

THE THIEF

— *Junichiro Tanizaki* —

It was years ago, at the school where I was preparing for Tokyo Imperial University.

My dormitory roommates and I used to spend a lot of time at what we called “candlelight study” (there was very little studying to it), and one night, long after lights-out, the four of us were doing just that, huddled around a candle talking on and on.

I recall that we were having one of our confused, heated arguments about love—a problem of great concern to us in those days. Then, by a natural course of development, the conversation turned to the subject of crime: we found ourselves talking about such things as swindling, theft, and murder.

“Of all crimes, the one we’re most likely to commit is murder.” It was Higuchi, the son of a well-known professor, who declared this. “But I don’t believe I’d ever steal—I just couldn’t do it. I think I could be friends with any other kind of person, but a thief seems to belong to a different species.” A shadow of distaste darkened his handsome features. Somehow that frown emphasized his good looks.

“I hear there’s been a rash of stealing in the dormitory lately.” This time it was Hirata who spoke. “Isn’t that so?” he asked, turning to Nakamura, our other roommate.

“Yes, and they say it’s one of the students.”

“How do they know?” I asked.

“Well, I haven’t heard all the details—” Nakamura dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. “But it’s happened so often it must be an inside job.”

“Not only that,” Higuchi put in, “one of the fellows in the north wing was just going into his room the other day when somebody pushed the door open from the inside, caught him with a hard slap in the face, and ran away down the hall. He chased after him, but by the time he got to the bottom of the stairs the other one was out of sight. Back in his room, he found his trunk and bookshelves in a mess, which proves it was the thief.”

“Did he see his face?”

“No, it all happened too fast, but he says he looked like one of us, the way he was dressed. Apparently he ran down the hall with his coat pulled up over his head—the one thing sure is that his coat had a wisteria crest.”

“A wisteria crest?” said Hirata. “You can’t prove anything by that.” Maybe it was only my imagination, but I thought he flashed a suspicious look at me. At the same moment I felt that I instinctively made a wry face, since my own family crest

is a wisteria design. It was only by chance that I wasn't wearing my crested coat that night.

"If he's one of us it won't be easy to catch him. Nobody wants to believe there's a thief among us." I was trying to get over my embarrassment because of that moment of weakness.

"No, they'll get him in a couple of days," Higuchi said emphatically. His eyes were sparkling. "This is a secret, but they say he usually steals things in the dressing room of the bathhouse, and for two or three days now the proctors have been keeping watch. They hide overhead and look down through a little hole."

"Oh? Who told you that?" Nakamura asked.

"One of the proctors. But don't go around talking about it."

"If *you* know so much, the thief probably knows it too!" said Hirata, looking disgusted.

Here I must explain that Hirata and I were not on very good terms. In fact, by that time we barely tolerated each other. I say "we," but it was Hirata who had taken a strong dislike to me. According to a friend of mine, he once remarked scornfully that I wasn't what everyone seemed to think I was, that he'd had a chance to see through me. And again: "I'm sick of him. He'll never be a friend of mine. It's only out of pity that I have anything to do with him."

He only said such things behind my back; I never heard them from him directly, though it was obvious that he loathed me. But it wasn't in my nature to demand an explanation. "If there's something wrong with me he ought to say so," I told myself. "If he doesn't have the kindness to tell me what it is, or if he thinks I'm not worth bothering with, then I won't think of *him* as a friend either." I felt a little lonely when I thought of his contempt for me, but I didn't really worry about it.

