

Rashomon

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It happened one evening. A lowly servant was under the Rashōmon gate, waiting for the rain to stop. Under the broad gate, there was no one but him. On one of the large, round pillars, whose red paint was peeling off in places, there was only a solitary katydid. Because the gate was located on Suzaku Boulevard, you would normally expect to find two or three other people there, waiting for the rain to let up. But there was nobody there but him.

You see, over the last two or three years there had been a series of disasters in Kyoto: earthquakes, whirlwinds, fires and famines. The capital was falling apart in many different ways. According to old records, Buddhist statues and altars had been smashed, and their vermilion-lacquered and gold or silver-foiled wood piled up on the side of the road and sold as kindling. Needless to say, with the capital in this condition, there was no one to repair the gate, and indeed, nobody even gave it a second thought. Taking advantage of this state of neglect, foxes and badgers began to live there. *Robbers lived there*. Eventually, it had even become customary to take unclaimed corpses to the gate and dump them there. So after sunset, people got scared, and nobody dared set foot near the gate after dark.

In their place, a large number of crows had flocked there. During the day, countless birds could be seen flying around in circles while cawing at the high ornamental ridge-end tiles. They looked just like scattered sesame seeds, particularly when the sky above the gate turned red at sunset. The crows, of course, had come to peck at the flesh of the dead bodies on top of the gate. Today, however, perhaps because it was late, not a single bird could be seen. But what you *could* see were their white droppings, stuck in patches to the stone steps, which were crumbling in places, with long weeds growing from the cracks. The servant, wearing a navy-blue kimono that had faded from over-washing, sat down on the seventh-and-top step of the stone staircase. He watched the rain fall while playing with a large pimple on his right cheek, lost in his own thoughts.

A little while ago, I wrote, "A lowly servant was waiting for the rain to stop". However, even if the rain *did* stop, the servant still wouldn't have anything to do. Normally, of course, he would have been expected to return to his master's house, but he had been released from the service of his master four or five days before. As I wrote earlier, at this time, the city of Kyoto was deteriorating in many different ways. That this servant had been dismissed by his master, who had employed him for so many years, was merely another small side effect of this decline. So, rather than saying, "A lowly servant was waiting for the rain to stop", it would have been more appropriate to say, "A lowly servant, trapped by the rain, had nowhere to go, and didn't know what to do". The weather that day further served to darken the mood of this Heian-period servant. The rain had started falling at a little after 4 PM, and still showed no signs of letting up. For now, foremost on the servant's mind was how he would make his living tomorrow—how he would get through this "hopeless situation". As he tried to piece together his wandering thoughts, he listened pensively to the sound of the rain falling on Suzaku Boulevard.

The rain engulfed Rashōmon, and gales of rain from far away pounded down upon the gate with a tremendous noise. The darkness of night gradually set in from above, and if you were to look up, it might seem as if the large, gloomy clouds were suspended from the ends of the tiles that jutted out from the roof of the gate.

In order to somehow get through his "hopeless situation", the servant might have to set his morals aside. If he refused to do things that he thought were morally questionable, then he would only end up starving to death under a roofed mud wall, or on the side of the road. And then he would be taken to this gate, to be discarded, like a dog. "If I am willing to do whatever it takes to survive..." His thoughts had circled through his head a number of times, and they had finally

arrived here. But this "if" would always remain a mere hypothetical. For although the servant acknowledged that he had to do whatever he could to get by, he didn't have the courage to bring the sentence to its foregone conclusion: "I am bound to become a thief."

The servant sneezed, and stood up wearily. Kyoto—so chilly in the evening—was already cold enough that he wished he had a brazier. The wind and the darkness blew mercilessly between the pillars of the gate. The katydid that had been sitting on the red pillar was long gone.

The servant tucked his head into his chest, hunched up his shoulders—clad in the blue kimono he wore over his thin yellow underclothes—and looked around the gate. "If there is a place where I won't be bothered by the wind or the rain; a place where I won't be seen; a place where it looks like I can sleep comfortably all night; then I will spend the night there", he thought. Luckily, just then, he spotted the wide, red staircase that led to the tower atop the gate. The only people he might find up there would already be dead! So, the servant, being careful that his simple wooden-hilted sword did not slip out of its sheath, stepped on the bottom stair with his straw sandal.

