

Passing through

Twelve months of wandering

Von MajinMina

Kapitel 2: Snow in April or: a child's name

Passing through

IV. Snow in April or...

Many travellers were on the road, crunching gravel beneath their feet, comparable to the whispering sounds of waves caressing the shore – but not half as monotone and calming.

Striking and wide steps of impressive men mixed with those pattered in womanly grace and the agile trampling of short children-legs. The kids mostly rushed ahead, playing and laughing, just to get shortly afterwards amassed by their protective mothers out of fear of losing them somewhere along the busy road.

Most people were in a high spirits. In time of the joyfully expected Hanami, many families were on their way to visit their relatives in the country. The adults gossiped merrily, joking and enjoying the awakening nature around them.

But from time to time people passed, who were not that cheerful. The families their kept distance from those vagabonds. Some of them radiated a kind of furious energy, a warning not the get between them and their destination. Others were walking very slowly, having no destination at all, tumbling, like they carried a heavy burden on their shoulders.

-Quite likely I'm more compatible with the last-mentioned, thought the red-haired wanderer, who sat at the roadside, watching the passers-by. With a little sigh he got up, brushed the dust from his hakama and left the concealing shadows of the trees. Back on the road he tried to blend in with the other travellers – which, of course, went wrong most of the time because his hair, shimmering bright in the sun, attracted attention like a red flashing warning light. From time to time first curious eyes narrowed when he passed, resting a few seconds with piercing or fearful glances on his sword and scarred face.

Himura Kenshin didn't look up to return those familiar glances – he looked down to the gravel at his feet, pretending to find an eager interest in the different shapes of

the little stones dodging around his tabi, his face hidden behind bangs of dusty hair.

-Kyoto comes closer and closer – I could've guessed that the road might be that busy. I could've walked through the forest, away from the main street.

With every suspicious glare and every word whispered a nuance too loud at his back, the overwhelming desire to vanish between the trees grew stronger. He was used to existing like a shadow in the company of his fellow Ishin Shishi until two years ago, barely noticed by others and if ever, then ignored out of fear and aversion. He was used to the curious looks at his hair since the day of his birth, but those glares, piercing his heart like little knives, particularly when he was recognized – he would never get used to them. They were a constant reminder that, though he abandoned his lethal swords, the haunting memories would not abandon him, let alone stop haunting him at night.

-And again... do people really believe I'm unaware of their bold stares?

Kenshin peered from under his red curtain to the left, looking for the impertinent person staring at him non-stop for almost five minutes now, determined to return the stare with as much unkindness as possible for a change. But to his surprise the source of his annoyance was just a little boy, walking near his left side a few steps behind, mouth open and eyes glued on his sword. Noticing Kenshin's glare he flinched and hastily looked away, his face getting a pink shade.

-Oh, have I scared him?

Wistful, Kenshin nipped a reassuring smile for the kid in the bud immediately.

-The last kid, who offered me friendship got a slap in the face from his parents afterwards...

But the black-haired boy was undeterred by his straight face. A minute later he tried cautiously to make eye-contact again. The kid was walking alone – his parents were already about fifty meters ahead and caught in a lively discussion with some merchants. Curiosity finally triumphed over shyness and the little boy directed his steps steadily nearer and nearer towards Kenshin. The swordsman examined him from above and this time the kid didn't look away – he admiringly gazed at Kenshin through black wisps of hair. Now Kenshin couldn't back a little smile creeping into his face. Instantly the kid, obviously waiting for this sign of reassurance, hopped alongside Kenshin, like he'd be travelling with him for weeks and not just for minutes.

"You have a sword!" the little boy stated. He could not be older than eight years.

Kenshin nodded, walking on.

"And red hair!"

Inwardly rolling with his eyes, Kenshin nodded again.

"Are you on the run?"

Surprised, Kenshin asked, „What makes you think that sessha is?"

The boy shrugged. "Well, you have a sword, so you are a fighter. And you have scars in your face, that means, you've actually fought. And you look like you've slept in coppice for months..."

Kenshin looked down at his rugged clothes, and smirked. "You are a good observer, that you are..."

Proud, the boy announced, "My name is Shinta!"