Hirata had an admirable physique and was the very type of masculinity that our school prides itself on, while I was skinny and pale and high-strung. There was something basically incompatible about us: I had to resign myself to the fact that we lived in separate worlds. Furthermore, Hirata was a judo expert of high rank, and displayed his muscles as if to say: "Watch out, or I'll give you a thrashing!" Perhaps it seemed cowardly of me to take such a meek attitude toward him, and no doubt I *was* afraid of his physical strength; but fortunately I was quite indifferent to matters of trivial pride or prestige. "I don't care how contemptuous the other fellow is; as long as I can go on believing in myself I don't need to feel bitter toward him." That was how I made up my mind, and so I was able to match Hirata's arrogance with my own cool magnanimity. I even told one of the other boys: "I can't help it if Hirata doesn't understand me, but I appreciate his good points anyway." And I actually believed it. I never considered myself a coward. I was even rather conceited, thinking I must be a person of noble character to be able to praise Hirata from the bottom of my heart.

"A wisteria crest?" That night, when Hirata cast his sudden glance at me, the malicious look in his eyes set my nerves on edge. What could that look possibly mean? Did he know that my family crest was wisteria? Or did I take it that way

simply because of my own private feelings? If Hirata suspected *me*, how was I to handle the situation? Perhaps I should laugh good-naturedly and say: “Then I’m under suspicion too, because I have the same crest.” If the others laughed along with me, I’d be all right. But suppose one of them, say Hirata, only began looking grimmer and grimmer—what then? When I visualized that scene I couldn’t very well speak out impulsively.

It sounds foolish to worry about such a thing, but during that brief silence all sorts of thoughts raced through my mind. “In this kind of situation what difference is there, really, between an innocent man and an actual criminal?” By then I felt that I was experiencing a criminal’s anxiety and isolation. Until a moment ago I had been one of their friends, one of the elite of our famous school. But now, if only in my own mind, I was an outcast. It was absurd, but I suffered from my inability to confide in them. I was uneasy about Hirata’s slightest mood—Hirata who was supposed to be my equal.

“A thief seems to belong to a different species.” Higuchi had probably said this casually enough, but now his words echoed ominously in my mind.

“A thief belongs to a different species. . . .” A thief! What a detestable name to be called! I suppose what makes a thief different from other men is not so much his criminal act itself as his effort to hide it at all costs, the strain of trying to put it out of his mind, the dark fears that he can never confess. And now I was becoming enshrouded by that darkness. I was trying not to believe that I was under suspicion; I was worrying about fears that I could not admit to my closest friend. Of course it must have been because Higuchi trusted me that he told us what he’d heard from the proctor. “Don’t go around talking about it,” he had said, and I was glad. But why should I feel glad? I thought. After all, Higuchi has never suspected me. Somehow I began to wonder about his motive for telling us.

It also struck me that if even the most virtuous person has criminal tendencies, maybe I wasn’t the only one who imagined the possibility of being a thief. Maybe the others were experiencing a little of the same discomfort, the same elation. If so, then Higuchi, who had been singled out by the proctor to share his secret, must have felt very proud. Among the four of us it was he who was most trusted, he who was thought least likely to belong to that “other species.” And if he won that trust because he came from a wealthy family and was the son of a famous professor, then I could hardly avoid envying him. Just as his social status improved his moral character, so my own background—I was acutely conscious of being a scholarship student, the son of a poor farmer—debased mine. For me to feel a kind of awe in his presence had nothing to do with whether or not I was a thief. *We did* belong to different species. I felt that the more he trusted me, with his frank, open attitude, the more the gulf between us deepened. The more friendly we tried to be, joking with each other in apparent intimacy, gossiping and laughing together, the more the distance between us increased. There was nothing I could do about it.

For a long time afterward I worried about whether or not I ought to wear that coat of mine with the “wisteria crest.” Perhaps if I wore it around nonchalantly no

