The Flower Thief

(Hana Nusubito)

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Thief (Shite)
Garden Owner (Ado)

Translated by Don Kenny

OWNER I am a resident of this neighborhood. While my flowers are always and every year magnificent, they are particularly glorious this year. Thus I imagine that many people will come flower viewing. And, I have been told that just last night, someone or other came and broke off branch to take back home with him. I intend to go and see how the situation stands. What is this? Well, I must say, how very vexing. Just what am I to do? Since they may well come again tonight, I myself will stay and keep guard, and capture any thief who comes here.

THIEF I am a resident of this neighborhood. While it is true of every year, this year’s spring is extraordinarily peaceful. Magnificent flowers are in bloom in a nearby garden, and tonight they are at the very zenith of their full-blooming beauty. Last night, I snuck in and broke off a branch, and when I presented it to a certain person, that person was so extraordinarily pleased and commented on how magnificent the blossom were, and ask me whether they were from my own garden. I inadvertently, with no ulterior intent, responded that they were indeed from my own garden. So that person asked me for one more branch. Thus I am on my way with the intent of breaking off one more branch. Truly, though this is merely a matter of breaking off a branch, stealing a thing that likely has an owner is a matter of considerable concern, so I truly hope that I can pull it off without
getting into trouble. Well, here I am already. Oh, they are blooming, they are blooming. They are even more magnificent than they were last night. This is what is meant by blossoming in full glory but not yet beginning to fall and scatter. While I do feel reluctant to break off such heartwarmingly blooming flowers, since I have already made a promise to deliver, I will break off a branch with full determination. Well now, I wonder if there is anyone about. It appears that there is no one about as there is not so much as a whisper of sound. So which branch should I choose? Shall I take this one? Oh, there is a very fine branch over there.

OWNER    I've got you. (Tying the THIEF's arms behind his back)

THIEF    What are you up to?

OWNER    What I am up to is preventing your from messing up my precious flowers. I will not let you go alive.

THIEF    Truly, I quite fully understand your intent. But happening to pass by your place, as your flowers are so very magnificent, I found myself compulsively breaking off one branch. I humble beg you to forgive me.

OWNER    What an inordinately vexing excuse you give. And I am quite convinced that it was you who broke off a branch just last night.

THIEF    Oh, no, tonight is my first time to do so.

OWNER    Even if it is your first time to do so, though I have put up a signboard forbidding the breaking off of branches, what do you mean by breaking one off?

THIEF    Oh, I see, but I did not notice your signboard. But I will hide nothing from you. Your flowers are so very magnificent that I got the desire to break off a branch as a gift for a friend, and the friend was so pleased that I inadvertently promised to break one more branch off to present to him, so there was nothing
for it but for me to come here once more. But I am definitely not a thief, so I
humbly beg you to forgive me.

OWNER  You continue to jabber incomprehensible nonsense. How can you
blame someone else for your thievery? I am convinced that you steal not only
flowers, but that you are truly an incessant robber and thief.

THIEF  I say, I say, I was greatly in the wrong and I deeply apologize. (He
weeps.) Oh, I must say, I did a thing that must not be done. I did not stop to think
that simply breaking off a branch would be a crime, so without considering the
consequences I have incurred the embarrassment of putting a noose around my
neck, and now my face is blackened for all time, and I must thus end my life.
Now that I have totally bereft myself of the beneficence of all the gods, both
Shinto and Buddhist, I feel overpoweringly vexed and regretful. (He weeps.) Oh,
how foolish, how very foolish I have been. I have shed tears over an insignificant
matter. I must sit on the veranda and regret the twilight of the flowers like the
famed Sokoku who abandoned his life without waiting for the arrival of spring,
that very Sokoku whose heart is know throughout all Japan and China, who
emptied his very heart in admiration of the flowers, causing him to misstep and
fall into an abysmally deep valley and lose his life. In the same manner, just now
I also, unaware that I could be cut down, executed through admiration of the
flowers. Oh how grieved I am, how very grieved and regretful!

OWNER  What is this? The thief is mumbling something or other to himself.
Here, here, as you are mumbling such gentle-hearted things to yourself, I
admonish you to consider carefully what you commit in future. After all is said
and done, flowers receive the beneficence of both rain and dew, and are tossed
about by storms. But during their time of full blooming, do they not hate the
storms. Rain and winds only blow through and over the flowers, seeming to take
careful precaution against harming them. This is what you so poetically
expressed. So how could you bring yourself to recklessly break off branches of
those gentle flowers?
THIEF   Indeed it is just as you say. Even so, while it is regretful, breaking off their branches is also an act of mercy, for as soon as spring comes round, not only this year, but next year and the year after next, they always bloom again. There is an old poem that says that if you feel regret for the residual memory of the flowers, there is nothing wrong in breaking off their branches.

