Kamishibai
by Gramarye

Summary

Even without costumes or sets or lights or music -- without a cast to perform it or a theatre to perform in -- you can still put on a good show. All you need is a good script, and an appreciative audience.

Notes

Additional historical notes are at the end.

See the end of the work for more notes

Tokyo, November 1945

In those first months after the end of the war, as the oppressiveness of summer faded into the chill of autumn, Sakisaka often found himself walking home from work. If it was raining, as it so often was, then he might take the initiative to push onto an overcrowded tram just to stay out of the wet for a few minutes, but if the streets were dry then there was no real excuse to make an effort to get home any sooner than he absolutely had to.

(Once, you could have set a watch by his punctuality.)

If nothing else, the long walks were good for pulling his thoughts together to draft the thrice-weekly letters, sent on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays regardless of the responses he received in the
interim. One was already winging its way out of Tokyo towards the Kanagawa coastline, to the long low wooden building overlooking the sea, and when he returned home tonight he would have to start on the next one.

Perhaps next month, he might write, later that evening, I will be able to make the trip to visit you. You have not told me what the doctors say, if you are permitted visitors yet. Of course they will tell you when, but I would like to know --

Too many things to know. Who wrote your last letter for you? he might ask. If it is a woman, perhaps one of the nurses, then her handwriting is nothing like yours. Most inconsistent in her spelling as well. No, that was too scolding, too eager to find fault. Perhaps something more cheering would be better, something for her to look forward to. I have a magazine to send you, one of the new literary reviews. I have not yet read it, but I am told that the editor has a keen eye for poetry. For that matter, would you like me to bring the book you were reading before you left? I know that you told me to leave it, that you would pick it up again when you returned, but a fortnight's consultation is much different than a six-month --

Draft after draft of letter written in his head, during his walks home. Every sentence carefully constructed and polished smooth as glass, every word neat and fitting and saying nothing that could be misinterpreted. Not as he had written during the war, with a weather eye on his unseen colleagues who censored the post, but for an audience of one.

Turning the corner, Sakisaka had to sidestep to avoid the small forest of bamboo poles that had sprung up around a patch of new construction. Peace could not restore the city he had known, but nearly all of the rubble had been cleared away from the common thoroughfares, even if the buildings themselves sat like rows of broken teeth on either side. Some families had scavenged enough fragments of their former dwellings to live on the bombed-out sites again; others were long gone, in one way or another. In his last letter, he had mentioned the most recent developments near their own home. The wall around the Inari shrine has finally been repaired. The plaster does not match, of course, but it looks a thousand times better than it did even a week ago.

A week ago. He had not had a letter from Kanagawa, from the low wooden building overlooking the sea, in six days. Tonight would make it seven.

Sakisaka sighed, and turned up the collar of his threadbare coat. A month ago, the evening breezes had been almost enjoyable when compared to the thick, humid air of late summer. Now they reminded him that he would have to set money aside to find a sturdier pair of shoes from somewhere, before the clumsy repairs he had made to his left sole wore through. Perhaps one of the vendors in the new 'liberty markets' would have something that fit him. There was no real shame in buying from there, these days, even though some small part of his gut still twisted to think of the laws being broken, left and right. The people of the capital had to make a living somehow.

Just as he was rounding the next corner, moving out of the main thoroughfare to the narrower side streets with their clusters of makeshift dwellings, a sudden shout from close behind him jolted him out of his thoughts. Before he could turn to look round, a pair of children bolted past him on either side, their flimsy sandals slapping on the pavement as they ran. Looking up, about two streets ahead, Sakisaka saw a crowd beginning to gather beneath one of the neighbourhood's few standing streetlights. The two children were heading straight for the crowd, and as Sakisaki drew closer he saw that they had joined a ragged group of other children, well over a dozen all told, gathered around a man who was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a patched haori two sizes too big for him. Over the heads of the crowd of small bodies, he could see that the man was standing beside a battered old bicycle that had a large wooden box fastened above the back tyre.
Sakisaka slowed his pace. A kamishibai man, of course, with his little portable theatre. The men and their bicycles seemed to be everywhere these days -- or perhaps he simply noticed them more readily than before. They eked out a living pedalling from place to place, selling cheap candy to their audiences, and in return they gave short performances, telling stories with the aid of a series of pictures that they had drawn or painted on screens that they carried with them on the backs of their bicycles. More affordable for their meagre audiences than a movie or a play, by far...and easily moved along, if a policeman loomed too close or a shopkeeper protested over the crowd blocking the pavement. Not an easy way to earn a living, but an honest one at least.