one would pay any attention. But suppose they looked at me as much as to say: "Ah, he's wearing it!" Some would suspect me, or try to suppress their doubts of me, or feel sorry for me because I was under suspicion. If I became embarrassed and uneasy not only with Hirata and Higuchi but with all the students, and if I then felt obliged to put my coat away, that would seem even more sinister. What I dreaded was not the bare fact of being suspect, but all the unpleasant emotions that would be stirred up in others. If I were to cause doubt in other people's minds I would create a barrier between myself and those who had always been my friends. Even theft itself was not as ugly as the suspicions that would be aroused by it. No one would want to think of me as a thief: as long as it hadn't been proved, they'd want to go on associating with me as freely as ever, forcing themselves to trust me. Otherwise, what would friendship mean? Thief or not, I might be guilty of a worse sin than stealing from a friend: the sin of spoiling a friendship. Sowing seeds of doubt about myself was criminal. It *was* worse than stealing. If I were a prudent, clever thief—no, I mustn't put it that way—if I were a thief with the least bit of conscience and consideration for other people, I'd try to keep my friendships untarnished, try to be open with my friends, treat them with a sincerity and warmth that I need never be ashamed of, while carrying out my thefts in secrecy. Perhaps I'd be what people call "a brazen thief," but if you look at it from the thief's point of view, it's the most honest attitude to take. "It's true that I steal, but it's equally true that I value my friends," such a man would say. "That is typical of a thief, that's why he belongs to a different species." Anyhow, when I started thinking that way, I couldn't help becoming more and more aware of the distance between me and my friends. Before I knew it I felt like a full-fledged thief.

One day I mustered up my courage and wore the crested coat out on the school grounds. I happened to meet Nakamura, and we began walking along together.

"By the way," I remarked, "I hear they haven't caught the thief yet."

"That's right," Nakamura answered, looking away.

"Why not? Couldn't they trap him at the bathhouse?"

"He didn't show up there again, but you still hear about lots of things being stolen in other places. They say the proctors called Higuchi in the other day and gave him the devil for letting their plan leak out."

"Higuchi?" I felt the color drain from my face.

"Yes. . . ." He sighed painfully, and a tear rolled down his cheek. "You've got to forgive me! I've kept it from you till now, but I think you ought to know the truth. You won't like this, but you're the one the proctors suspect. I hate to talk about it—I've never suspected you for a minute. I believe in you. And because I believe in you, I just had to tell you. I hope you won't hold it against me."

"Thanks for telling me. I'm grateful to you." I was almost in tears myself, but at the same time I thought: "It's come at last!" As much as I dreaded it, I'd been expecting this day to arrive.

"Let's drop the subject," said Nakamura, to comfort me. "I feel better now that I've told you."

“But we can’t put it out of our minds just because we hate to talk about it. I appreciate your kindness, but I’m not the only one who’s been humiliated—I’ve brought shame on you too, as my friend. The mere fact that I’m under suspicion makes me unworthy of friendship. Any way you look at it, my reputation is ruined. Isn’t that so? I imagine you’ll turn your back on me too.”

“I swear I never will—and I don’t think you’ve brought any shame on me.” Nakamura seemed alarmed by my reproachful tone. “Neither does Higuchi. They say he did his best to defend you in front of the proctors. He told them he’d doubt himself before he doubted you.”

“But they still suspect me, don’t they? There’s no use trying to spare my feelings. Tell me everything you know. I’d rather have it that way.”

Then Nakamura hesitantly explained: “Well, it seems the proctors get all kinds of tips. Ever since Higuchi talked too much that night there haven’t been any more thefts at the bathhouse, and that’s why they suspect you.”

“But I wasn’t the only one who heard him!”—I didn’t say this, but the thought occurred to me immediately. It made me feel even more lonely and wretched.

“But how did they know Higuchi told us? There were only the four of us that night, so if nobody else knew it, and if you and Higuchi trust me—”

“You’ll have to draw your own conclusions,” Nakamura said, with an imploring look. “You know who it is. He’s misjudged you, but I don’t want to criticize him.”

A sudden chill came over me. I felt as if Hirata’s eyes were glaring into mine.

“Did you talk to him about me?”

“Yes. . . . But I hope you realize that it isn’t easy, since I’m his friend as well as yours. In fact, Higuchi and I had a long argument with him last night, and he says he’s leaving the dormitory. So I have to lose one friend on account of another.”