It was a few minutes later. Halfway up the wide staircase leading to the top of the gate's tower, the man held his breath, and, crouching like a cat, looked up cautiously. The light of a fire shone down softly upon the man's right cheek from the top of the tower. It was that same cheek, with the red pus-filled pimple among the stubble. The servant had taken for granted that everyone up there would already be dead. But when he climbed up two or three more steps, he saw that not only had someone had lit a fire up there, they seemed to be moving it back and forth... He could tell this from the way that the muddy, yellow light wavered in the spider webs hanging from every nook and cranny of the ceiling. A lighted fire... on this rainy night... and on top of this gate... Surely this could be no ordinary human.

The servant crept up to the top step of the steep staircase, his feet as silent as a gecko's. He straightened out his body as much as he could, stuck his neck out as far as possible, and cautiously peered into the tower. As the rumours had said, a number of corpses had been discarded in the tower, but the firelight wasn't as bright as he had expected, so he couldn't tell how many. Although the light was dim, what he *did* know was that some of the bodies were wearing kimonos, and others were naked. Predictably, the corpses' numbers counted both men and woman, mixed together amongst the dead. The bodies looked so much like clay dolls, that you might doubt that any of them had ever even been alive. Their mouths open and their arms outstretched, they were strewn haphazardly across the floor. And while the higher parts of their bodies—like their chests and shoulders—caught some of the dim firelight, they cast shadows on the lower parts, and the corpses were as eternally silent as a mute.

The servant instinctively covered his nose from the putrid stench of the rotting bodies. But the next instant, his hand fell away from his face. A strong emotion had almost completely robbed him of his sense of smell.

It was at that moment that the servant first caught glimpse of the person squatting among the corpses. It was an emaciated, little, old, white-haired woman in a dusky-red kimono. The old woman was carrying a lighted pine torch, and staring at one of the corpses' faces. Judging from the length of its hair in places, it was probably the body of a woman.

For a while, moved by six parts fear and four parts curiosity, the servant forgot even to breathe. To borrow a phrase from the writers of the chronicles of old, he felt as if "the hairs on his head and body had grown thick". The old woman thrust the handle of the pine torch into the space between the floorboards. She placed both hands on the corpse's head, and like a monkey picking the lice off its child, she began to pull out strands of the corpse's long hair, one-by-one. The hairs seemed to be coming out with very little effort.

Each time she plucked one of those hairs, the servant grew a little bit less frightened. And each time she plucked one of those hairs, the intense hatred that he now felt for this woman grew a

little bit stronger. No—it is probably misleading to say that he hated *her*, per se. Rather, it was a revulsion against all forms of evil, which was growing stronger by the minute. At that moment, if someone again raised the question that the servant had been thinking about under the gate—whether he would starve to death or become a criminal—the servant would almost certainly have chosen starvation, without an ounce of regret. Like the torch the old woman had jammed between the floorboards, this was how ardently the man's heart burned against all that was evil.

The servant, of course, didn't know why the old woman was pulling out the corpse's hair, so, rationally, he had no way of knowing if it was immoral or not. But for this servant, on this rainy night, on top of this gate, pulling out a dead woman's hair was an unforgivable sin. Of course, the servant had already forgotten that until very recently, he was considering becoming a robber himself.

The servant strained his legs, and, suddenly, leapt up from the stairs without warning. He strode over to the woman, his hand on the wooden hilt of his sword. Needless to say, the woman was scared out of her wits.

As soon as the old woman saw the servant, she sprung up as if she had been fired from a crossbow.

"You! Where are you going?"

