

THIEF BY NIGHT

by Steve Bowkett.

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RYOKAN LIVED by himself in a tiny hut far up in the hills. He possessed very little; only the clothes he stood up in, a spare shirt, a pair of straw sandals, some pots and pans, and a walking stick. Even so, Ryokan was the happiest of men.

Many years ago he had left the town way down in the valley, together with the busy life he had led there. Using all of his meagre savings, Ryokan bought a square of land far away from everyone.

He built his hut with his own hands out of sticks and mud and thatch. At the back of the hut was a small plot of ground that Ryokan had cultivated. Here he grew his vegetables and fruit, and kept a few chickens for their eggs and for company.

At the front of the hut was, to Ryokan's eyes, the most wonderful view in the world. He would spend hours sitting on an ancient tree stump just a few yards from his front door, staring outwards. Right ahead of him the mountains towered massively into the sky. To his left, the sun rose in the morning, swung high above the snow covered peaks, and set to his right in the evening. At night, the moon and stars and planets did the same.

And every day was different, as was every night. And all of them were breathtaking.

Now and again, Ryokan reluctantly left his retreat and walked through the woods to the town. Here he would sell any spare eggs his chickens had laid, together with the crop of cherries produced by the cherry tree growing near the hen house. With the money he made, Ryokan might purchase a fish or some fruit of a different kind. Once he bought some paper and a cheap pen, in order to write down his thoughts about the beauty of the world. But he soon gave this up, realising that what he felt in his heart no words could ever express.

During Ryokan's latest trip into town a previous neighbour greeted him with a smile.

"Ryokan! How wonderful to see you again..."

But then the neighbor's smile faded on seeing Ryokan's worn sandals and his shabby clothes.

Ryokan bowed and hailed his old friend in return. "You too are looking well Chang, though your eyes are tired."

Chang shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I'm all right. But I do tend to worry. Still, at least I earn a sufficient living. How you manage, my friend, I will never know!"

Ryokan's eyes gleamed and he laughed the laughter of a child.

"Don't worry about me, Chang. I may look poor, but in fact I'm rich beyond words—or beyond your wildest dreams it seems..."

Chang frowned, not understanding this, and the two friends went on to talk of other things.

But at that moment a thief was passing by. He had come into town to see what he could steal. Now however, on hearing what Ryokan had to say about riches beyond Chang's wildest dreams, he wondered whether he might not find better luck in the hills...

Ryokan made his way home. His footsteps were light despite his age because he was looking forward to seeing the mountains and the sky once more. Ryokan knew there would be a full moon tonight and he had plans to stay up late to watch it rise.

He ate a light supper of a boiled egg and rice cakes, followed by a handful of cherries fresh from the tree. Then he stepped outside and sat on the tree stump, first to see the sun set in a blaze of fiery clouds, then to wait for the silvery glow in the east, showing him where the moon would soon appear.

And presently, as the sky darkened, it did appear. Beyond the far horizon of the Earth a pale light grew stronger and brighter. The woods and the hills were very, very still. A few stars speckled the heavens—but it was the glorious moon that Ryokan was eager to glimpse.

When its shining white rim rose above the tree line, Ryokan's breath caught in his throat and his heart soared. It was as though the night creatures of the woods were also waiting for this wonderful sight... Because as the round and dazzling moon broke

free of the horizon a warm wind breathed across the land, an owl called from the trees and two deer peeped nervously from the bushes, their noses twitching curiously.

Ryokan gave a deep and satisfied sigh, so moved by the moonrise that tears sparkled in his eyes.

“How lucky I am,” he said quietly to himself. “I must be one of the luckiest, richest men that ever lived...”

Just then he remembered that he had forgotten to feed his chickens that evening, so excited had he been upon arriving home.

Clicking his tongue at his own forgetfulness, Ryokan hurried round to the back of the hut. As he did so, a shadow slipped from the darkness. It was the thief who had been waiting for his moment and now crept quietly into Ryokan’s hut.

Seconds later Ryokan reappeared just as the thief was leaving with his arms full of pots, pans and a tunic. Both men looked surprised.

Ryokan recovered his composure, bowed and said, “Good evening, sir. What can I do for you?”

The thief seemed angry. He scowled at the old man. “I overheard in the town that you were wealthy. But I can find no riches in that hut!”

Ryokan nodded. “That is very true. There’s nothing of any value in there.”

“What about at the back, where you’ve just been?” the thief said, still in a bad temper.

“My chickens,” Ryokan explained, “and a cherry tree.” He smiled. “Would you like some cherries, sir? And I think I have a spare egg I could give you?”

“Are you mad!” exclaimed the thief. “What use have I for cherries or an egg! I have come for your wealth. So tell me, old one,” the thief continued, “where are your treasures?”

Ryokan lifted up his arms and turned his head to the sky. “Look, listen, smell—riches are all around you! And they’re all yours.”

The thief looked nervously about himself and thought that, indeed, this old hermit must surely be mad. He glanced at the few poor items in his hands. “And these are worth nothing either,” he muttered and dropped the pots with a clatter.

“I was a fool,” he shouted back at Ryokan as he hurried off along the hill path, “to believe your silly old man’s dreams...”

Ryokan watched him go then shook his head sadly. “You were a fool indeed,” he whispered in the quietness of the night, “not to let me give you the beauty of the moon.”