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Opening Extract from...

The Thief

Written by Fuminori Nakamura

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the Thief

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1

When I was a kid, I often messed this up.

In crowded shops, in other people's houses, things I'd pick up furtively would slip from my fingers. Strangers' possessions were like foreign objects that didn't fit comfortably in my hands. They would tremble faintly, asserting their independence, and before I knew it they'd come alive and fall to the ground. The point of contact, which was intrinsically morally wrong, seemed to be rejecting me. And in the distance there was always

the tower. Just a silhouette floating in the mist like some ancient daydream. But I don't make mistakes like that these days. And naturally I don't see the tower either.

IN FRONT OF me a man in his early sixties was walking towards the platform, in a black coat with a silver suitcase in his right hand. Of all the passengers here, I was sure he was the richest. His coat was Brunello Cucinelli, and so was his suit. His Berluti shoes, probably made to order, did not show even the slightest scuff marks. His wealth was obvious to everyone around him. The silver watch peeping out from the cuff on his left wrist was a Rolex Datejust. Since he wasn't used to taking the bullet train by himself, he was having some trouble buying a ticket. He stooped forward, his thick fingers hovering over the vending machine uncertainly like revolting caterpillars. At that moment I saw his wallet in the left front pocket of his jacket.

Keeping my distance, I got on the escalator, got off at a leisurely pace. With a newspaper in my hand, I stood behind him as he waited for the train. My heart was beating a little fast. I knew the position of all the security cameras on this

platform. Since I only had a platform ticket, I had to finish the job before he boarded the train. Blocking the view of the people to my right with my back, I folded the paper as I switched it to my left hand. Then I lowered it slowly to create a shield and slipped my right index and middle fingers into his coat pocket. The fluorescent light glinted faintly off the button on his cuff, sliding at the edge of my vision. I breathed in gently and held it, pinched the corner of the wallet and pulled it out. A quiver ran from my fingertips to my shoulder and a warm sensation gradually spread throughout my body. I felt like I was standing in a void, as though with the countless intersecting lines of vision of all those people, not one was directed at me. Maintaining the fragile contact between my fingers and the wallet, I sandwiched it in the folded newspaper. Then I transferred the paper to my right hand and put it in the inside pocket of my own coat. Little by little I breathed out, conscious of my temperature rising even more. I checked my surroundings, only my eyes moving. My fingers still held the tension of touching a forbidden object, the numbness of entering someone's personal space. A trickle of sweat ran down my back. I took out my cell phone and pretended to check my email as I walked away.

I went back to the ticket gate and down the gray stairs towards the Marunouchi line. Suddenly one of my eyes blurred, and all the people moving around me seemed to shimmer, their silhouettes distorted. When I reached the platform I spotted a man in a black suit out of the corner of my eye. I located his wallet by the slight bulge in the right back pocket of his trousers. From his appearance and demeanor I judged him to be a successful male companion at a ladies-only club. He was looking quizzically at his phone, his slender fingers moving busily over the keys. I got on the train with him, reading the flow of the crowd, and positioned myself behind him in the muggy carriage. When humans' nerves detect big and small stimuli at the same time, they ignore the smaller one. On this section of track there are two large curves where the train shakes violently. The office worker behind me was reading an evening paper, folded up small, and the two middle-aged women on my right were gossiping about someone and laughing raucously. The only one who wasn't simply traveling was me. I turned the back of my hand towards the man and took hold of his wallet with two fingers. The other passengers formed a wall around me on two sides. Two threads at the corner of his pocket were frayed and

twisted, forming elegant spirals like snakes. As the train swayed I pushed my chest close to him as though leaning against his back and then pulled the wallet out vertically. The tight pressure inside me leaked into the air. I breathed out and a reassuring warmth flowed through my body. Without moving I checked the atmosphere in the carriage, but nothing seemed out of order. There was no way I would make a mistake in a simple job like this. At the next station I got off and walked away, hunching my shoulders like someone feeling the cold.

I joined the stream of weary people and went through the barrier. Looking at the fifteen or so average men and women gathered at the entrance to the station, I figured there was about two hundred thousand yen among them. I strolled off, lighting a cigarette. Behind a power pole to my left I saw a man check the contents of his wallet in full view and put it in the right pocket of his white down jacket. His cuffs were dark with stains, his sneakers worn and only the fabric of his jeans was good quality. I ignored him and went into Mitsukoshi Department Store. On the menswear floor, which was full of brand-name shops, there was a display mannequin wearing a coordinated outfit, something reasonably well-off guys in their late twenties

or early thirties would wear. The mannequin and I were dressed the same. I had no interest in clothes, but people in my line of work can't afford to stand out. You have to look prosperous so that no one suspects you. You have to wear a lie, you have to blend into your environment as a lie. The only difference between me and the store dummy was the shoes. Keeping in mind that I might have to run away, I was in sneakers.