...a child's name

At the sound of this unexceptional name the smile in Kenshin's face froze and he imperceptibly winced. He forced a repelling "Shinta-san, it was nice to meet you" quickly out of his mouth, then looked pointedly to the gravel again, hoping, his dismissive behaviour might scare off the little boy from further attempts to make friends with him. Also, the pronunciation of the so well-known name had released a sudden anxiety in his chest.

-Shinta ...a long time since I've dared to think about the times this name is connected with. The little boy here is around the same age I was when...I received a name more suited for a swordsman.

Kenshin's face darkened while detaching his glances back from the gravel to examine the family of the boy further ahead. The parents, both laden with baggage, were still chattering with some merchants. Next to the mother walked an older girl, holding hands with her sister, a little child, about four years maybe.

-When I was Shinta, I also had a family similar to this... When was the last time I've allowed myself to think of them?

Blurry pictures, long locked up inside, returned grudgingly and started to float into Kenshin's consciousness – when suddenly a little elbow prodded into his left side. Kenshin flinched a little at this unexpected contact. Walking in the broad daylight on a busy mainroad, not that far away from Kyoto made him jumpy. He almost expected some revenge-seekers to ambush him – it would not be the first time since his two years of wandering. Especially in the south, where most people knew of him. Feeling ignored, the spiky elbow stabbed into his ribs again, with more force this time.

"You're dreaming?" Kenshin looked down into a pair of curious, black eyes with not the slightest sign of shyness anymore. "And? Are you on the run or what? Are you a bandit?"

-This boy does not mince matters. A curious, brave nature...

Kenshin shook his head no. "Sessha's just a wanderer, a Rurouni." He intentionally avoided addressing the boy with his name again. In fact he preferred to pretend that he hadn't heard or spoken the name at all.

"Why are you a Rurouni? How long are you wandering? And where to, Rurouni-san?"

"Hm," was Kenshin's muffled answer, overwhelmed by all those questions.

"Have you fought in the revolution before? Is that why you are a rurouni now?"

Surprised, Kenshin lifted an eyebrow.

-Sharp-witted this boy, that he is... I'm sure he bombards everyone with his questions.

"And you were on the side of the defeated." Not a question this time. A statement.

Reluctantly and feeling unused on his lips, an "oro?" slipped out of Kenshin's mouth. "What makes you so sure about that?"

The boy casually shrugged again. "It's your gloomy face... you don't look happy. And winners usually do look happy, don't they? Besides, my father looked the same, back then when he returned from Kyoto. It's just a month since he started to smile again. He was on the loser-side, like you. He was a samurai, you know!" Kenshin heard the proud tone in the kid's voice. His mind was already somewhere else though.

-A samurai, from Kyoto of all things. And on the Bakufu's side, too. Great. Why haven't I noticed his presence before?

Kenshin's eyes narrowed as he took a closer look on the guy a good distance in front of him. Hidden under the mass of luggage, the trained body of a former swordsman was plain to see at second glance, even from this range. But his Ki? It was harmless, no trace of a warrior spirit – no trace of a desire to fight at all. And he didn't wear his daisho either.

-Maybe he's abandoned the sword, now living a peaceful life. However, I was lucky to make my own Ki just as inoffensive as the Ki of a rabbit. Or else I'm sure he would've sensed me already. And if he recognized me – I doubt that he'd still be that peaceful, especially if he sees his son near my sword...

"May I take a look at your Katana?" Startled, Kenshin looked down to his new appendage again. This question was really unexpected out of the mouth of an eight-year-old. "I've never touched a real katana. My father has sealed his sword away since he returned, with a peace-knot. I'm not allowed to touch it. So may I look at your sword instead? I want to learn Kenjutsu, so I need to know how to hold a real sword, though my father says I'm still too young and... May I?"

Being dumfounded, Kenshin stared in eyes glittering with excitement. "A-ano... I don't know, I think your parents won't agree... You should ask them for –"

"I'll do that!" the boy enthusiastically screamed and stormed ahead.

"- a visit in a dojo..." Kenshin sheepishly finished his sentence, horrified watching the boy, who ran towards his parents, shouting "Okaa-chan! Otou-chan!" Seconds later the addressed turned.

