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RYŪNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA was one of Japan's leading literary figures in the Taisho period. Regarded as the father of the Japanese short story, he produced over 150 in his short lifetime. Haunted by the fear that he would inherit his mother's madness, Akutagawa suffered from worsening mental health problems towards the end of his life and committed suicide aged 35 by taking an overdose of barbiturates.

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MURDER IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

ESSENTIAL STORIES

RYŪNOSUKE
AKUTAGAWA

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE
BY BRYAN KARETNYK

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**MURDER IN
THE AGE OF
ENLIGHTENMENT**

THE SPIDER'S THREAD

I.

ONE DAY, BROTHERS and sisters, Lord Buddha Shakyamuni was strolling alone by the banks of the Lotus Pond in Paradise. The blossoms on the pond were each a perfect white pearl, and from their golden centres wafted unceasingly a wondrous fragrance surpassing all description. It must have been morning in Paradise, brothers and sisters.

By and by, Lord Shakyamuni paused at the edge of the pond, and He looked down through the carpet of lotus leaves to behold the scene below. For you see, directly beneath the Lotus Pond in Paradise lay the lower depths of Hell, and as He peered through the crystalline waters, He could see the River of Three Crossings and the Mountain of Needles as clearly as if He were viewing pictures in a peep box.

Soon His eye came to rest on the figure of a man named Kandata, who was writhing around in those hellish depths with all the other sinners. This great robber, this Kandata, had wrought all manner of evil and misdeeds—murder, arson, and more besides. But, for all that, he had, it seemed, performed one single act of kindness in his time. Passing through a deep wood one day, he noticed a tiny spider creeping along the wayside. His instinct was to trample it to death, but, as he raised his foot, he had a sudden change of heart. “No, no,” he thought. “Tiny though this creature is, it’s still a living thing. To take its life on a whim would be too cruel an act, however you look at it.” And so he let it go unharmed.

Lord Shakyamuni recalled, as He looked down on this scene of Hell, that Kandata had saved that spider, and so He decided to reward this singular good deed by rescuing the man from Hell if He could. As chance would have it, He turned to see a heavenly spider spinning a beautiful silver thread atop a lotus leaf with the brilliance of kingfisher jade. Taking the spider’s thread carefully in His hand, Lord Shakyamuni lowered it among the pearl-white lotus blossoms, straight down into the far-distant depths of Hell.

There, in the Pond of Blood at the very pit of Hell, Kandata and his fellow sinners kept floating up and sinking back down again. Pitch darkness reigned wherever the eye roamed. The only thing to pierce it was the faint glint of a needle on the awe-inspiring Mountain of Needles—and that only heightened the sense of despair. All around hung a sepulchral silence, and the only sound to break it was the occasional sighing of a sinner. For you see, brothers and sisters, having fallen as far as this, they had already been so wearied by the many tortures of Hell that they no longer had the strength to cry out. And so, even Kandata, great robber though he was, could only thrash around like a dying frog as he choked on the blood of the Pond.

And what should happen then but that Kandata should lift his head up to the sky above the Pond of Blood and see there, amid the pitch-black stillness, a glimmering silver thread gliding stealthily down from the high, high heavens. When Kandata saw it coming straight towards him, he clapped his hands with joy. Surely, if he could just grab hold of it, he could climb his way out of Hell. Perhaps, with a bit of luck, he could even make it all the way to Paradise. No more

then would he be driven up the Mountain of Needles or plunged down into the Pond of Blood.

Having formulated his plan, he gripped the spider's thread in both hands and began pulling himself up, higher and higher, with all his might. For the great robber he had once been, this skill in climbing was practically second nature.

However, the journey from Hell to Paradise is one of untold thousands of leagues, and so no matter how Kandata tried, it was no easy task to escape. Up and up he climbed until eventually even he was overcome by weariness and could haul himself no further. He had no choice but to rest awhile, and, as he clung to the thread, he looked down into the depths far below.

Kandata's heroic climb had been worth the effort; the Pond of Blood where he had languished only a short time ago now lay hidden in the black depths. What was more, even the faint glint of the awe-inspiring Mountain of Needles was now far beneath his feet. At this rate, climbing his way out of Hell might prove easier than he had imagined, and so, clasping both hands around the spider's thread, Kandata laughed aloud as he had not done in the many years since coming to this place. "I did it! I'm saved!"

Just then, however, he noticed far below an innumerable company of sinners scrambling up after him, higher and higher, like a column of ants. The sight struck him with such shock and terror that for a moment all he could do was move his eyes and let his mouth hang open like a fool's. It seemed as if the delicate thread would snap from his weight alone—how could it possibly bear that of so many others? If it were to break midway, then he—he himself!—would go plummeting back down into the Hell that he had taken such pains to escape. How horrible it would be! But still, an unbroken chain of sinners kept swarming up the fragile, gleaming thread from the very depths of the pitch-dark Pond of Blood. They were coming in their hundreds, in their thousands! He had to do something right away, or else the thread would snap.

"Now listen here, you sinners!" Kandata roared at them. "This spider's thread is *mine*! Who said *you* could climb up it? Go back! Go back!"

That was the moment when it happened, brothers and sisters. The spider's thread, which until then had been perfectly sturdy, lashed the air, sealing his fate. It broke just at the point where Kandata had been hanging from it. Before he could even cry out, he plunged down, whirling like a spinning top, rushing headlong into the black depths below.

The only thing left behind was the short end of the spider's thread, dangling down from Paradise, glittering faintly in a moonless, starless sky.

3.

As he stood on the bank of the Lotus Pond in Paradise, Lord Buddha Shakyamuni followed everything closely from start to finish. And when at last Kandata sank like a stone into the depths of the Pond of Blood, He resumed his stroll, His countenance now tinged with sorrow. Kandata had meant to save himself alone and, as punishment for his lack of compassion, had fallen back into Hell. How terribly shameful it all must have seemed, brothers and sisters, in the eyes of Lord Shakyamuni.

And yet the lotuses of the Lotus Pond were not in the least perturbed by any of this. Those pearl-white flowers swayed their heads by the feet of Lord Shakyamuni, and from their golden centres wafted unceasingly a wondrous fragrance surpassing all description. It must have been close to noon in Paradise.

IN A GROVE

THE TESTIMONY OF A WOODCUTTER UNDER QUESTIONING BY THE MAGISTRATE

THAT'S RIGHT, YOUR HONOUR. It was I who found the body. This morning I went out as usual to cut cedar in the mountains overlooking the village, when I came across the body lying in a shady grove. The exact location? A few hundred yards from the Yamashina stage road. An out-of-the-way spot with a few scrub cedars dotted among the bamboo.

The body was lying flat out on its back, dressed in a pale-blue silk robe, and it was wearing one of those elegant peaked black hats they wear in the capital. There was only one stab wound, but the blade had gone straight through his chest. The leaves of bamboo scattered on the ground around the body were stained dark red with blood. No, Your Honour, the bleeding had stopped. The wound looked dry. Yes, and there