

HASHIRIAME (SHOWERS)

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A solitary thief lurks under the eaves of the little shrine dedicated to Hachiman. His name is Kakichi.

By day, Kakichi is a tool grinder. Bearing his box of whetstones, files and assorted tools of the trade, he circulates from village to village throughout Edo, sharpening knives, sickles, or scissors. Sometimes he's called upon to raise the teeth on a saw; on these occasions his files are at the ready. In the course of his rounds, he sometimes returns to a home after its dwellers have dozed off for the night.

This is not to say that Kakichi necessarily thinks of his tool grinder's trade as a ruse to deceive the public, or to better size up homes for burgling. No, he is dedicated to his trade, and considers it his true profession.

But from time to time, as if urged on by bad blood, Kakichi performs a break-in. At such times he becomes a thief to the bottom of his soul, thinking as he carries out the robbery that he would just as easily stab the first person who stood in his way. It has been years since he turned this way, yet not a soul has ever noticed.

A hard rain is falling. Kakichi watches the faint light of the dense rain splashing off the ground in the darkness as he waits for the downpour to end.

A black fence confronts him on the other side the street. There stands the Ohtsu-ya, long-established merchant house and now the object of his break-in scheme. The store thrives by offering merchandise brought in from Kyoto.

When called to work at a house, Kakichi usually performs his task at the back door. Spending nearly half a day seated at his work, he might ask for a drink of water or to use the toilet. Once inside, he can generally discern whether he'll be able to break in later.

If a house looks promising, Kakichi will stretch out his work, or ask to eat his lunch in the kitchen, so that he can meticulously survey both interior and exterior.

Eating his lunch, he sometimes banter with the maids. Kakichi is thirty-two, of medium build and height. Neither ugly nor handsome, his face is utterly indistinct, but some of the maids can nevertheless become suddenly very chatty when they learn during the conversation that Kakichi is a bachelor.

A house's susceptibility to a break-in is also revealed by the training of its servants. Years at the robber's trade have sharpened Kakichi's eye for these things.

Twice before he has been called in to the Ohtsu-ya. On the third call, today, Kakichi made certain provisions on his way out. The latch will be found not to have dropped quite correctly when he closed the back door this evening. A proper household would make the repair, even if it meant calling in a carpenter, but Kakichi guessed the Ohtsu-ya would not. Doubtless they would just give it a quick fix to last the night.

If that doesn't work, all I have to do is get over the fence, Kakichi thought, his eyes keenly aware. Now he had only to wait for the rain to stop. Rain which started this suddenly probably won't go on for too long, he thought. Somewhere a faint glow shone in the night sky.

No one suspected Kakichi as he stood under the eaves of the shrine. Four or five people had rushed by just when Kakichi darted in, but since then no one had passed. Only the pounding rain on the street marked the time.

Suddenly he heard voices and footsteps. Someone ran into a small vacant lot not quite within the shrine grounds, causing Kakichi to tuck hurriedly around under the eaves to keep out of sight.

"Oh, no...it's gotten so late...what am I going to do?" The voice belonged to a young girl.

"It's nothing. The old lady won't say anything if you tell her you got caught in the rain along the way and took shelter," answered a young man's voice. The effeminate way he said it conjured up the image of a boy who works in a notions store or a clothes shop catering mostly to women.

"It's young master's fault," said the girl accusingly. "I thought even if we did meet along the way, we would just have tea and go right home, but then you took me to that place."

"You went right along and didn't say a word!" The boy she called "young master" said this gently, with a chuckle.

"Well, when a girl is invited out it's hard to say no. And now I can't be apart from young master."

The sudden silence, filled by the sound of falling rain, suggested that the boy and girl were embracing. From the sound of their conversation, the young master and the maidservant had become good friends while working in the same store. Each had gone out on separate errands and, running into each other along the way, they had made the most of it. Kakichi uttered an inward "tisk, tisk."

Now get lost, kids. As Kakichi silently cursed them, the girl's voice sounded as though she'd awakened from a dream.

"What will happen to us now that we've done this?"

"There's nothing to worry about. I told you, leave it to me."

"Of course you're going to marry me?"

"Of course..."

"I'm so happy."

From the silence that followed, they seemed to be embracing again, or pressing their faces together. Kakichi was irritated. The rain seemed to be letting up a bit.

