

RYŪNOSUKE  
AKUTAGAWA

Rashōmon and Seventeen  
Other Stories

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PENGUIN BOOKS

# THE SPIDER THREAD

## I

And now, children, let me tell you a story about Lord Buddha Shakyamuni.<sup>1</sup>

It begins one day as He was strolling alone in Paradise by the banks of the Lotus Pond. The blossoms on the pond were like perfect white pearls, and from their golden centers wafted forth a never-ending fragrance wonderful beyond description. I think it must have been morning in Paradise.

Soon Lord Shakyamuni stepped to the edge of the pond, where He glanced down through the spreading lotus leaves to the spectacle below. Directly beneath the Lotus Pond of 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.<sup>2</sup>

Down there His eye came to rest upon a man named Kandata, who was writhing in Hell with all the other sinners. This great robber had done many evil deeds: he had even killed people, and burned down houses. But it seems that Kandata had performed one single act of goodness. Passing through a deep wood one day, he had noticed a tiny spider creeping along the wayside. His first thought was to stamp it to death, but as he raised his foot, he told himself, "No, no. Even this puny creature is a living thing. To take its life for no reason would be too cruel." And so he had let it pass unharmed.

Now, as He looked down at the nether world, Lord Shakyamuni recalled how Kandata had saved the spider, and He decided to reward him for it by delivering him from Hell if

possible. By happy chance, He turned to see a heavenly spider spinning a beautiful silver thread atop a lotus leaf the color of shimmering jade. Gently lifting the spider thread, He lowered it straight down through the pearl-like blossoms to the depths far below.

## 2

Here, with the other sinners at the low-point of the lowest Hell, Kandata was endlessly floating up and sinking down again in the Pond of Blood. Wherever he looked there was only pitch darkness, and when a faint shape did pierce the shadows, it was the glint of a needle on the horrible Mountain of Needles, which only heightened his sense of doom. All was silent as the grave, and when a faint sound did break the stillness, it was the feeble sigh of a sinner. As you can imagine, those who had fallen this far had been so worn down by their tortures in the seven other hells that they no longer had the strength to cry out. Great robber though he was, Kandata could only thrash about like a dying frog as he choked on the blood of the pond.

And then, children, what do you think happened next? Yes, indeed: raising his head, Kandata chanced to look up toward the sky above the Pond of Blood and saw the gleaming silver spider thread, so slender and delicate, slipping stealthily down through the silent darkness from the high, high heavens, coming straight for *him!* Kandata clapped his hands in joy. If only he could take hold of this thread and climb up and up, he could probably escape from Hell. And maybe, with luck, he could even enter Paradise. Then he would never again be driven up the Mountain of Needles or plunged down into the Pond of Blood.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than Kandata grasped the spider thread and started climbing with all his might, higher and higher. As a great robber, Kandata had had plenty of practice at this kind of hand-over-hand rope climbing.

Hell and Heaven, though, are untold thousands of leagues apart, so it was not easy even for a man like Kandata to escape, no matter how hard he tried. He soon began to tire, until he

couldn't raise his arm for even one more pull. He had no choice but to stop for a rest, and as he clung to the spider thread, he looked down far below.

Then he realized that all his climbing had been worth the effort: the Pond of Blood was hidden now in the depths of the darkness. And even the dull glint of the terrifying Mountain of Needles was far down beneath his feet. At this rate, it might be easier than he had imagined to climb his way out of Hell. Twining his hands in the spider thread, Kandata laughed aloud as he had not in all the years since he had come to this place: "I've done it! I've done it!"

And then what do you think he saw? Far down on the spider thread, countless sinners had followed after him, and they were clambering up the thread with all their might like a column of ants! The sight struck him with such shock and fear that for a time his mouth gaped open like an idiot's; only his eyes moved. This slim thread seemed likely to snap from his weight alone: how could it possibly hold so many people? If it were to break midway, then Kandata himself would plummet back down into the Hell he had struggled so mightily to escape. How terrible that would be! Still, from the pitch-dark Pond of Blood, an unbroken column of sinners came squirming up the fragile, gleaming thread by the hundreds—by the thousands. He knew he would have to do something now or the thread would break in two.

Kandata screamed at them, "Listen to me, you sinners! This spider thread is *mine*! Who said *you* could climb it? Get off! Get off!"

At that very instant the spider thread, which until then had been perfectly fine, broke with a "snap!" just where Kandata was hanging from it. Before he could even cry out, Kandata fell, slicing through the air, spinning like a top, down head-first into the darkest depths.

Behind him all that remained was the dangling short end of the spider thread from Paradise, delicately gleaming in the moonless, starless sky.

## 3

Standing at the edge of the Lotus Pond in Paradise, Lord Shakyamuni watched everything that happened. And when, in the end, Kandata sank like a stone into the Pond of Blood, the Holy One resumed His stroll, His face now tinged with sorrow. Kandata had thought to save himself alone, and as just punishment for this lack of compassion, he had fallen back into Hell. How shameful it must have seemed in the eyes of Lord Shakyamuni!

The lotuses of the Lotus Pond, however, were unperturbed. They swayed their perfect pearl-white blossoms near the feet of Lord Shakyamuni, and from their golden centers wafted forth each time a never-ending fragrance wonderful beyond description. I think it must have been close to noon in Paradise.

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