I took Nakamura’s hand and gripped it hard. “I’m grateful for friends like you and Higuchi,” I said, tears streaming from my eyes. Nakamura cried too. For the first time in my life I felt that I was really experiencing the warmth of human compassion. This was what I had been searching for while I was tormented by my sense of helpless isolation. No matter how vicious a thief I might be, I could never steal anything from Nakamura.

After a while I said: “To tell you the truth, I’m not worth the trouble I’m causing you. I can’t stand by in silence and see you two lose such a good friend because of someone like me. Even though he doesn’t trust me, I still respect him. He’s a far better man than I am. I recognize his value as well as anyone. So why don’t I move out instead, if it’s come to that? Please—let *me* go, and you three can keep on living together. Even if I’m alone I’ll feel better about it.”

“But there’s no reason for you to leave,” said Nakamura, his voice charged with emotion. “I recognize his good points too, but you’re the one that’s being persecuted. I won’t side with him when it’s so unfair. If *you* leave, *we* ought to leave too. You know how stubborn he is—once he’s made up his mind to go he’s

not apt to change it. Why not let him do as he pleases? We might as well wait for him to come to his senses and apologize. That shouldn't take very long anyway."

"But he'll never come back to apologize. He'll go on hating me forever."

Nakamura seemed to assume that I felt resentful toward Hirata. "Oh, I don't think so," he said quickly. "He'll stick to his word—that's both his strength and his weakness—but once he knows he's wrong he'll come and apologize, and make a clean breast of it. That's one of the likable things about him."

"It would be fine if he did. . . ," I said thoughtfully. "He may come back to you, but I don't believe he'll ever make friends with me again. . . . But you're right, he's really likable. I only wish he liked me too."

Nakamura put his hand on my shoulder as if to protect his poor friend, as we plodded listlessly along on the grass. It was evening and a light mist hung over the school grounds: we seemed to be on an island surrounded by endless gray seas. Now and then a few students walking the other way would glance at me and go on. They already know, I thought; they're ostracizing me. I felt an overwhelming loneliness.

That night Hirata seemed to have changed his mind; he showed no intention of moving. But he refused to speak to us—even to Higuchi and Nakamura. Yet for me to leave at this stage was impossible, I decided. Not only would I be disregarding the kindness of my friends, I would be making myself seem all the more guilty. I ought to wait a little longer.

"Don't worry," my two friends were forever telling me. "As soon as they catch him the whole business will clear up." But even after another week had gone by, the criminal was still at large and the thefts were as frequent as ever. At last even Nakamura and Higuchi lost some money and a few books.

"Well, you two finally got it, didn't you? But I have a feeling the rest of us won't be touched." I remember Hirata's taunting look as he made this sarcastic remark.

After supper Nakamura and Higuchi usually went to the library, and Hirata and I were left to confront each other. I found this so uncomfortable that I began spending my evenings away from the dormitory too, either going to the library or taking long walks. One night around nine-thirty I came back from a walk and looked into our study. Oddly enough, Hirata wasn't there, nor did the others seem to be back yet. I went to look in our bedroom, but it was empty too. Then I went back to the study and over to Hirata's desk. Quietly I opened his drawer and ferreted out the registered letter that had come to him from his home a few days ago. Inside the letter were three ten-yen money orders, one of which I leisurely removed and put in my pocket. I pushed the drawer shut again and sauntered out into the hall. Then I went down to the yard, cut across the tennis court, and headed for the dark weedy hollow where I always buried the things I stole. But at that moment someone yelled: "Thief!" and flew at me from behind, knocking me down with a blow to my head. It was Hirata.

"Come on, let's have it! Let's see what you stuck in your pocket!"

“All right, all right, you don’t have to shout like that,” I answered calmly, smiling at him. “I admit I stole your money order. If you ask for it I’ll give it back to you, and if you tell me to come with you I’ll go anywhere you say. So we understand each other, don’t we? What more do you want?”