"Hey...", said the girl in a cloying voice. "Just in case..."

"What?"

"If, I'm saying, a baby were coming..."

"A baby?" His voice sounded shocked. Then he burst out laughing. "Don't try to scare me!"

"I'm not trying to scare you." The girl's voice became suddenly sharp. She seemed a strong willed girl underneath. "I'm saying it might be true."

"....."

"Well, it's been two months since my...you know."

"That can't be." The boy laughed again. But it was a hollow laugh. "You're saying that to test me, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," she said in a fierce tone. "I may really be pregnant."

"....."

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean, what am I going to do?" The boy sounded annoyed. The gentleness had disappeared from his voice. "Doesn't it take a little longer to find out?"

"If in a little while it turns out to true, what will we do?"

"....."

"Will you be sure to tell the Master and Mistress?"

"Mm." This the boy said in a frighteningly cold voice. "If that happens, there won't be much choice, will there?"

"Probably not."

"....."

"If you don't tell them, I will tell the Mistress, you know."

"Alright, alright." The boy spoke hurriedly, "let's leave that talk for later. We're getting soaked, so go along. I'll follow after."

"Will you meet me later?"

"Mm."

The sound of wooden clogs on cobblestones echoed in the street. The boy stayed on for some time, muttering to himself. "This is no joke. If my father finds out, I'll be disowned." Then he spoke in a strangely affected voice, "*Iseya Tokusaburo: has life's defeat come so early?*" Perhaps the boy was a theater buff.

The sound stopped. When Kakichi peered out, the boy had also disappeared. It seemed he had run out in the still-falling rain to follow after the girl.

Kakichi was relieved to see that the rain appeared to be letting up as he'd predicted. The driving force that beat the rain up off the ground had long since

subsided, and although the sound of the rain was still audible, that too was diminishing.

"When the rain stops, I'm going in," Kakichi thought. He'd decided on his entry point – the rear door next to the kitchen. From there he would go straight into the kitchen and come out in the hall. *That's where the maid's room is, so I better be careful,* he thought. There were three maids. One was a day worker – she went home in the evening – but the other two lived in the house.

He didn't worry about the maid called Okiyo. Once she'd found out Kakichi was single she was always inviting him to "have some tea" and "have some crackers" and brushing up against him in a most familiar way. She was a hulk of a girl and didn't seem likely to wake up for anything. The other one was a widow they said – past fifty and skinny as a broomstick – she might be a light sleeper. He mustn't make even the slightest sound.

Passing in front of the maid's room he would come immediately to the reception room. Okiyo had told him that the master and mistress's bedroom was next to that, but that at night they left a cash box with the day's proceeds in that otherwise quite empty room.

Saying something about needing to use the toilet, Kakichi had taken the opportunity to go in as far as the reception room, where he saw the master and the manager conversing about something in front of the cash box. The drawer under the family altar was open and empty. Doubtless this is where the cash box would be.

The Ohtsu-ya doesn't take the cash from the day's sales to the storehouse in the evening. Once I watched from outside while I sharpened their knives... Kakichi's musings were suddenly interrupted. Two black shadows, speaking in hushed tones, had emerged unnoticed in front of a small *torii*. This time both voices were male.

Again Kakichi slipped around the corner, staying under the eaves. He strained his ears, but the two men's voices were too low and he couldn't make anything out. Their conversation went on too long, and Kakichi grew impatient.

What are you two dragging on about? As he swore under his breath, one of them finally spoke up,

"We're getting wet here. Why don't we go under those eaves?"

The "eaves" meant the Hachiman shrine. *Not again*, thought Kakichi with disgust. But there was something in that voice that made Kakichi's ears stand straight up.

It wasn't that he'd heard the voice before, but Kakichi perceived in its tone a bone-chilling bleakness. *Who the hell is this?* he thought.

"I'm leaving," the other one said. This one, too, spoke in a cold, bleak voice that hardly seemed to issue from an honest soul. "The conversation's over, Mino."

"No, it's not over," said the first man, chuckling. But there was no particular mirth in his laugh, which was soon suppressed as he continued, "I get what's due me. That's my style. I don't care if you're an older brother. I'm not shutting up while you rob me of my share. You're going to fix this."

"I can't figure you out. I didn't make anything on that job. I'm telling you, nobody got a cut."

