

The Gang

Masayoshi Mura was like a brother to Murata. He was not, as I discovered, the godfather of Obama. He was, however, the number two man in the organization, heading Murata's force of senior soldiers and, next to the Boss himself, the gang's most fearsome warrior. The two of them had been perpetrating lawlessness since junior high school when Murata, the leader of the Korean gang, whipped Mura, the head of the rival Japanese faction, in a fight for supremacy of Obama juvenile delinquent society.

After high school Mura went to work in Tokyo, where he quickly gravitated to the fringes of the Sumiyoshi Rengo, the metropolitan area's largest syndicate. He had spent one year as a trainee in Asakusa when he was apprehended coming out of an America army base with twelve US Army service revolvers. Two years in prison followed. So did a career as a yakuza.

Mura's philosophy of gangstering was that "part of a yakuza's job is going to jail." But it was his extremely volatile temper that kept him behind bars more than on the streets. In one outburst, he lunged across the counter at a local bar, seized a cleaver and laid open a customer's wrist because he didn't move fast enough in sliding over to vacate a seat. He threw drinks on hostesses who displeased him. He kicked in the doors of bars already closed for the night, allowing them to shut down only after he had drunk his fill. There was only one person who could control him—Murata.

And even then, not always.

My second drinking expedition with Mura turned out to be our last. Two days later, his face decorated the "society page," busted with two others for injuries inflicted while trying to recover money on a check the victim bounced. I read of "three nightmarish days and nights in the clutches of yakuza fiends." According to the article, Mura not only brutalized his victim, but repeatedly threatened to kill him, cut him into pieces and use him as fertilizer.

That was just Mura's way of getting his client's money back, Murata explained months later. After all, the guy who bounced the check was trying to screw somebody, right? He had to believe the threats. Who could fault Mura for a little rough stuff? What cost him his freedom was when he got a little carried away, breaking four of the guy's ribs. He then had to be physically restrained by the other two, who thought he was actually going to prepare their hostage for use in the garden.

Murata shook his head. "I told the crazy fool not to take the damn job in the first place."

I began thinking backwards. If my arithmetic was right, Mura must have done the job just before we went out.

Obamans "raised their pillows to sleep" on September 10, 1978, the day Masayoshi Mura left Obama to donate another chunk of his life to the Japanese penal system.

I didn't give Mura much thought until the first of January, when New Year's cards began arriving. There it was. Postmark: Toyama Penitentiary.

A Happy New Year! May 1979 be a wonderful year.
I am very obliged to your for your kindness. Take
care of yourself against the cold.

Masayoshi Mura

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When Murata needed a strong arm, Mura was his first choice. When it was a cool head he was after, he turned to Kikkawa, his other right-hand man.

"Cool" and "hot" was only the beginning of the long list of contrasts between Murata's two most trusted lieutenants. Mura was tall and wiry. Kikkawa was short and stocky. Mura exploded with laughter, anger or whatever he felt the instant he felt it. Kikkawa never changed expressions; he even laughed with a straight face.

Kikkawa entered Noguchi's family on a trial basis and came to be a familiar sight at headquarters, where he met Murata. From his higher position within the organization, Murata took no special notice of the new grunt. Until, that is, Kikkawa got busted several months later.

He was on telephone duty at Noguchi's apartment with Uda, another junior family member, when the call came.

"I just got a call from my brother. Two yakuza're breaking into his apartment!" the woman screamed into the phone. "You gotta get over there!" Kikkawa recognized the voice of Noguchi's mistress. Her brother lived on the ground floor in the same apartment complex.

"Somebody breakin' into *oneesan's* brother's place," Kikkawa shouted as he opened the drawer

of the telephone stand and grabbed the .38 revolver inside. Uda pulled a Japanese sword out from behind the couch.

• *oneesan*: "Older sister," but frequently used to show respect to an older woman. Here it refers to Kikkawa's godfather's mistress.

They heard the sound of breaking glass as they stepped out of the elevator. There were the yakuza, one stepping in the shattered window. The other stood with his back to them, the bent anti-burglar bars lying on the concrete walkway.

Kikkawa raised his gun.

When something caught his eye, a black and white Kobe squad car pulling up to the entrance. The cops were probably just out on routine patrol—no gumballs flashing—but the officer in the passenger's seat spotted Kikkawa.

"You!" he yelled. "Drop that!" The front doors of the sedan burst open.

"Let's get outta here!" Uda hissed.

The two yakuza at the window turned, saw the patrol car, then Kikkawa with them in his sights. For a brief instant their eyes met. Kikkawa began to squeeze the trigger.