Before the war, Sakisaka recalled, the kamishibai men had been little more to him than nuisances on street corners, telling foolish tales for children or spouting scandal and scurrilous nonsense for the illiterate masses. With no playscripts but the ones in their heads, their art -- such as it was -- had never crossed his desk. Even during the war, when more of the storytellers were inclined to share educational or morally uplifting tales, he'd never have thought to stop and look at one for longer than a passing moment, let alone stop to listen to his tale. But tonight, there was nothing waiting for him at home but some cold rice and the last of the pickled vegetables from the night before. Perhaps he could stay and watch for a few minutes...just to be sure, of course, that the man was not telling any stories that were inappropriate for young, impressionable ears.

Most of the children who had flocked to the kamishibai man and his bicycle were on the younger side, perhaps between four and eight years of age. The oldest among them was a girl of no more than nine or ten, who had a wiggling infant strapped into a sling across her back. A younger sibling, most likely -- and judging by the brisk open-handed slaps she was dealing out among the shouting, squalling crowd, no fewer than three of the other children in there were also in her charge. Some sort of exchange seemed to be going on between the children and the kamishibai man, and as Sakisaka drifted closer the babble of children’s voices resolved into understandable shouts:

'Here, mister, here -- '

'Junpei, settle down!'

'-- I want that one, I want it!'

'Mister, mister, where's the lemon drops?'

'I found that one, you can't have it!'

'Quit pushing me!'

'Nee-nee, Yurika-nee-nee, Toshi-kun pinched me!'

'Lemon drops, mister -- '

'I did not!'

'You said you'd share it, you said -- '

Somehow, the kamishibai man managed to make sense of the chaos. A large paper bag appeared, to a raucous cheer and and a flurry of small waving hands. In ones and two, the small hands deposited tiny amounts of change into his larger one, and pieces of hard candy went into those small hands in turn. Gradually, shouting faded to silence as the children's mouths were occupied by their sweets. The eldest girl shifted the baby in the sling so it could fall asleep on her back, and wearily handed over one last coin in exchange for two wrapped pieces of candy. The kamishibai man put the bag away, and turned to open the wooden box attached to his vehicle.
At that moment, as if responding to some unspoken cue, the lone streetlight at the intersection flickered on, casting a weak, ghostly glow down onto the man, the bicycle, and his paper theatre.

Nothing could have prepared Sakisaka for the moment when the kamishibai man straightened up, and tilted his old straw hat back to let the light hit his face -- and Tsubaki Hajime-sensei looked up, out across his audience of small children, and locked eyes with the man who had stopped to stare at him in turn.

Sakisaka felt his breath leave his body in a rush like a punch to the gut, his mouth falling half-open as if his jaw had detached itself from the rest of his head. Tsubaki also seemed to have lost his voice: his mouth opened and shut, moving without a sound. Before either of them could find a word between them, a lone child's voice rose up into the silence, with youthful impatience --

'Hey, mister, we want the story!'

-- and though the demand was followed by a sharp smack and a little cry, as the oldest girl took the youngster to task for his impudence, the break was enough to make Tsubaki pull himself together, and give the group of children a shaky little smile and a bow, before he cleared his voice and began to speak.