I took advantage of the warmth inside the shop to loosen my fingers, opening and closing my hands inside my pockets. The wet handkerchief I used to moisten my fingers was still cold. My forefinger and middle finger were almost the same length. Whether I was born like that or they gradually grew that way I don't know. People whose ring fingers are longer than their index fingers use their middle and ring fingers. Some people grip with three fingers, with the middle finger at the back. Like all forms of motion, there is a smooth, ideal movement for removing a wallet from a pocket. It's not only a matter of the angle, but of speed as well. Ishiwaka loved talking about this stuff. Often when he drank he became unguarded and chatty like a child. I didn't know what he was up to anymore. I figured he was probably already dead.

I entered a stall in the department store's dimly lit toilet, pulled on a thin pair of gloves and inspected the wallets. I'd made it a rule never to use the station toilets, just to be on the safe side. The Brunello Cucinelli man's held 96,000 yen, three American $100 bills, a Visa gold card, an American Express gold card, a driver's license, a gym membership card and a receipt for 72,000 yen from a fancy Japanese restaurant. Just when I was about to give up I found an intricately colored plastic card with nothing printed on it. I'd come across these before. They're for exclusive private brothels. In the male companion's wallet were 52,000 yen, a driver's license, a Mitsui Sumitomo credit card, cards for Tsutaya video store and a comic book café, several business cards from sex workers and a whole lot of scrap paper, receipts and the like. There were also some colorful pills with hearts and stars stamped on them. I only took the banknotes, leaving the rest inside. A wallet shows a person's personality and lifestyle. Just like a cell phone, it is at the center, forming the nucleus of the owner's secrets, everything he carries on him. I never sold the cards because it was too much bother. I did what Ishikawa would have done—if I dropped the wallets in a mailbox, the post office would forward them to the police,

who would then return them to the address on the driver's license. I wiped off my fingerprints and put the wallets in my pocket. The male escort might get busted for drugs, but that wasn't my problem.

Just as I was leaving the stall I felt something strange in one of the hidden pockets inside my coat. Alarmed, I went back into the toilet. A Bulgari wallet, made of stiff leather. Inside was 200,000 yen in new bills. Also several gold cards, Visa and others, and the business cards of the president of a securities firm. I'd never seen the wallet or the name on the cards before.

Not again, I thought. I had no recollection of taking it. But of all the wallets I'd acquired that day it was definitely the most valuable.

2

Feeling a slight headache, I gave myself up to the rocking of the train. It was bound for Haneda Airport, but it was terribly crowded. Between the heating and the warmth of other people's bodies, I was sweating. I stared out the window, moving my fingers in my pockets. Clusters of dingy houses passed at regular intervals, like some kind of code. Suddenly I remembered the last wallet I took yesterday. I blinked and an enormous iron tower flashed by me with a loud roar. It was over in an

instant but my body stiffened. The tower was tall and I felt like it had glanced casually at me standing tensely in the middle of that crowded train.

When I looked around the carriage I saw a man who seemed to be totally absorbed by something. Not so much concentrating as in a trance, eyes half closed, as he groped a woman's body. I think that men like that fall into two types—ordinary people who have perverted tendencies, and people who are swallowed up by their perversion so that the boundary between fantasy and reality becomes blurred and then disappears completely. I suspected he belonged to the second group. Then I realized that the victim was a junior high school student, and I wove my way through a gap in the crowd. Apart from me and him and the girl, no one had noticed anything.

From behind, I deliberately grabbed the man's left wrist with my left hand. All his muscles suddenly jerked into life and then I felt him go limp, as though after a severe shock. Keeping hold of his wrist, I steadied his watch with my forefinger, undid the clasp on the strap with my thumb and slid it into my sleeve. Then I pinched his wallet from the right inside pocket of his suit with my right fingers. Realizing there was a risk of touching

his body, I changed my movement, dropped the wallet in the space between his jacket and shirt and caught it with my left hand underneath. A company employee in his late thirties, and judging from his ring he was married. I grasped his arm again, this time with my right hand. The color had drained from his face and he was struggling to turn towards me, twisting his neck while rocking with the motion of the train. Sensing the change behind her, the girl moved her head, unsure whether to turn around or not. The carriage was quiet. The man was trying to open his mouth to speak, as if he wanted to justify himself to me or to the world. It seemed like some malevolent spotlight was calling attention to his presence. His throat quivered as though he was getting ready to scream. Sweat was running down his cheeks and forehead and his eyes were wide but unfocused. Perhaps I would wear the same expression when I got caught. I released the pressure on his arm and mouthed, "Go!" Face contorted, he couldn't make up his mind. I jerked my head towards the door. Arms trembling, he turned to the front again, as if he'd realized that I'd been looking at his face. The door opened and he ran. He thrust his way into the throng, wriggling and shoving people out of the way.