Uda elbowed his arm before he could get the shot off. "You fuckin' crazy? Let's get outta here!"

The two patrolmen ran along the concrete walls of the entrance, guns drawn. Kikkawa reluctantly lowered the .38.

The two pairs of yakuza fled in opposite directions.

Uda managed to escape. Kikkawa was apprehended two hours later coming out of a nearby housing development and a .38 revolver bearing his fingerprints was found under a car parked nearby. At headquarters he gave the sergeant his name and address. That was the last thing anyone got out of him.

Japanese police are notoriously successful at extracting "voluntary confessions" from arrest victims. They have to be, otherwise Japanese federal prosecutors would be hard pressed to maintain their conviction rate at a staggering ninety-eight percent. Law enforcement officials will tell you this statistic reveals police expertise in persuading even hardened criminals into baring their souls of their own free

will. Criminals will tell you different.

From Kikkawa they got ulcers. It didn't matter how many hours they interrogated him, what kind of acts they put on, how late they kept him up. He even declined to discuss the matter with the lawyer Noguchi hired to defend him. Not a word about the family, the job, those involved with him. Nothing. To anybody.

"Fuck him!" the detective seethed, kicking the wastebasket across the room. The final interrogation, four hours of, "I ain't got nuthin' to say." Prospects of the guy copping—zero. "The judge'll take care of this one. The only other one I've seen as pig-headed as him was that Takahashi character from Himeji." (Years later, that same Takahashi would become the fourth godfather of Japan's largest organized crime syndicate.)

The detective squad took care of Kikkawa long before he ever saw a judge—solitary confinement the month before his case came to trial, no cigarettes, reading materials or diversions of any kind. Had he cooperated, he would never have seen the hole and, when finally brought to court, would have walked with a suspended sentence as a first offender. As it was, after due consideration of Kikkawa's "attitude problem," the judge sentenced him to one year in Akashi Federal Penitentiary, the maximum.

Murata was sitting in his Nissan Fairlady Z outside the prison gate at 6:30 a.m. twelve months later. One ex-con sat at the bus stop, a small suitcase at his feet. Murata lit a cigarette, then spit in the direction of the ugly, sprawling structure—the dirty concrete walls, the towers, lurking in the mist. Finally the iron doors clanged opened and a short, stocky figure emerged into the morning air. He stopped, looking up at the sky. Then he saw the car and began walking toward it, fast.

"Good to see ya," Murata said as Kikkawa climbed in.

"Thanks for coming," said Kikkawa. "How's *oyaji*?"

"Good." Murata slid an brown envelope containing a thousand dollars out of his jacket pocket and lay it on the seat between them. "This is for your trouble."

¹ *oyaji* Lit. "Father," but can be used to refer to one's godfather—in this case, Noguchi.

Kikkawa looked down. "Wasn't no trouble."

Murata surveyed his passenger. He had to be thirty pounds lighter than the last time he'd seen him. "Treat ya okay in there?"

"No problems."

Kikkawa didn't once mention solitary or the year in the pen or express dissatisfaction with the family. (Noguchi had been furious at his mistress, threatening her with physical violence if she ever again used his men for her own personal business.) When they pulled up in front of Noguchi's Kobe headquarters hours later, he sat momentarily looking at the two-story structure. "It's good to be back," he said. He was ready to go to work.

It was Kikkawa's distaste for drugs that eventually led him to Obama. Sasaki's organization had a big brother system to help smooth entry for new recruits. But Kikkawa's big brother was a methamphetamine addict, and the constant exposure to crank and what he saw it doing to those around him eventually dissuaded him from joining the family. He admired Murata for abstaining from drugs, felt this was an important part of his being the yakuza he was.

A month after bringing Kikkawa back to Kobe, Murata himself was busted for possession of firearms and spent the next sixteen months in Toyama Penitentiary. When he got out, Kikkawa had still not taken the yakuza vows, and his speed-freak big brother was in jail. He approached Murata, asking him if he could go to Obama and be a part of his operations there.

Kikkawa became one of Murata's most trusted lieutenants. While Mura's skills as a mobster were limited to wiping the floor with people, Kikkawa was good at something even more important—using his head to turn a profit.

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Akira Sudo was another soldier whose allegiance to Murata was complete. He was twenty-eight and lived with his wife and daughter in Obama. As Murata's main chauffeur and bodyguard, he was constantly at his godfather's side, and on more than one occasion told me that was just how he wanted it; he'd be with Murata until he died. What he didn't say was, if it wasn't for Murata, he'd be dead already.