'Once upon a time,' he said, in the voice that Sakisaka had thought that he might never hear again, 'a long, long time ago, a old man and old woman lived in a small farm in the countryside. One day, while the old man was out in the fields, he set a trap for a wicked old tanuki that had been stealing rice from his harvest. He caught the tanuki, and carried it home to his wife. She knew how to make delicious tanuki udon, with big thick noodles and a rich broth and plenty of fresh green onions, and when he went back out to the rice fields he knew that she would cook it up for their supper.'

For a group of children who seldom saw fresh vegetables, let alone thick noodles or rich broths, Tsubaki's description was enough to hook them from the start, their mouths watering as they sucked harder on their candies. Even Sakisaka found himself thinking of a real tanuki udon, slurped hot from the bowl in a little stand by a railway station, and with his mind's eye he could almost see the steam rising from it in vanishing curls.

Tsubaki turned to his theatre, and lifted the lid of his box to show the first of his picture cards. It featured the image of an old woman bent over a big soup pot, looking up at a tanuki bound up in a net over the simmering brew. 'When the old woman returned to her kitchen,' he said, 'she saw the tied-up tanuki, and immediately put on a big soup pot to cook it. But as she began to chop the vegetables for the pot and knead the dough for her fresh noodles, the tanuki began to cry."

"Oh, please, kind lady, please don't kill me!" Tsubaki made his voice quaver with the fear of the cowardly, weak-willed animal. "I know I'm only a wicked old tanuki, and I've stolen rice from you, but I was so very hungry and your food looked so good to me! Please ex-squeeze me, won't you, and let me go?"

The children giggled around their sweets at the silliness of the line, and even Sakisaka huffed through his nose in spite of himself. So you managed to sneak in -- what was his name? -- ah, yes, that Ao-Kan into your story here? What would your old patron say, playing the villain of this piece? And yet Tsubaki's impression of the clownish old actor, the former head of his former troupe, had a wry enjoyment to it, as if he were keeping a fond memory alive.

Switching out of character, and back to narration, Tsubaki continued. 'The old lady knew that the tanuki was wicked, and that she shouldn't listen to it, but the tanuki cried and carried on so pitifully that eventually her kind heart gave way. She put a big helping of vegetables in the boiling soup pot, and went over to cut the tanuki down -- '
'Don't do it!' one of the younger children shouted, completely caught up in the moment. Two of his companions elbowed him harshly in the ribs, and he quieted with a whimper. But Tsubaki took advantage of the interruption, and nodded sagely at the worried boy.

'See, you're very smart children!' he said. 'You know you shouldn't trust the tanuki. That's an important lesson to learn. But as I said, the old lady felt sorry for the tanuki -- and no sooner had she cut away the ropes that tied it up, and lowered it down to the ground, than the tanuki sat up, grinned wickedly at her, and gave a great big push! -- he mimed the action, making the children in the front row gasp and recoil -- 'and the poor old lady fell, PLOP!, into the big pot of soup, and I'm sad to say that that was the end of her.' He frowned. 'But the wicked old tanuki wasn't finished yet.'

With a sorrowful shake of his head, Tsubaki pushed his overly long sleeves back and went to switch cards. However, he paused before he could take the next one out. 'You know that tanuki can transform themselves, right?' he said. 'Make themselves look like humans, if they want to?' As several of the children nodded, Tsubaki nodded back at them. 'You sometimes see a big plump man, all round like a ball, and a mean look on his face --'

' -- like that loud foreigner who yelled at Toshi-kun today!' a girl exclaimed.

'He was scary,' said another boy, who rubbed at his nose in sudden shyness, and one or two others murmured agreement.

Tsubaki let out a hump. 'Well, he might look like a scary loud foreigner to you...but he might be a tanuki, pretending to be a human! And sometimes, if you see a big scary man like that and you yell out, "There goes a tanuki! Look out!", he might be so surprised that he'll forget about his disguise, and he'll turn back into one right before your eyes!'