"That's not what Take said."

"How the hell do I know what Take said? I didn't put a penny in my pocket, and there was nothing for you either. Don't you get it? That's all there is to say about this."

"If you're going to play the innocent like that, I'll take this up with the boss."

"The boss?"

"That's right. I hear Tagaya went crying to the boss that he'd been swindled. The boss blew him off – told him 'our gambling parlor's the only one that *doesn't* do that.' So if I was to confess and tell him, 'well, what really happened, see...'"

"Cut it out." The one who'd been called "older brother" spoke sharply. "You're a real idiot. Where's that going to get you?"

"Let me see, where will that get me..." The one called Mino swaggered, "if we knew how much Tagaya was taken for that night, we could figure out our share, couldn't we?"

"Forget it, Mino." Older brother's voice dropped ominously. "If we did that we'd pay the price. It wouldn't bother me. But elder brother Sukezo would be inconvenienced."

"Really? In that case I'll just keep quiet and you'll give me my share, won't you?"

"Are you trying to threaten me?"

"What can I say?" Mino laughed sarcastically. "I have evidence, you know, elder brother. You took my share. You used it on that girl Okimi who lives under the tower."

"....."

"I don't let go so easily, see? That much I can dig up to bargain with you..."

"Yeah, I'm impressed," said elder brother. Suddenly his voice was softer. "Did you investigate this on your own?"

"How else? I'm thinking if you keep playing the innocent and won't give up the money, I'll spill the beans to the boss about the girl, too. I'm not as dumb as....Hey! What are you doing?"

Suddenly, a black shadow jumped out into the street. The other shadow followed and overtook it, as if mugging it from behind. Kakichi saw something that looked like a dagger gleaming sharply in the man's hand.

A solitary scream pierced the darkness and the two shadows merged and fell onto the street. A fierce struggle ensued. Like wild dogs fighting over food, the two men rolled around on the road as they wrestled, letting out an incessant low growl.

A light rain kept falling. By now they must have been covered in mud, but still they didn't stop fighting. They seemed intent to stop at nothing.

Finally one of them jumped astride the other. Raising his dagger high in the air, he plunged it down. All movement stopped. Perhaps the one who'd been stabbed could not speak because the one on top had covered his mouth.

At last the man on top stood up. The sound of his rough breathing was audible even to Kakichi's ears. The man gazed down on the fallen victim for some time, panting, then suddenly disappeared into the darkness. All that remained was the black figure spread out on the ground.

Up until now Kakichi had been peering nervously at the two wild dogs as they fought, but when the victor disappeared, he emerged under the *torii* and surveyed the street.

So he's done for. Kakichi was disgusted. He didn't have a sliver of sympathy for the dead man. Anger brimmed up in his chest. *Interfering with a man's work*, he thought.

It wouldn't do to break into the Ohtsu-ya with a dead body left in the middle of the road. No one else seemed likely to appear, but he couldn't take chances. If someone came along and discovered the corpse after Kakichi had broken into the house across the road, the whole neighborhood would be up in arms, even if it was nighttime. Officials would come. There would be no way to calmly get on with the robbery.

Shall I hide him in back? There was a tiny thicket of trees attached to the back of the Hachiman shrine. It was a nuisance, but for now there was no choice but to drag the corpse back there and hide it. What a pain. As Kakichi set foot on the street, uttering curses at the sprawled-out corpse, the corpse let out a groan.

Damn it. He's alive. Kakichi, who had been hiding himself behind the *torii*, now saw the fallen man slowly rise before his eyes. Several times he began to stand and then crouched back down, but finally he stood upright and shakily began to walk. His gait was precarious, and he looked as though he could topple over any minute, but little by little he made his way down the street.

That's it. Keep it up. Kakichi cheered him on from behind. Not that he especially cared about the man. He was just thinking, if you're going to drop dead, wait until you've gotten a little farther away from here. Kakichi was a man of cold indifference on nights when he was pulling a robbery – unfeeling as a stone.

The man's silhouette wobbled off into the darkness and disappeared. In any event, that obstacle was now gone. Relieved, Kakichi returned to his place under the eaves of the Hachiman shrine.

The rain had almost stopped. Once again Kakichi looked around carefully, but there were no sounds other than the rain drops falling from a shivering cedar tree in front of the shrine.