Murata recruited Sudo for the Noguchi family in April, 1972. Six months later, Sudo was arrested and charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, subsequently serving a thirty-two month stretch in Akashi. He returned to active duty for Noguchi in January, 1975.

In March, he found himself a girlfriend.

This was no mean achievement for a lowly soldier in a yakuza organization. First, he had very little free time. Second, he never knew when it would be, which meant his contact with women usually came at a toruko. The few times he did find a steady girl other than a working woman, she ran off with another man who could spend more time with her.

Sudo wasn't about to let this one go. She was a cabaret hostess, not a hooker, and she really seemed to care about him. The more involved Sudo got, the less he wanted to lose her to the demands of his profession.

"Let's get away from this shit," he cajoled. "Go somewhere. Start a new life."

"What're we gonna use for money?" she said.

"I been thinkin' about that," he said.

"Good," she said. "How much you been thinkin' about?"

"Five thousand dollars," he said, "give or take a little."

"It's a start," she said. And shrugged.

What Sudo had in mind was organization funds, funds he had access to. On Wednesday and Saturday it was his job to collect the horse racing take from family betting parlors throughout the city. Saturday he was with another junior soldier. Wednesday he was on his own. The take was smaller, but one installment was enough to make a new start.

After making his rounds on collection day, just past 7:00 p.m., Sudo had the five thousand, six hundred dollars that would take him and his hostess far away from Kobe and yakuza life. His girlfriend was already at work. Sudo took in a triple-feature until midnight, then moved to an all-night coffee shop across the street from her apartment.

At 12:30 the light went on.

Minutes later Sudo walked in to break the news. He slapped the thick brown envelope down

on the table, smiling like a detective who just cracked a case. "Start packing," he said.

She looked at him like he was a door-to-door salesman. "Something's come up," she murmured, turning and walking slowly across the room.

Sudo's smile vanished. "The fuck you mean, 'come up?'"

"One of my customers at the cabaret offered to set me up in my own bar. It's too good an opportunity to turn down." She walked towards him, hands together, staring down at the carpet. "I'm sorry if I caused you a lot of trouble," she continued, finally raising her eyes. "I'd still like to see you if you decide to stay. But if you have to go . . ."

Sudo hit her. The blow backed her up across the room, arms spread as if about to hug someone, until she hit the wall and slumped to the floor.

It was too late to go back now. Sudo had five thousand, six hundred dollars. And the rest of his life to run.

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"Get the sonofabitch!" Noguchi growled, pacing back and forth in front of the window. Murata had never seen him like this before. Both Sudo and his money were missing, and he had no reason to suspect aggression from a rival family. Noguchi took good care of his men. He didn't expect this in return. He looked at Murata, controlling it now. Murata stared back, his eyes dull. As head of recruits like Sudo, it was his job to find him. And kill him.

The Jinbokkai information network crackled as family chapters throughout the country were alerted. Murata and his men concentrated their search in Kobe, combing all Sudo's likely haunts. But nobody had seen him.

They also made regular visits to places where Sudo had mentioned having relatives. He came from a big family—nine brothers and sisters, thirty-odd first cousins, and who knew how many seconds, thirds and removeds. Home was Himeji, a city of four hundred thousand, an hour out of Kobe down Hanshin Expressway. Most of the clan was scattered throughout the area.

Sudo wasn't there, either.

This was a matter of family honor; Murata had to finish it no matter how long it took. But after

a year, they were still no closer to finding him.

The more time passed, the less chance they had. He'd probably already dug in, borrowed money from relatives and buried himself anywhere from Hokkaido to Kyushu for the next couple of years.

On May seventeenth, 1976, Murata took two carloads of men to Hawai-cho, in Tottori Prefecture, where one of Sudo's sisters lived. It had taken Murata a year to find her, the last sibling they hadn't seen yet. Hawai-cho was a town of no more than five thousand on the Japan Sea. It was their first search mission in three months. Sudo could be anywhere by now.

They had been on the road four and a half hours when they pulled into a gas station just inside the city limits. Murata was the first one out of the restroom. Halfway back to the car he stopped.

Parked next to his Nissan Crown was an early-model Isuzu Gemini getting gas. Sudo sat frozen behind the wheel staring at Murata, who now approached the car, making his way around to the driver's side.

"Aki," he said, resting both elbows on the window frame. "Been lookin' for ya." Sudo dropped his head to his chest, slumping down at the wheel as if someone had let the air out of him.

Murata had finally found his quarry. Now he had orders to carry out. But he couldn't shoot Sudo here, in a gas station in front of witnesses. Circling around to the passenger's side, Murata got in and waved his men to follow. "Drive," he said.