"What is it, Shinta-chan?" the mother demanded short-tempered. "Otou-san and I are in the middle of a conversation with those merchants!"

„May I look at the katana of the Rurouni-san?" Shinta asked breathlessly and pointed with his arm down the road behind him. The family stopped.

"Sword?" With a serious expression, the eyes of his father followed his son's outstretched arm. "Rurouni? Where? The next travellers are almost a mile behind us."

"Are you blind?" Shinta laughed and turned. His arm pointed at an empty space, filled with the slender body of the rurouni only seconds ago.

"Obviously you are the blind one, Ototo-chan," Shinta's big sister smirked and the little girl at her hand giggled in assistance.

But Shinta's father was still unsmiling, when he bent the knee to look his son straight into the eye. "A lonely Rurouni with a sword, and you spoke to him?" he asked and Shinta nodded. "He was really there! I asked him about his katana..."

"Shinta!" The father looked angry now. "You can't ask strangers to show their weapons to you!" With an angry snort the mother agreed from behind him.

"But he looked like a samurai!"

"That's not the point. Many former samurais are wandering now but not all of them have good intentions! Many have still a grudge against the new government. They would not hesitate to hurt a child that bothers them with bold questions!"

Shinta's eyes grew even bigger. The father sighed. "I know you admire the samurai. You are one, after all. If you want to hold a real sword so badly, if you can't wait any longer, if you have to ask strangers on the street – then I guess I have no choice to allow you to visit a dojo, when we're back in Kyoto."

"Really?" Shinta gasped. His father nodded and patted his shoulder while rising to his feet.

"But only this one time! Swords will be inappropriate in this new era. You know, Shinta, even back in the old times samurai-kids like you trained not with the katana but with shinai until their genpukku."

"And what's with the stranger now?" Shinta's mother interrupted. "Have you made him up, trying to convince your father to let you train kenjutsu?"

"No!" Shinta shouted. "He was really there! He was nice! He called me a good observer!"

"So?" A soft smile crept into the fathers' face.

"Yes! Because I've said he looked like he had slept in the coppice for months!"

"What?!" The parents exchanged amused looks about their pert son. „And he praised you for that?" the father softly laughed. "Must have been a funny person, this Rurouni..."

"Yes," giggled Shinta. "He was funny. He had red hair, you know! And a scar on the cheek, like a X. I'm sure he was a fighter in the...ouch!"

Shinta looked into the suddenly ashen face of his father, who grabbed his shoulder like a vice.

"What..." The mother stammered from behind. The kids felt the sudden change in their parents and it unsettled them. Shinta's little sister burst into tears.

"What's wrong? I.. I'm sorry!" Shinta was scared by his parent's strange behaviour. "I'll never talk to a stranger again, I'll promise. Please, don't be mad at me!" He began to sob. His father completely ignored him. Instead, the warily looked up and down the street.

"Anata, let's go, let's catch up with the merchants," his wife pressed. "Let's hurry to the next village."

"Do you think, that's an obstacle for him?" her husband hissed, voice harsh with unfamiliar hatred. "Do you think he can't appear and vanish like a ghost out of nothing, just because he's not in Kyoto but in a small village?!"

"Please," his wife pleaded, "don't scare the children. Let's hurry." With a firm grip on Shinta's and his older sisters' hands she began to walk ahead. Gloomy, her husband followed, constantly glancing backwards and into the forest next to the road. His right hand instinctively remained near where the hilts of his two swords would have been.

"Does Otou-chan know this Rurouni I met?" Shinta fearfully whispered to his mother.

The woman strengthened her grip. "Yes, Shinta-chan, he knows him. Or, at least, about him."

"Have they met?"

The mother winced. "Not personally, thanks to the kami."

"Where?"

"Back then in Kyoto. In the Revolution. But stop asking, you don't need to know more,

it's unimportant. Forget about it!" Her voice softened a bit. "Don't worry, Shinta-chan. It has nothing to do with you. It's just... Otou-chan tried so hard to left those times behind and now he is angry, that this rurouni reminded him... It's not your fault. Just never talk about him again, will you?!"

After a short pause, Shinta did, though. "Is he... dangerous?"