Several of the children giggled, a little nervously, at the thought, and Tsubaki used the pause to catch his breath. 'Anyway, where was I?' he said. 'Oh, yes. Well, the wicked old tanuki didn't turn itself into a man this time, but made itself look like the poor old woman it had pushed into the pot! He turned to the next card, which showed the plump tanuki with a woman's kerchief over its head, stirring the pot as the old man appeared in the doorway. 'But the tanuki certainly wasn't as good a cook as the old lady had been. When the old man came home, and his wife (who was really the tanuki, remember!) gave him a bowl of the soup that was boiling on the hearth, he was astounded by how awful it was! The fresh udon noodles were tough and gummy, the vegetables were all in little pieces, and the meat of the soup -- which the old man thought was the tanuki he'd captured -- seemed to fall off his chopsticks, as if it didn't want him to eat a single bite of it! So the old man looked over at the tanuki-wife and said, "My dear, are you unwell? This tanuki udon is not very good at all!"

'Now, a tanuki is very vain, as well as being wicked, and when it heard the old man say that the soup wasn't good, it completely forgot that it was pretending to be a nice old lady. "Ex-squeeze me!" it said, going all bristly, "How dare you say that my soup isn't very good!" And as soon as it said that, the man knew that it wasn't his wife, but the tanuki he'd captured! But before the man could say or do anything, the tanuki dropped its disguise and ran out of the old man's house, leaving him all alone with the terrible pot of soup.'

The children shifted uneasily as Tsubaki flipped to the next card. This one had a picture of a rabbit sitting up on its hind legs, holding a wide-brimmed straw hat in its paws at it looked up at the saddened old man.

'Not far from the house, there lived a rabbit. He was good friends with the old man and woman, and they treated him like a grandson, sharing vegetables with him in exchange for his help in digging out and eating the weeds in their garden. When the rabbit heard about what the wicked old tanuki had done, he told the old man, "Don't worry, Grandfather! That tanuki will pay for what he did to
Grandmother, I promise you!" Tsubaki held up one pinky, imitating the rabbit's vow. 'So the rabbit put on his big travelling hat, to disguise his long ears, and packed a small bag with some secret herbs in it, and went out to find the tanuki.'

Listening to Tsubaki's performance, Sakisaka found himself pondering the choice of story. Kachi-kachi Yama -- Fire-crackle Mountain -- certainly was an old tale, and one that could be told easily by a single story-teller, but the object lessons it contained were a far cry from the ones in the stories that had been most popular in recent years. Children were expected to want to emulate Momotarou and his loyal animal companions fighting against the oni of a far-off island, or the hatchet-wielding Kintarou making his solitary way through the forest -- and how could one compare those moral examples of strength, and friendship, and cheerful perseverance, with the tale of a greedy, murderous tanuki receiving its comeuppance from a vengeful rabbit?

And yet the children seemed to be enjoying themselves nonetheless. They were listening attentively, caught up in Tsubaki's performance. For someone who had never professed to be an actor himself, as Sakisaka recalled, the young man had a certain gift for telling a story to keep his audience engaged. He seemed to have warmed to the tale as well, because he leaned forward with a conspiratorial air as he reached the next part.

'At that time, the tanuki had gone out to collect wood for its fire. It had managed to find a lot of wood, but there was too much to carry all in one bundle, and being a lazy tanuki it didn't want to take one bundle home and come all the way back for the second one. So when the tanuki saw another creature in a big travelling hat, looking like one of the poor peasants who lived in shacks in the forest and gathered herbs to make medicines, it called out: "Ho, you there! Come and help me carry this firewood, and I will give you some rice for your trouble." So the rabbit pulled the brim of its hat down low over its eyes -- and in a little moment of play-acting, Tsubaki did the same with his wide straw hat -- 'and came over to pick up one of the bundles. The wicked tanuki, of course, took the smaller bundle for itself, and gave the rabbit the larger one. The tanuki set off back to its home, with the rabbit following behind.'