Hirata seemed to hesitate, but soon began furiously raining blows on my face. Somehow the pain was not wholly unpleasant. I felt suddenly relieved of the staggering burden I had been carrying.

“There’s no use beating me up like this, when I fell right into your trap for you. I made that mistake because you were so sure of yourself—I thought: ‘Why the devil can’t I steal from *him*?’ But now you’ve found me out, so that’s all there is to it. Later on we’ll laugh about it together.”

I tried to shake Hirata’s hand good-naturedly, but he grabbed me by the collar and dragged me off toward our room. That was the only time Hirata seemed contemptible in my eyes.

“Hey, you fellows, I’ve caught the thief! You can’t say I was taken in by him!” Hirata swaggered into our room and shoved me down in front of Nakamura and Higuchi, who were back from the library. Hearing the commotion, the other boys in the dormitory came swarming around our doorway.

“Hirata’s right!” I told my two friends, picking myself up from the floor. “I’m the thief.” I tried to speak in my normal tone, as casually as ever, but I realized that my face had gone pale.

“I suppose you hate me,” I said to them. “Or else you’re ashamed of me. . . . You’re both honest, but you’re certainly gullible. Haven’t I been telling you the truth over and over again? I even said: ‘I’m not the person you think I am. Hirata’s the man to trust. He’ll never be taken in.’ But you didn’t understand. I told you: ‘Even if you become friendly with Hirata again, he’ll never make friends with *me*!’ I went as far as to say: ‘I know better than anyone what a fine fellow Hirata is!’ Isn’t that so? I’ve never lied to you, have I? You may ask why I didn’t come out and tell you the whole truth. You probably think I was deceiving you after all. But try looking at it from my position. I’m sorry, but stealing is one thing I can’t control. Still, I didn’t like to deceive you, so I told you the truth in a roundabout way. I couldn’t be any more honest than that—it’s your fault for not taking my hints. Maybe you think I’m just being perverse, but I’ve never been more serious. You’ll probably ask why I don’t quit stealing, if I’m so anxious to be honest. But that’s not a fair question. You see, I was born a thief. I tried to be as sincere as I could with you under the circumstances. There was nothing else I could do. Even then my conscience bothered me—didn’t I ask you to let *me* move out, instead of Hirata? I wasn’t trying to fool you, I really wanted to do it for your sake. It’s true that I stole from you, but it’s also true that I’m your friend. I appeal to your friendship: I want you to understand that even a thief has feelings.”

Nakamura and Higuchi stood there in silence, blinking with astonishment.

“Well, I can see you think I’ve got a lot of nerve. You just don’t understand me. I guess it can’t be helped, since you’re of a different species.” I smiled to conceal

my bitterness, and added: “But since I’m your friend I’ll warn you that this isn’t the last time a thing like this will happen. So be on your guard! You two made friends with a thief because of your gullibility. You’re likely to run into trouble when you go out in the world. Maybe you get better grades in school, but Hirata is a better man. You can’t fool Hirata!”

When I singled him out for praise, Hirata made a wry face and looked away. At that moment he seemed strangely ill at ease.

Many years have passed since then. I became a professional thief and have been often behind bars; yet I cannot forget those memories—especially my memories of Hirata. Whenever I am about to commit a crime I see his face before me. I see him swaggering about as haughtily as ever, sneering at me: “Just as I suspected!” Yes, he was a man of character with great promise. But the world is mysterious. My prediction that the naïve Higuchi would “run into trouble” was wrong: partly through his father’s influence, he has had a brilliant career—traveling abroad, earning a doctoral degree, and today holding a high position in the Ministry of Railways. Meanwhile nobody knows what has become of Hirata. It’s no wonder we think life is unpredictable.

I assure my reader that this account is true. I have not written a single dishonest word here. And, as I hoped Nakamura and Higuchi would, I hope you will believe that delicate moral scruples can exist in the heart of a thief like me.

But perhaps you won’t believe me either. Unless of course (if I may be pardoned for suggesting it) you happen to belong to my own species.

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