Receiving no answer, he looked up into the normally soft face of his mother. Her eyes looked straight forward and her lips weren't but a thin line.

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Noiselessly Kenshin stepped out of the brushwood into a little clearing.

-Just in time...

The redhead leaned against a tree and paused for a breath.

-Imagine, Himura, what would've happened if this shogunat-loyal ex-samurai had seen you... He'd recognized you in a second. And then...

Kenshin knew, what then. Two choices. A stupid fight or a panicked escape. And no chance to show up in the next two or three villages. Angry, Kenshin plucked a little twig from the tree behind him.

-From the start I should've wandered off the road, especially in the Kinki-region. I'm still too far south to show myself so openly on main roads...In this area, many people have already heard the tales about the Battousai from Choshuu spreading out from the old capital city, including a mostly exaggerated but never the less rather fitting description of my appearance.

Kenshin snorted in disgust. He just remembered, what the little, witty boy has said to him.

-And you were on the side of the defeated.

With his bloody sword he'd destroyed the unjust bakufu. His name was spoken with both, fear and reverential admiration. Hitokiri Battousai helped to win the war and some said, that without him the revolution would've failed. He was not just (in)famous – after his disappearance he had become a man of legend.

-And the appearance of this legendary assassin looks defeated in the truth-seeing eyes of a child, that it does. Defeated by the era of peace he had so longed for.

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Since those two years of wandering through all of Japan, Kenshin had overheard enough conversations about the frightful Choshuu-assassin. His mysterious vanishing into thin air after the battle of Toba Fushimi was just oil into the fire of the already

brightly burning rumours. Most people believed he was finally killed in on the battlefield. Preferably a slow and horrible death. At least they hoped. "It would be the most agreeable imagination," he had overheard a conversation some time ago. "A hitokiri like him...the hitokiri... still alive in this time of peace? Impossible." And another one had answered, "You're right. Someone of this calibre... I mean, he lived for killing. He would only cause trouble in times of peace. Maybe he was killed of by his own people. Or did the job himself."

-Not that I haven't thought about executing this "job"...

Kenshin looked down at his hands. One was still holding the little twig. Little, innocent leaves already tried to make their way out of the bugs.

-People are right. I hadn't thought about how to live once the new era has come. I never imagined myself alive at the end of the bakumatsu... well, I kept the promise I made to Tomoe. I'm still living.

Sighing, Kenshin contemplated the now rather cloudy sky through the still bare branches. Around him the birds were chirping their lungs out to attract an agreeable lover. It became spring. Animals and nature were in a euphoric mood. But Kenshin did not care about those signs of reawakening. He still felt frozen inside, a winter within not yet touched by the reviving radiance of sunlight.

-It's so hard, Tomoe... I try to live for you. But with every day passing by, it becomes more and more clear to me, that I will never fit this new Meiji-time. I pretend to blend in but the truth is, that I am still a dangerous man, forged by war. I know no other way than the sword – I still carry one, you see and even if the blade is backwards, it's still a tool of war. Like Shaku-dono said to me, when I left Kyoto two years ago: I'm a swordsman. I should live and die by the sword.

Quickly, Kenshin suppressed the bitter feelings of loneliness now afflicting his mind. Self-pity was humiliating and wouldn't change anything. But still... he was overwhelmed by the thoughts about what could have been.

-You could have showed me how to live... Like you did in Otsu. But back then, it was just the start. Just a bud, barely open. We were just at the beginning when everything ended. Not even a spring was granted us together. Everything stopped in the winter. Snow falling, like you. If my hands...hadn't killed you...

Kenshin dropped down, back against the tree, dark and abysmal feelings bearing down on him like drowning waves. He allowed them to wash him away, to wash him out – until he was empty and calm, like the sea after a storm. He dwelled in the emptiness of himself until time caught up with him, the sinking sun bringing him back to the world of living. Finally he found the strength to get up and walk on. Only now he realised that it had become awfully cold and his body was half frozen. He hurried to leave the forest, the little twig, still in his hands, unconsciously stowed in the sleeve of his gi. Shortly after he'd climbed through the nasty underwoods little white flakes of snow got caught by his hair.