OWNER   And how does that old poem go?

THIEF   I have heard that it goes, “When you view the flowers, as the cherry blossoms that do no speak aloud to us, we break off their branches with both hands and take them home to enjoy there.”

OWNER   You are a most fascinating person. They say that poems please both demons and deities. Compose for me a poem about these flowers, and in return, I will forgive your crime and spare for you your life.

THIEF   Is what you say really true?

OWNER   Poems are appreciated by all the three major deities, so how could I be equivocating?

THIEF   For that I am indeed most grateful. If that is the case, I will compose one verse.

OWNER   That is a fine idea.

THIEF   How about this?

OWNER   How about what?

THIEF   This spring. . .

OWNER   This spring. . .
THIEF  Ropes are not attached below the blossoms, so people call them tall black lacquered hats.

OWNER  Very well done. The gods in heaven observe and approve. Well, I must say, how very amusing. Here, here, I will untie your rope.

THIEF  For that I am most grateful.

OWNER  Your hand must be quite chaffed and painful.

THIEF  No, not in the least. I will immediately be on my way.

OWNER  Here, here, even for a brief time, you were most uncomfortably tied up. So to lighten up your spirits, I will serve you a cup of wine. Please sit down here.

THIEF  Just sparing me my life is quite sufficient, anything further is quite unnecessary.

OWNER  I beg you to sit down here.

THIEF  With all my heart.

OWNER  Here, here, drink a cup of wine.

THIEF  I am grateful that you pour for me yourself. I accept this most unexpected cup of wine.

OWNER  You are most welcome. Drink the cup dry.

THIEF  Well, I must say, what delicious wine.
OWNER  Are you a good drinker?

THIEF  I am truly a good drinker.

OWNER  Since you seem to like my wine, have another cup.

THIEF  If that is the case, I accept another cup. I accept one more quite unexpected cup.

OWNER  Wine in abundance is a very fine thing.

THIEF  The more I drink, the better this wine tastes. While I realize how rude it may seem, I now pass this cup to you.

OWNER  Oh, and I accept it.

THIEF  I am sorry I have soiled it.

OWNER  It does not matter. Now I pass the cup back again to you.

THIEF  And I accept it.

OWNER  I will sing a little bit. (He sings a very short song.)

THIEF  Now I pass this back to you.

OWNER  And I accept it. Now I have had another drink. Now, entertain me with a dance.

THIEF  I am most inept at dancing. Please allow me not to dance.

OWNER  How can you refuse?! I insist that you dance.
THIEF  If that is the case, I will dance a dance that I learned when I was younger, so while I realize how rude it may seem, I beg you to sing to accompany me.

OWNER  With all my heart.

THIEF  (He dances.)

OWNER  Well done, well done.

THIEF  I was most awkward.

OWNER  Well now, won’t you have another drink?

THIEF  I will not accept another drink.

OWNER  Then shall I dance for you?

THIEF  That is a fine idea.

OWNER  Well, I must say, I have become acquainted with a most fascinating person. Please come and visit me frequently from now on. I will welcome you with open heart and arms.

THIEF  Today I have received your unexpected kind hospitality. I will come to visit you with greatest frequency, so please do what you can for me.

OWNER  I will gladly extend to you my hospitality.

THIEF  Well, while I will regret leaving you no matter how long I stay here, I will now say farewell and be on my way.

OWNER  Here, here, if that is the case, I will give you a souvenir.
THIEF  What will you give me?

OWNER  This is what I will give you.

THIEF  This is a truly magnificent branch of flowers. This is what is known as chasing after a true thief.

OWNER  What an impressive greeting you speak.

THIEF  Now I will sing one more song and be on my way.

OWNER  That is a fine idea.

THIEF  (Singing)

The light of the moon,
Reflect the shadow of the flowers,
Leaving fond memories of this lovely night.

Eliciting my song:
Ah, lovely, solitary branch,
Your blossoms held gently,
Wrapped in my sleeve.

Gazing at them and the moon,
Thoughts fill my mind with hope,
That will remain within my heart,
My dream of this spring,
That will remain in my heart.

Now, I will be on my way.

OWNER  I am most grateful you have come.

THIEF  Haaaa. (Bows deeply and exits.)