The next card that Tsubaki held up showed the tanuki and the rabbit, both with big bundles of firewood on their backs. The rabbit, however, was striking sparks from a flint held in its paws, and bright red and orange flames were licking up the bundle of firewood the tanuki was carrying. Several of the children squirmed again, nudging each other, but this time with anticipation and excitement.

'As they walked along,' Tsubaki said, 'the rabbit secretly took out a little tinderbox, and sent sparks flying toward the firewood on the tanuki's back. The dry wood soon caught fire, and the flames went crackling through the bundle. The tanuki started to feel very warm from the heat of the fire, and wiped the sweat from its forehead, but thought that it was feeling warm from working so hard and carrying the bundle so far. But all of a sudden, it started to hear a strange crackling noise, kachi-kachi-kachi, like the sound of a big fire -- but there was no fire nearby to be seen. So it said to the rabbit, "Here, listen, do you hear that noise? A crackle-crackle sound, kachi-kachi-kachi, like that of a big fire?"'

Tsubaki smiled faintly. 'The rabbit, pretending to be only a foolish peasant, said, "Oh, m'lord, have you never heard of Fire-crackle Mountain? It's named like that because you can hear a sound like a big fire, kachi-kachi-kachi, whenever you come close to it. We aren't far away from the mountain now, so I'm not surprised that you can hear it!"'

'The tanuki still thought this was strange, but it kept walking. All the while, the crackle-crackle sound, kachi-kachi-kachi, got louder and louder, and the tanuki felt warmer and warmer...until all of a sudden, it felt something hot and prickling right against its back! And then there was an awful smell, like stinky burning hair, as the fire reached the tanuki's fur!'
One of the smallest girls in the group let out a high, nervous giggle, and Tsubaki plunged on to the heart of the scene. "The tanuki let out a howl, and spun around in circles as it tried to get the flaming bundle of firewood off its back. "Ex-squeeze me! Ex-squeeze me!" it cried to the rabbit, who was standing there and watching the fun. "Get this firewood off of me! Somehow, it's caught on fire, kachi-kachi-kachi, and it's burning me alive!" So the rabbit set down the second bundle of firewood, and once the tanuki had got the wood off its back, it stamped out the fire with its big long rabbit feet. And then, because the tanuki was rolling around on the forest floor, trying to put the last bits of fire out, the rabbit decided to "help" it by rolling the tanuki into a big patch of thorns and nettles. So the wicked old tanuki was not only burned all up and down its back, but it had dozens of sharp pointy needles to pick out of its fur.'

The children all laughed at the thought of the evil tanuki plucking thorn after thorn from its sides and behind. Sakisaka couldn't help but smile at the thought as well; Tsubaki certainly had a way with words.

'But the rabbit wasn't finished yet,' Tsubaki continued, and flipped to a new card. This one showed the rabbit putting something on the tanuki's back, while the thorn-studded creature writhed in surprisingly realistic agony. "'Oh, m'lord, you look like you're in pain!' it said. "I have some medicine that will feel good on your poor back!'" The tanuki was in too much pain to say yes or no, so the rabbit reached into its bag and took out some little pots, the kind that usually held mixtures of medicines. It opened one pot, and scooped out a handful of herbs and seeds that had been ground into a paste. But it wasn't a nice soothing poultice at all -- it was a pepper-and-mustard poultice, the kind used for aches and pains. On a sore leg or tender shoulder, it would feel nice and warm, but on a big burned blister it would be as hot and prickly as a hundred thousand scalding needles! And no sooner had the rabbit put some of the pepper-and-mustard poultice on the tanuki's back than the tanuki let out an even louder howl. By the time the rabbit was done, the tanuki had been burned twice over: first by the fire, and then by the poultice.

'That's for the burning pain that Grandmother felt as you pushed her into the pot of hot soup! the rabbit thought to itself.' Tsubaki mopped his brow with his sleeve, and Sakisaka had to resist the urge to take out his own handkerchief as well in unconscious sympathy. 'But it still wasn't finished punishing the tanuki yet.