Sudo's face had gone past fear, to resignation. "Where?"

"Somewhere we can talk. Alone."

"My apartment?"

"Anybody there?"

Sudo shook his head.

"Go." Murata felt the weight of the Walther .32 caliber pistol in his jacket pocket. He had never shot a man like this, the guy knowing all along. A chauffeur to his own funeral.

Sudo pulled up in front of a two-story apartment building, three peeling plywood doors per floor. The cinder block walls, after years of slowly dripping water, looked like a full-length mural of black

stalactites.

"Place's a little messy," Sudo mumbled, opening the middle door on the second story.

Murata walked in and stopped. He stared at the six worn tatami mats, the half-inch cracks between walls and window moldings, the mounds of dirty clothes, the beer cans littering the floor and the dishes piled high in the sink, stinking of rotten food. Sudo maintained himself here by working as a part-time bartender in a local sunakku. It was a perfect place to kill somebody.

Murata looked hard at Sudo. It didn't make sense. Why would he throw away a job in the organization to live like this?

Sudo cleared a place for Murata at the kotatsu.

Murata sat down, still looking. "Aki, you're in a lotta trouble."

"Sorry the place looks so bad."

"You know what I gotta do."

Sudo rested his head between his palms. "I was gonna come back lots a times . . . take a finger to oyaji . . . it's just . . . I was ashamed." His words came in bursts between muffled sobs, the tears making tapping sounds on the Formica kotatsu top.

"You'd a come back, I wouldn' be here."

Sudo wiped his face on his sleeve and looked up at Murata. His eyes were still red, swollen, but he wasn't crying any more. "You gotta do it, do it. It's easier'n livin' with it."

Murata didn't say anything. It was his duty to kill Sudo; if he didn't, he'd be betraying his godfather. If Sudo had tried to escape, Murata would have had no trouble putting him away. But hanging his head, saying go ahead and shoot . . .

Murata wasn't looking at Sudo any more. He stared at the diamond pattern on the kotatsu. It was like the structure in his own family. Each soldier was part of that pattern, with a sworn pact of obedience to his oyabun when he joined. They all had their jobs to do. If they didn't do them, the entire family crumbled. It wasn't easy all the time, but that was the way it had to be.

Slowly the pattern blurred, the black lines becoming gray, the sharp edges of the diamond softening. Sudo had broken yakuza law; he had betrayed his family. But his mistake was one of

inexperience; he was still young. He was also one of Murata's men, and Murata felt some of the responsibility as his own.

Murata pulled out the Walther. It was old, but still a good piece. See how Sudo took the black hole of the four-inch barrel two feet from his face. See if he whimpered or begged.

Sudo's eyes opened, then glazed.

Murata thumbed back the hammer until it clicked. He took his time bringing his forearm forward, like he was handing something to Sudo.

Sudo swallowed hard. His red, swollen eyes moved from the barrel to Murata's eyes. Fifteen long seconds passed. His bottom lip trembled, that was all.

Murata eased the hammer back into place, Sudo's eyes following it into Murata's jacket pocket. Murata waited until Sudo raised them again. "Aki," he said, almost under his breath, "You ever fuck me again, I won't kill ya. You'll do it yourself." He paused. "Now pack your shit."

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The television announcer shuffled the stack of papers in front of him. "In baseball today," he continued, looking into the camera, "Aging Kintetsu Buffaloes ace Tetsuya Yoneda hurled his team to a three nothing victory over the Hankyu Braves for his sixth season shutout and three hundred and twenty-fifth career win. We take you now to Braves Stadium in Osaka and reporter Tadashi Otani for an eyewitness account of that game."

Noguchi stared into the set. "Sonofabitch can still throw."

Murata glanced at the wall clock over the television. By now, his men should be heading back to Kobe after depositing Sudo in Obama. "We got him," he said without turning his head.

Noguchi shifted slowly to face him.

"We left him in his apartment. Nobody'll come lookin' for 'im in that shitheap."

"D'he say anything . . . before?" Noguchi pulled out a cigarette.

Murata reached across the kotatsu to light it, then coaxed his own pack out of his shirt pocket. "I didn't exactly kill him," he mumbled.

Noguchi's eyes flickered to Murata, then past him. "Oooi!"

“Hai,” came a female voice from the bedroom. Soon a woman in her thirties in a white terry cloth bathrobe appeared in the doorway.

“Beer,” Noguchi snorted.

She turned and disappeared. Murata heard the refrigerator door open, bottles clinking together. She returned carrying a tray of two Kirin Lights and two tall glasses.