The time was 11:00 pm. All good souls were asleep. It seemed the thief's chance had finally come.

Just as Kakichi was bracing himself, thinking, I'll just catch my breath and then get to work, a tiny lamp flickered on the left side of the street.

What's that, at this hour? Kakichi quickly moved around the side of the shrine. The light approached with annoying slowness. In reality the lamp's pace was so slow that Kakichi wanted to stamp his feet impatiently. His face took on a frightening look at this appearance of yet another obstacle. Kakichi glared at the paper lantern as it finally approached, yelling under his breath, "*get lost!*" Whereupon the lamp, as if hearing his voice, stopped exactly in front of the *torii*. Not only that, but a woman's voice spoke out,

"Ochie, shall we rest here for a bit?" The voice was miserably weak. Then a voice as clear as a child actor's answered,

"Mother, does it still hurt?"

Kakichi stuck his neck out and saw what looked like a woman in her mid-twenties with a six or seven year old girl. Apparently they had decided to take a rest and were just coming into the shrine grounds, holding hands. Kakichi chafed with impatience and wanted to cry.

The woman was beautiful, with a graceful nose, but her hair was disheveled and even by the light of the paper lantern it was clear that her face had been drained of color. Both were shabbily dressed.

What's this, an invalid? thought Kakichi, drawing back. It seemed the mother was ill and perhaps they were on their way to get medicine from a doctor. The child had come along to help.

She's sick, so what can I do? I can't tell her to move along just for my convenience, thought Kakichi. A feeling arose in him that he should wait patiently for their departure.

"Mother, do you want me to rub your back?" the little girl said. The two seemed to have seated themselves at the entryway in front of the door.

"That's good of you."

"We shouldn't have gone to Papa's place, should we?" said the little girl, sounding very grown up. "Papa got mad, and that lady said we couldn't come in..."

"Mama didn't want to go there either, you know," said the mother. Her voice sounded hollow and low, as though she was thinking of something else. "But we couldn't pay the rent. The landlord told us to get out. If I were well, I would do anything in my power, but I've been sick for so long. I went to get the money because I didn't have any choice."

"Why does Papa stay in that house and not come home?"

"I don't know. Why does he?" There was no strength in the mother's voice. "I guess he must be happier with that woman than with Mama. Even though he has a daughter like you, he's fallen for that young girl."

"Isn't he coming home again?"

"Not a chance."

What sort of bastard is this? thought Kakichi, meaning the woman's husband. His anger welled up in a frenzy.

Just from what he'd overheard, he got a pretty good idea of the mother and child's circumstances. Having abandoned his sickly wife and his child, the husband was living it up with a young girl. The abandoned mother and child couldn't even pay the rent, and the landlord had all but told them to get out. That was evidently the situation.

It seemed the wife had made up her mind to go visit the husband, but when she got there she was flatly turned down, and now they were on their way home.

What a waste! Kakichi's anger was so great that he almost yelled out.

She was called Oharu. That had been Kakichi's wife's name. Back then Kakichi was a busy blacksmith. Oharu was pregnant and just waiting for the child to be born. They couldn't afford luxury, but Kakichi was trusted by his boss, his wages were paid like clockwork, and they lacked for nothing.

Kakichi was a skillful craftsman, so the boss had promised he would eventually share the company name and let Kakichi open his own shop. Those were happy days, when he would talk to his pregnant Oharu about where he would set up business, and how he'd hire two apprentices.

But misfortune like a blast of wind attacked Kakichi's home. Death stole Oharu away, together with the child in her belly. An illness which at first they thought was just a light cold quickly sapped Oharu's pregnancy-weakened body. She ran a high fever and in no time she died.

Kakichi had never liked liquor much, but now he started to drink, until he was drinking so much he had to stay home from work. He stopped listening to the boss's opinions, and finally felt so embarrassed he gave up blacksmithing. After that he worked as a day laborer or just lay around the house if he had no work. Nothing held his interest. He was willing to work enough to eat, but sometimes even that seemed like too much trouble.

One day as he was passing through the town he noticed a house with a store at the front covered with a red and white bunting. There seemed to be a great celebration going on. People were busily coming and going and laughter from inside the packed house could be heard even on the street. Great numbers of people would suddenly laugh, followed by more laughing voices.