'Once it had recovered from the burning fire and the burning poultice,' Tsubaki said, 'the tanuki hid and sulked, because its once sleek and glossy fur was all blackened and singed and its back was covered in blisters. But soon it became very hungry, and decided to go down to the river to catch some fish for supper. The rabbit had been spying on the tanuki, and raced ahead down to the river, where it put on its big straw hat to hide its long ears and began to work on building a small wooden boat, just big enough to hold one lightweight creature like itself.

The next card showed the tanuki lolling on a grassy riverbank, seemingly asleep without a care in the world, while the rabbit was fashioning some sort of round bowl-like vessel out of mud or dirt beside the water. 'The tanuki arrived at the river, and saw what he thought was a peasant building a boat. Being lazy, the tanuki thought that it would be better to take the peasant's boat and go out into the middle of the river, where there were more fish. So it walked up to the rabbit and said, "Ho there, my good fellow! Give me that boat you are building, and I will go out and catch enough fish for both of us."

'The rabbit pulled the brim of its hat low over its eyes' -- again, Tsubaki adjusted the hat on his own head -- 'and said, "M'lord, this boat would be much too small and light for you. If you give me a few minutes, I will make a much better boat for you, using the clay from the riverbank." The tanuki thought that this would be a good idea, and so it settled down to take a nap while the rabbit made the boat for him. However, the rabbit did not use clay for the boat, but handfuls of heavy river mud
mixed with field grasses. When the boat was done, it looked like a nice clay boat, but only the rabbit knew that it was really made of wet, sticky mud and dry grass. But when the tanuki woke up from its nap, it was pleased by the new boat, and pushed it out onto the river. The rabbit took its little wooden boat and followed closely behind.'

Tsubaki flipped to his final card, which showed the tanuki up to its neck in the middle of the river, reaching out to the rabbit in its wooden boat like a drowning man trying to grasp for a final lifeline. 'No sooner had both boats reached the middle of the river, however, than the tanuki's boat started to fall apart, as the rushing water washed away the grasses and the mud holding it together.' He extended an arm out to the children, mimicking the tanuki's plight. 'Seeing the rabbit in the little wooden boat, the sinking tanuki called out to it. "Ah, save me, save me, my good fellow!" it shouted, waving its little arms in the air. But to its surprise, the rabbit flung off its big straw hat, picked up its oar, and struck at the mud boat' -- and suddenly, Tsubaki raised his arms over his head, as if he were holding the rabbit's oar -- 'with a WHACK!, until the boat cracked right in half and the tanuki fell PLOP! into the river.

"O wicked tanuki, the rabbit declared, you killed my friend the old woman by pushing her into a big pot of hot soup, where she was cooked and sank to the bottom! Now you have been cooked as she was, and now you will sink as she did!" And sure enough, the wicked old tanuki sank right down to the bottom of the river -- and was never seen or heard from again.'

Tsubaki drew a long breath, and gave a little bow. 'And that, boys and girls, is the end of the story, and I thank you for listening to it.'

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For a few minutes, Sakisaka had thought that he would never be able to extricate Tsubaki from the little group of children. They had clamoured around him, wanting to know if he would be back with another story soon, pleading with him to tell their favourite tales. One wanted something with lots of demons, another wanted magical heros fighting lizards and spacemen, yet another asked for a story that involved some kind of 'Golden Bat' -- and Tsubaki somehow promised them that they would have to wait and see until next time, but it would be a spectacular show. And finally, finally, he and Sakisaka were alone.

Of course, it was awkward. Not knowing what to say, what to ask. Where have you been? and Are you well? naturally fall short, in a world that had fallen apart around both of them. For that matter, Sakisaka had met too many returning soldiers to open up any conversation that might turn on experiences best forgotten. Yet they could not stand on a street corner all night, so when Tsubaki made a vague gesture towards a direction that might have been his home, the two men began walking in that direction. It was the opposite direction of Sakisaka's building, but that was of no consequence.

