademark of a type of shoe; a shop in Ginza imported a machine from America for making these shoes in 1905 and they were sold from the following year. However, the shop soon went bankrupt. "Capinnray" is actually "Pakinray" in the original—the play on words is made with the use of "pakkuri" (gaping wide).

Karl V (1500-1558) Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and the King of Spain.


A town in Shiba ward where used clothing was sold. The term "used clothing stores of Hikagechou" can be found in literature of the Meiji and Taisho eras.

An association is drawn between "flood" and "pump", contrasting "like a pump" with "a bustling flood of moving people".