What are they so happy about? he thought. Even though he knew it was unreasonable, Kakichi couldn't suppress the dark anger pouring up from deep in his chest. If one had to rationalize it, one could say it was his anger at the world's happiness.

The happiness Kakichi had so recently held in his hand still shone faintly through, like a distant dream. Kakichi lived by that memory alone.

But this happy-sounding laughter he now heard cruelly destroyed his illusions, reminding him that his happiness was lost in the distant past, and that nothing more remained. The crowd's laughing voices announced: *this is what happiness is like*. The happy are ridiculing the unhappy, it seemed to Kakichi as he listened to the din from the house.

It didn't occur to him that this world includes both happiness and unhappiness. He didn't think that the ones who are happy now won't always be happy, and the unhappy ones might one day be blessed with happiness. The laughter brought out in him a single-minded, brimming-over hatred for the happy ones.

That night Kakichi ran like a nocturnal animal through the sleeping town until he reached the house so merry with laughter in the day. He broke in and stole their money.

"Ochie, you must be hungry. I'm sorry."

"I'm not hungry."

"Oh come on. It's alright to say you're hungry if you are. You're going to make Mama sad if you're too good."

"Well then, I am hungry."

"Of course you are. Look what time it is. When we get home we'll borrow some rice from Osue and I'll cook it for you, so don't worry."

Tears welled up in Kakichi's eyes as he listened to them. He suddenly seemed to be hearing a conversation between the dead Oharu and her child.

What a waste, he thought again. *That bastard is too much, not satisfied with such a fine wife and child so he abandons his home.*

"Shall we get going?"

"Are you alright? Can you walk?"

"I'm alright. But we've come a long way, haven't we, Ochie? Hold my hand the way you did before." The two seemed to have stood up. After a while Kakichi came out and watched them from the corner of the shrine. They crawled slowly along, like insects. The mother looked quite weak.

Is she really alright? Just as Kakichi had this thought, the mother did indeed fall down hard as she entered the street, hitting her knees on the ground. The child started to cry.

"You see!" Kakichi yelled, as he jumped out from under the eaves into the street.

The mother clutched her child to her breast and looked up, startled, at Kakichi, who had so suddenly appeared. Her eyes were wide with fear. As he'd suspected, she was a good looking woman.

"Don't be frightened," Kakichi said hurriedly. "I was just taking cover from the rain when you two came along, so I didn't come out. Sorry to scare you."

Kakichi helped the woman up. When he saw the child's eyes were wide with surprise he gave her a pat on the head.

"My name is Kakichi. I'm a grinder from Moto-cho, Fukagawa. I live an honest life. Don't worry."

"....."

"How far are you two from home?"

"We live in Tomigawa-cho in Fukagawa..."

"You don't say! So we're neighbors then," Kakichi said cheerfully. "Let me walk with you. You'll be going 'til dawn walking from here with that child."

"Don't bother about us, please," said the woman. She still seemed in some doubt about Kakichi.

Oh this, thought Kakichi, and quickly pulled off his black head kerchief. "Ma'am, there's no reason to hesitate."

"I'm not hesitating. We'll be on our way, so please go on ahead of us."

"Are you sure?"

That's what Kakichi said, but he stood watching the two as they began to walk. Mother and child began their journey leaving Kakichi behind, but again the mother stumbled and hit her knee. The child, pulling her mother's hand, looked back at Kakichi.

Kakichi approached and knelt down in front of the woman, who was catching her breath with her knees still on the ground. Silently he turned his back

toward her. She seemed to hesitate for an instant, but finally, as if at the very end of her strength, she collapsed onto Kakichi's back.

"I'm sorry, but I heard you talking," Kakichi said as they crossed the Third Bridge. "I'm just a grinder, but if you let me, I can be at least a little strength to you, ma'am." When Kakichi said this, the woman who until then had been holding herself tense on his back suddenly became limp and heavy, as if she'd lost her strength. She said nothing, but Kakichi was satisfied by that heaviness, and he jogged her lightly in the air.

Walking with this woman on his back and holding the girl's hand in his own, relying on only the little paper lantern for light, Kakichi had the feeling he'd walked this way before, in a group of three, on a dark street. That only a moment ago he had been holding his breath about to break in to the Ohtsu-ya was quite unbelievable. The rain had come to an end, and the stars were beginning to shine in the night sky.