The servant shouted. He stood firmly in the old woman's way, as she tripped over corpses in a frenzied attempt to escape. The old woman tried to shove him aside. But the servant still had no intention of letting her go, and he pushed her back. For a while, the two grappled among the corpses without saying a word. But the outcome of this battle was clear from the beginning. In the end, the servant grabbed the old woman's arm and wrenched her down to the floor. Her arm, like a chicken leg, was merely skin and bones.

"What were you doing? Well, what were you doing? SPEAK! If you don't tell me, you'll get THIS!"

The servant pushed the old woman away from him, and, suddenly, he drew his sword and thrust the pale white steel before her eyes. But the old woman said nothing. Her hands shook uncontrollably, her shoulders heaved as she panted. Her eyes were open so wide that they looked like they were going to pop right out their sockets, but still, like a mute, she remained obstinately silent. Seeing this, the servant then realized that he held this woman's life in the palm of his hand. When he realized this, his heart, which had been burning so fiercely with hatred, cooled down, until all that remained were the feelings of pride and satisfaction that come with a job well done. The servant looked down at the woman, lowered his voice and said:

"I'm not an official from the police department or anything. I'm just a traveller who happened to be passing under the gate a moment ago. So I'm not going to tie you up or anything like that. But it would be best if you told me what you were doing on top of this gate just now."

The bug-eyed old woman, opened her eyes even wider, and stared at the servant's face. She looked at him with the piercing red eyes of a bird of prey. And then, her lips—so wrinkled that they were almost a part of her nose—moved, as if she were chewing something. You could see her pointed Adam's apple moving in her gaunt throat. Then, from that throat, came a pant-broken voice that sounded like the cawing of a crow.

"I'm taking this hair... I'm taking this woman's hair to... Well, I thought I'd make a wig."

The servant was disappointed that the old woman's answer was so unexpectedly dull. Along with the disappointment, those old feelings of hatred and contempt came flooding back to him. And somehow, he must have conveyed these feelings to the old woman. With the hairs she had stolen from the corpse still clutched in one hand, she mumbled in a raspy, toadish voice:

"I see. Well, perhaps it is immoral to pull out the hairs of the dead. But these corpses up here—all of them—they were just the sort of people who wouldn't have minded. In fact, this woman whose hair I was just pulling out a moment ago—she used to cut snakes into 5-inch pieces, dry them, and go sell them at the camp of the crown prince's palace guard, saying it was dried fish. If she hadn't died in the plague, she would probably still be going there now. And yet, the guards said this woman's dried fish tasted good, and they always bought it to go with their rice. I don't think what she did was immoral. If she hadn't done it, she would have starved to death, so, she just did what she had to. And this woman, who understood so well these things we have to do, would probably forgive me for what I'm doing to her too."

The old woman said something along those lines.

The servant put his sword back in its scabbard and rested his hand on its hilt while he listened to her story unsympathetically. Sure enough, while he listened, his right hand nursed the red pus-filled pimple on his cheek. As he was listening to her story, he felt the courage that he had lacked under the gate a few moments earlier building up inside him. It was leading him in the completely opposite direction of the courage he had when he climbed up the gate and grabbed the old woman. The servant was no longer debating whether to starve to death or become a thief. The way he felt now, the idea of starving to death was virtually unthinkable.

"That's definitely true," the servant agreed derisively when she had finished speaking. He took a step forward and suddenly tore his right hand away from the pimple. Grabbing the woman by the scruff of the neck, he said to her in a biting tone:

"Well then, you won't hold it against me if I try to steal *your* clothes. If I don't, you see, I too will starve."

The servant deftly stripped the woman of her kimono. She tried to cling to his leg, but he kicked her violently onto the corpses. The entrance to the stairwell was a mere five paces away. In the blink of an eye, the servant ran down the steep staircase and into the darkness, carrying the dusky-red kimono under his arm.

For a while, the old woman lay there as if she were dead, but it was only a short time before she lifted her naked body off the corpses. Whimpering, she crawled over to the stairs, by the light of her still-lit torch. She stuck her head into the stairwell door, and looked down to the bottom of the gate, her short white hair hanging upside down. But outside, there was only the pitch-black darkness of night.

Where the servant went to, nobody knows.