

# Rusty Knife (錆びたナイフ Sabita naifu)

Japan | 1958 | 90 minutes

## Credits

Director	Toshio Masuda
Screenplay	Shintarô Ishihara / Toshio Masuda
Photography	Kurataro Takamura
Music	Masaru Satô

## Cast

Yukihiko Tachibana	Yûjirô Ishihara
Mie Kitahara	Keiko Nishida
Shôji Yasui	Prosecutor Karita
Mari Shiraki	Yuri

## In Brief

Udaka is a new, post-war city where corruption has already taken hold. A persistent district attorney wants to arrest and convict Katsumata, a laughing, self-confident thug. The D.A. gets an anonymous letter about the suicide five years' before of a city council member. Evidence about the case leads the D.A. to Tachibana, struggling to go straight after involvement with the mob and a prison sentence for killing the man responsible for the rape and suicide of his fiancée. One of Tachibana's friends is Keiko, the daughter of the dead councilman and the ward of another powerful official. How do these stories connect?



Born in 1928, Toshio Masuda began as an assistant director at Shinto studios, working with “women’s film” master Mikio Naruse and horror genre visionary Nobuo Nakagawa before following his mentor, Umetsugu Inoue, to Nikkatsu in 1954 (where he would also assist Kon Ichikawa on *The Burmese Harp*). In 1958, the year Shohei Imamura made his first film for Nikkatsu, Masuda—soon to be considered the most bankable director on the lot—turned thirty, and was paired for his third film with the young star Yujiro Ishihara, still just twenty-three. The chemistry was immediate: *Rusty Knife* became one of the highest-grossing releases of the year, and the Masuda-Ishihara combine continued for an eventual twenty-five films.

At once a systemic analysis of the symbiosis of postwar economic recovery and thriving syndicated crime and a furrowed scream of pain from the lingering social and psychological stab wounds of the war and its still-hemorrhaging aftermath, *Rusty Knife* ties the fate of the nation’s recovery directly to the reformation of Tachibana, a former yakuza flunky who’s gone straight after witnessing the murder of a prominent politician but still refuses to rat out the criminal cohorts of his past. (With Tachibana played by Ishihara, the fate of the nation seems, by extension, tied to the reformation of the entire taiyozoku generation as well—a desire with which the actor’s increasingly less rebellious characters seemed designed to comply.) Unfortunately, Tachibana bears scars deeper than the rustiest knife could slice: the rape and suicide of his former lover, and the five-year stretch he pulled for stabbing the man he believed responsible. And when Mie Kitahara—as the slain pol’s orphaned daughter, a producer of socially conscious documentaries on the subject of “violence”—begins to fall for Tachibana, and uncovers evidence that the rapist he murdered hadn’t acted alone, the admonition of one of the inwardly seething Tachibana’s former gangmates, “Wake him up, and you’re dead,” proves all too explosively apt.



Alongside its myriad genre pleasures (dueling dump trucks, jackknife vs. saber battles, a glimpse of soon to be Seijun Suzuki stud Joe Shishido as a hapless and horribly fated blackmailer), *Rusty Knife* provides a paradigmatic example of what might as well be axiomatic when peaking beneath the surface and seeing into the (a)moral imperatives of Nikkatsu’s aching-to-be-modern action films: if something smells like Ozu, it’s probably rotten already. No sooner do Kitahara’s guardian uncle and his cronies start beaming about his pretty young niece’s marriageability (as if they’d wandered over from the set of, say, *Equinox Flower*) than astute viewers will begin marking the minutes until the uncle (and all of avuncular patriarchy along with him) is unmasked as some sort of mad Mabuse, stealing the milk of Japan’s economic miracle from the mouths of modernity’s young. No wonder Masuda cuts directly from Kitahara’s buttoned-down meeting with a group of paternalistic police detectives to future Nikkatsu star Akira Kobayashi’s dashing young knucklehead and his “slut” girlfriend tearassing through crowded streets on a motor scooter, laughing and screaming and full of life, as the director surrounds them with canted, careening angles of city corridors that look back as much to the inventive vitality of Jean Vigo as they do forward to the more fevered freshness of the incipient *nouvelle vague*.

- Chuck Stephens