Inside the carriage the schoolgirl was staring at me. I turned away, trying to suppress my revulsion. I'd taken a watch I didn't want, a wallet I didn't want, and both the man and the girl had seen what I looked like. At least there was no way he could report me.

My heart was no longer in it so I got off at the next stop. On the escalator I spotted the slack, wealthy face of a middle-aged man, but I went outside and rested against the dirty wall. The tension was gradually leaving my body. I warmed my fingers in my pockets, thinking about catching a taxi.

I felt someone's presence and when I looked around a skinny guy was just leaning on the wall beside me. A black suit, a brand I didn't recognize, black shoes I didn't recognize. *It's Tachibana*, I thought. Caught off guard, I started to panic and fought to control myself. His hair, which had been blond, was now dyed brown. Staring fixedly at me through narrowed eyes, he curled his thick lips. It might have been a smile, but I wasn't sure.

"I thought you only targeted rich people?"

As he said this he turned his whole body to face me. Tachibana might not have been his real name, but I was pretty sure he knew mine. I thought I'd meet him

somewhere, but I expected that when I did I'd be the one to spot him. All my memories came flooding back and I took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I do."

I wanted to say something else, but this inane reply was all I could come up with.

"That's boring. Besides, do really rich people ride trains? You're a crook, so act like one."

"I just go with the flow. So, you're still alive."

"I'm talking to you, aren't I? I've been watching you."

"Since when?"

"The whole time. Since you took that pervert's wallet. I'm a bit surprised you didn't realize I was following you."

I started to walk and he walked with me. We went under the railway bridge and I stopped.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

For some reason he was looking at me seriously.

"Not long. After all, there's easy pickings in Tokyo. This and that."

"But it must be hard on your own. I'm free. Why don't we team up?"

"I'm fine. I don't trust your skills and I don't trust you to share either."

He laughed loudly and started walking again. Deliberately loud laughter makes people uncomfortable, and although Tachibana must have known that he didn't stop. When we came out on the other side of the railway bridge I felt as though the massive structures, the department stores and buildings, were glaring down at me from behind. A shiver ran down my spine and I found myself staring at the wilted grass poking up through the concrete. Tachibana stopped, leaned against a wire mesh fence and lit a cigarette.

"Sure, I'm not that good. I was originally a shoplifter, back in junior high school. Picking pockets was just an extension of that, just for fun. I can't do it like you or Ishikawa. You doing the lift, passing the wallet to him, he takes out what's inside and then you put it back in the owner's pocket. And then he'd only take two thirds. The mark wouldn't realize what had happened, and even if he did he couldn't report it. And the way you guys shared the roles, changing positions and taking turns. Signaling just with your eyes. All I could do was watch in awe. But there are hardly any Japanese pickpockets these days. Are you still changing jobs all the time? If you need a sideline, why not join another pro burglary ring, like you did before, or

deal, or something? Has pickpocketing turned into your main job? "

Because of the nature of our conversation I had to move closer to him.

"I used to sell fakes. What's good now?"

"Loan-sharking's gone out of fashion, and I was using some young guys for bank transfer scams. Now it's stocks. Of course, I'm just a go-between."

"Stocks?"

"I'm not a nobody any more. The yakuza give me money, which I pass on to someone else to invest. Their information is amazing. Insider trading, that's what I'm talking about. Everyone's doing it these days."

He tossed away his cigarette butt.

"I'm making heaps more than you. I could put some work your way. All you'd have to do is just give some filthy rooms to a bunch of homeless people. In return, you get them to set up bank accounts, which we can use for a whole range of scams without there being any connection to us."

"I'm not interested."

"You're weird. So was Ishikawa. What is it you want?"

I stayed silent.

"Well, aren't you going to ask what happened to him?"

He was watching me. My heart started to beat faster.

"Do you know?"

"No," he said and laughed.

The sunlight overhead was really bothering me.

"But it had something to do with that robbery, I guess. One thing's for sure. That was spooky. It's spooky when a big job like that goes off without a hitch. I bet he got into trouble then. I'll tell you one thing, though. You should get out of Tokyo, especially this area."

"Why?"

"It looks like they're up to something again."

Our eyes met. I wasn't sure how to respond, so I looked at the ground.

"You should disappear, before you get caught up in it again."

"What about you?"

"I'll be OK. In fact, if they are planning something I'll make a lot of cash. Besides, that's how I live. It's too late to worry about saving my own skin."

He laughed, so I laughed too. As if realizing that he'd talked for too long, he raised his hand lightly and turned at the intersection. In the distance I saw a tall, rich-looking

man, but I couldn't be bothered. The buildings were getting to me, so I went back under the bridge. Murky water had pooled in a discarded take-out container. Somehow it looked unpleasantly warm.