-Snow? I believed it was already spring. But I'm heading north and the April-weather is incalculable anyway. I guess I have to search for a roof over my head for the night.

Shivering, Kenshin hurried in the direction of the nearest village. He still had some money left from his winter-work in the south, so he decided to stay in a Ryokan. But when he entered the village shortly before dawn, every Inn was occupied because weather forced all travellers to stay indoors for the night. One Innkeeper offered him a sleeping-place in a large common-room, together with other travellers, but Kenshin declined with a rueful smile. He would not sleep a second in a room full of men who were travelling to or coming from Kyoto. And even if nobody would recognize him and he would fall asleep – what would be both very unlikely – he still could have one of those common nightmares and scare everyone with his screams. Rather than that he'd prefer to sleep on spiky roots with snow as a blanket.

His last hope was therefore a little house, gone to rack, near the border of the village. Not until five minutes of knocking and calling have passed, finally an old, tattered hag opened the wooden door, examining him through narrowed eyes and after an eternity of consideration, finally let him in. She gave him the last free room in her ramshackle Ryokan, asking him to pay in advance. After Kenshin entered his place for the night, he knew why: the small chamber looked like it had never seen any cleaning and, as a bonus, smelled like rotten fish. Nevertheless he thanked the old woman, who pointed out, that he was lucky to get such a comfortable accommodation despite his shabby looks (Kenshin's eyebrow twitched) and continued that he couldn't expect to have breakfast in the morning (Kenshin's empty stomach growled in protest) because the Inn was hopelessly understaffed.

Ignoring his stomach and the fishy smell Kenshin began to prepare for the night. Outside everything was already getting snowed in, so he was really glad to have a roof over the head after all. With a barely noticeable smile he began to defrost his toes, holding them near the embers of a little coal-basin.

Suddenly his eyes snapped open.

-Nani? I dozed off...

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Broad laughter, coming through the thin walls, had awakened him. Obviously the customers in the next room were having a little party. From time to time the men started to sing and the smell of sake made its way through the rice paper-walls. Kenshin deeply inhaled the sweet alcoholic scent, thankful, that it drowned out the morbid reek of fish, already settled in his clothes.

For he could neither sleep nor avoid overhearing the shrill conversation, Kenshin knew after several minutes of listening, that the men next door were merchants, coming from Kyoto and heading to Okayama. Kenshin's way was the opposite direction. He had spent most of the winter working in a small town in Shikoku and now he wanted to travel into the north of Honshu. Unfortunately, he had to pass Kyoto and some of the big streets leading to it in doing so.

Thinking of Kyoto and the merchants, Kenshin's mind drifted back to the afternoon,

where he had made the acquaintance of the little, witty boy called Shinta. Now, sitting alone in a dark room, the feelings and memories this name conjured, returned.

-Shinta...

The name itself was not unusual, actually quite common throughout all of Japan, but it wasn't the name that unsettled Kenshin. It was the child – for a short moment it had been like a mirror and Kenshin had seen himself in that little boy: openhearted, shy and bold at the same time, and, the most important – innocent, like only children can be. Kenshin could still remember that he, even a long time ago and long forgotten, had been the same.

"Shinta..."

Barely audible, Kenshin whispered the name into the sombre room, but instead of his own voice he heard the faraway voice of his mother. That was one of the last few, untouched memories from the happy time of his childhood: The bright and soft voice of his mother, carried to him by winds over the field, softly calling his name.

-Why does it make me so sad, to hear her calling that name? Is it her voice or the name itself? It's just a child's name anyway. A name doesn't define a person... or does it?

Nothing had been ever a better allegory of his innocence than the unstained name his mother had given to him. Hearing her pronouncing it in his childhood felt like little sunrays on his heart.

-It's sad...I can remember so little. Even the faces of my own family are just blurry pictures.

No wonder. After his childhood was shattered in a storm containing famine and cholera-pandemic, he was forced to seal all his happy memories deep inside his heart, out of reach from the harsh hands of the slave-traders, away from their blows and humiliations.

-In this dark time I lost my name... War did not need a name. I was a nobody. An unimportant and weak child. A boy who couldn't even protect the lives of three girls who had cared for him like they were his sisters. Who had died for him...But in this fateful night everything changed.