With little room to talk about the past, the present was the safest option. And in this instance, Tsubaki's bicycle and its precious cargo was the most obvious topic of conversation.

'It belongs to one of the actors from the troupe,' Tsubaki said, as he pushed the bicycle along. 'I was fortunate enough to track him down, about a month or so ago -- his people live in Fukuoka, not far from where mine lived, and once I had my discharge papers in hand they helped me reach out to him. He's working on a construction site now, so he's been letting me borrow his bicycle, and the story cards. As long as I sell the candy, he says I can keep it for as long as I need to do so.'

Sakisaka nodded. 'Better than having it sit around idle,' he said, and immediately hated how that sounded, so he tried again. 'Do you mostly tell folk tales?"
'For now,' Tsubaki replied. 'The children know them, so it's easy to tell them over and over again. But I've been trying to come up with some other stories. Not very successfully, though.' He ducked his head, letting the brim of his hat fall over his eyes. 'I'm not that good of a writer these days, to be truthful. And possibly even worse of an actor.'

'You were very good back there.'

For a moment, Tsubaki was silent. 'You're too kind, Sakisaka-san,' he said at last. 'I think it might have helped that I like telling the story. Fire-crackle Mountain, that is. Because it's not like most of the other folk tales, you know. It's more... The street ahead was pitted in places, and so Tsubaki paused for the few seconds needed to manoeuvre the bicycle around the cracked pavement before he continued his thought. 'More honest, I think.'

Sakisaka frowned at the odd choice of word. 'Honest?'

There were far fewer streetlights in this stretch of street, and Tsubaki's voice, when he spoke, drifted out from beneath the shadows of his brim. 'Both the tanuki and the rabbit are cruel, aren't they?' he said at last. 'The tanuki of course, because of what it does to the old woman, but the rabbit...well, the rabbit tortures the tanuki first. It's the hero of the story, but it's not really a hero, is it?'

Sakisaka opened his mouth to argue, then shut it again. 'I suppose not,' he murmured.

Tsubaki looked up hastily, as if out of concern that he'd caused offense. 'Forgive me, Sakisaka-san, I'm talking too much,' he said in a rush. 'What have you -- I mean, didn't you say that you were still employed in your old office these days?'

Sakisaka considered his reply. 'When most of the theatres closed down,' he said, 'I was transferred to the film review offices. I did some work with the newspapers, too, when there weren't any scripts to review. And then....' His mouth twisted wryly. 'It might surprise you, but I'm working for the Americans now.'

'For the Americans?'

'I look at textbooks mostly, these days. The ones that those children you were entertaining should be reading in school. Literature, history, even mathematics.' Sakisaka cleared his throat, as if preparing to quote something he'd heard many times before. 'Children should be counting apples and balls, the Americans say, not battleships and grenades. So I keep an eye out for "undesirable phrases" to remove, or reword.'

Tsubaki gave him a sidelong look, and a flicker of a reflected lantern outside a temple gate illuminated a hint of a smile. 'For the sake of the nation?'

Sakisaka returned the look evenly. 'Yes, that would be one of them.'

Tsubaki's smile stayed in place for a moment, then faded into a pensive look. 'Apples and balls,' he said. 'The children who were watching me this evening won't be likely to have either of those for a while yet.' He ran a hand over the handlebars of the bicycle. 'Maybe that's why I like telling these stories to them. Not just Fire-crackle Mountain, but the other ones, too. I don't tell stories with battleships or grenades in them.' A pause. 'We've had enough of those for all our lifetimes.'

The silence that fell between them felt thin and strained, until finally Sakisaka couldn't bear it any longer. 'Look, Tsubaki-sensei -- ' he said, his voice suddenly loud than he had intended it to be, only for Tsubaki to interrupt him.

'Just Tsubaki-san,' he said. 'I'm hardly an authority on anything these days.'
'...er, Tsubaki-san, then.' Sakisaka plunged on. 'I don't...I don't know if you need a place to stay, but...but I have a few rooms, in a decent building. There would be room for you to store the bicycle, I believe, and a quiet space if you wanted to write. And I haven't seen any other kamishibai men around there, so you might have less competition for audiences.'

Tsubaki stopped short, seemingly stunned by the offer, and looked up at him with wide eyes. 'I...' he began, then shook his head. 'Sakisaka-san, that's...it's incredibly generous of you, truly but I wouldn't want to -- '

Sakisaka cut him off. 'Please,' he said. 'As it happen, my wife is out of town for a few weeks, taking in the sea air in Kanagawa for her health' -- which was not a lie, not truly, no matter how much blood he imagined that he could taste on the back of his tongue -- 'so you would be free to stay until she returns. Two can live just as cheaply as one, after all.'

Tsubaki hesitated. 'I'd pay you rent, of course. From my earnings. I have enough.'

'Of course,' Sakisaka agreed, knowing that he'd never touch a sen of Tsubaki's money. 'Then we have an agreement! You may bring your things over as soon as tomorrow evening, if you like. I can give you the address.' A mad thought had seized hold of him, a sense that if he didn't make the offer quickly, grab hold of Tsubaki as swiftly as he could, then the younger man would dissolve into the night mist like a demon in a dream.

'If...only if you insist, Sakisaka-san.' Tsubaki replied. He turned a thoughtful eye on Sakisaka, then turned to give him a little bow over the crossbar of the bicycle. 'Then perhaps, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, you might help me decide which stories would be best for the children to hear? Since you're spending so much time with their textbooks these days,' he added slowly, as if thinking aloud, 'I would appreciate your guidance on how to tailor my performances, in accordance with the appropriate values needed for moral education and proper civic duty.'

Sakisaka blinked -- and realised, incredibly, that Tsubaki was poking fun at him, and his work, and his duty to the people.

For perhaps the first time in his life, he realised that he couldn't care less.

'Then for the steak of the nation, Tsubaki-san,' he replied, with a perfectly serious expression, 'you may expect nothing less than my best.'

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End Notes

The Kamishibai (紙芝居, 'paper play') tradition in Japanese performance has its roots in some of Japan's early illustrated scrolls, dating back to the Heian and Kamakura periods, but the practice flourished most in the early twentieth century, especially during the 1930s and 1940s. The performers, or kamishibaya, would narrate stories with the help of illustrated cards, presenting their shows as many as a dozen times a day and selling cheap candy to their audiences in exchange for their performances. The stories ranged from traditional tales (as Tsubaki tells here, with Kachi-Kachi Yama) to the action-packed adventures of modern costumed superheroes. The advent of television and growing postwar prosperity made kamishibai audiences turn elsewhere for entertainment, while many storyboard artists switched over to producing manga. For a demobilised writer and storyteller like Tsubaki, however, a stint as a kamishibaiya in the immediate postwar period would not have been out
of place.

The references to Sakisaka's wife in Kanagawa here are alluding to treatment for tuberculosis. With its proximity to Tokyo, Kanagawa Prefecture had several tuberculosis facilities and sanitariums, and treatment and care for the disease could last several months or more, especially in Japan's resource-constrained postwar environment.

The chapters on postwar censorship, demilitarisation, and democratisation in John Dower's *Embracing Defeat* present a comprehensive account of the work that Sakisaka and Tsubaki have ahead of them. Textbooks in particular were targeted for revision, because the editions published before and during the war had often used military language and examples to instill patriotism in students. Under the occupation, textbook passages that were considered too nationalistic or militaristic had to be redacted (in published books) or rewritten (for unpublished manuscripts), which in some cases meant that students and teachers literally had to go through the texts with brushes and ink, blacking out offending words and passages and rewriting the accepted words in their stead. Prepublication censorship (検閲, ken'etsu) of the kind seen in *Warai no Daigaku* would be outlawed in Article 21 of *Japan's 1947 constitution*...but that is another story for another time.

Many thanks for the opportunity to write for this film, and on a topic and time period very dear to my heart!

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