He saw himself standing there like it was yesterday, surrounded by wooden crosses, gleaming red in the dying sunlight. Next to him the large figure of an impressive and frightening man.

"What's your name?"

"Shinta."

"A child's name. Too soft for a swordsman. From this day forth you will be called Kenshin."

"Ken...shin."

-Shishou gave me a new name... and a new life.

Shinta was not forgotten. Shinta was the force that drove him forward, made him stronger – because it was the child, who reminded the loss of the girls, who'd died trying to protect him, and the weight of their bodies in his arms.

Kenshin grew stronger and learned the way of the sword. It even became part of his own body. But still it had been the voice of Shinta, who spoke out of him during his last dispute with his shishou, forcing him to leave the mountains to follow his own ideals – protecting people.

Both, Kenshin and Shinta, crumbled down in the bloodshed of the Bakumatsu. The innocence and idealism of Shinta was used to turn Kenshin into a manageable weapon of dead.

-And the result culminated in my third and most hated name. A name that will hunt me forever...

Battousai.

This was the opposite of Shinta, his inversion: The personification of his ruined innocence and his abused idealism. This was the dark half of Kenshin, only the first kanji of his name – a blank blade: merciless, destroying, mechanical – without its second kanji, the heart.

Since he had abandoned his killing swords two years ago, he had locked away that half of him, that was capable of manslaughter without even blinking, thus giving unstained feelings and memories the possibility to return. His heart - forsaken and almost lost, repaired and softened by the scent of white plums, then broken again - was still beating and it healed. Even though very, very slowly. With every month of wandering more happy memories, thought forgotten, returned. Above all Kenshin finally began to understand all those teachings, which had been so cryptic to him when his Shishou had tried to thumb them into his brain all those years ago.

-Maybe I can take up to the Kenshin I was back then. Like Hiko taught me, being a free sword, protecting the weak and innocent from the hardship of the times, but without killing. My intentions never had changed. But I follow them now as a nameless person, a Rurouni on his journey.

Even though a part of Shinta had survived the bloodshed of the bakumatsu deep within him, he could never be like the child he was again – innocent. He couldn't wash the guilt from his hands. And never he would forgive himself for sacrificing the pure soul of this little boy.

-Once tainted, innocence is forever lost. My mother will never again call me by my child's name and if, I would not be able to answer. My Shishou will never take me back

as an apprentice, and if, I would not be the deshi he used to know. My sword will never reduce human life into garbage of bloody flesh. No if.

I can't bear a child's name and I can't bear a murderer's name either. I still feel too stained to wear the warrior's name but... Maybe some day I can be the Kenshin my master had wanted me to be.

Kenshin's finger reached out to touch the cool bark of the twig still in his sleeves. He put it out. The green of the maiden leaves smiled reassuringly to him, even through the darkness of night.

"My name is Shinta!"

-It's a good name. Not only a child's name but a name full of hope and dreams. A future. If I could only protect the pureness of one shinta out there I would willingly sacrifice the shinta in me again.

"Are you on the run?"

-I was, but just running from myself. I wanted to leave behind all those bitter names and their embodiments. But I began to understand, that I cannot deny all of my past.

"Sessha's just a wanderer, a Rurouni."

-The wanderer contains everything I was in the past. Shinta, Kenshin, Battousai... but all those names do not show me, who I am or who I was. They show my ideal, how I can be and how I never want to be again. They are parts that define my still incomplete self. I'll be the rurouni until I know, who I really am.

"How long are you wandering? And where to, Rurouni-san?"

-Wherever I can be of help and as long as my feet can go on forward. For little Shintas like you, with open eyes and a sunny heart. To enable you to bombard strangers with curious questions. For a childhood without fear and hardship.

The laughter in the next room slowly turned into likewise loud snores. Kenshin, too, felt the tiredness of the long day. His eyelids went heavy and finally closed but his dreams this night were not made out of blood but out of falling snow, little by little changing into falling sakura blossoms. And somewhere in the distance of his memories or his future he saw the blurry figure of a woman, awaiting him with outstretched arms and the whispers of a soft voice was carried to him together with white petals.

"Welcome home, Shinta."

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Thanks for leaving a comment ^_^