Murata filled Noguchi’s glass, then his own. “He won’t be in any shape to handle money for a long time,” he added, somewhat apprehensively. He had never gone against his godfather’s wishes before, nor had he ever lied to him. He wondered what Noguchi would do if he found out. Or if he guessed the truth already.

Noguchi was watching the baseball again. The announcer was taking an indignant stand against violence in the current controversy surrounding Japan’s unruly crop of gaijin players, who were punching out pitchers wholesale after being hit by pitches. Noguchi inhaled on his cigarette. “Tough decision,” he said, letting the smoke out slowly. “Either way.”

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The seniority board at headquarters showed Noriyuki Morioka as one of Murata’s senior soldiers. He had been an active participant in some of the gang’s most important jobs and accompanied Murata when he needed a bodyguard. Morioka had also served under Murata in Kobe and later followed him to Obama. He had been in yakuza organizations since the age of eighteen, joining Noguchi’s family in 1974. He was twenty-nine, had no tattoos and ten fingers. Morioka also had a wife seventeen years his senior in Kobe, shuttling back and forth between her and work in Obama.

The truth was, however, he was rarely delegated any real responsibility. He was never sent to collect money on bad debts or bounced checks, never put in charge of any gambling operations like Kikkawa and the others. Morioka had been under Murata for three years in Kobe, another two in Obama, and had never been more than backup. There was something about him Murata didn’t trust. He was the kind you couldn’t let down your guard with. The kind who looked for an opening, then ways to take advantage of it.

But Murata had no real grounds for these suspicions. Morioka performed his duties, got along

with the other soldiers, had friends in Obama. And with the final appeal on Murata's impending sixteen-month sentence coming up in April, 1979, he had to come to a decision about Morioka. Mura, Kikkawa and Sudo were in jail. When he left, Morioka and Kikuchi would be his only two senior soldiers in Obama. If he didn't put Morioka in charge, he might very well leave the family.

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The three-inch circular steel door to the safe stood open, stacks of ledgers lined neatly across the Formica. "I'm puttin' you'n Kikuchi in charge a operations while I'm gone," Murata said, leaning back in his chair. "These're the books." He reached in the safe and placed three thick bundles of ten-thousand-yen notes on top of the ledgers. "An' fifty thousand operating expenses."

Morioka looked at the stacked bills.

Murata watched his eyes, then held out a small strip of paper. "Combination to the safe. Burn it."

Morioka raised the piece of paper, studying the sequence of numbers and letters.

Murata continued to look at him.

Morioka shifted positions. "Is there something else?"

Murata eased the ledgers with the money on them back into the safe. He swung the door closed, then looked back up at Morioka. "Don't fuck up."

In early 1978, Murata had acquired the rights to a bankrupt Obama steel factory and all equipment in it. He purposely did not liquidate these holdings into cash before going to prison, counting on this nest egg as operating capital when he got out.

Morioka was scheduled to begin serving an eighteen-month stretch of his own in November, 1979, seven months after Murata left. In September, he sold the rights to the factory, took the profits and cleared out of Obama.

Morioka had the money. With it came a problem—saving his life. He was scheduled to do his time in Toyama, the same place accommodating Murata and most of the gang. If Morioka was *there* when the Boss heard the news, he wouldn't last the day.

So Morioka went to the police.

He told the sergeant he had had a falling out with Murata before Murata began serving his term, that sending him, Morioka, to Toyama would mean trouble. His life might even be in danger. Then he made a very strange request—to serve his time elsewhere.

Even stranger, the cops said yes.

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On April twenty-fourth, 1980, Noriyuki Morioka became a free man. Free, but wanted. On April twenty-fifth, he stood outside the door of the one person who could stay his execution—Noguchi. Next to him stood his forty-seven-year-old wife. Together, they told Noguchi there had been trouble with Murata, that Murata might be planning to retaliate. Morioka asked for protection as a former soldier, offering his and his wife's services to use as Noguchi saw fit.

The phone call reached Murata six days later. Morioka was on the streets. And, once again in Noguchi's employ.

Murata and three of his men headed for Kobe. What was the thieving sonofabitch doing at Noguchi's? But to Murata, showing proper respect for his former oyabun outweighed justice even for a crime against him and his family.

Noguchi listened. The steel mill. The money. Murata said he had come to make sure it didn't happen again. He asked Noguchi to hand him over.

Noguchi called Morioka in. Murata saw him hang his head and apologize, no defense. Saw Noguchi push Morioka against the wall. Heard him yell that scum like him didn't deserve to live. Then heard him say how, from a business standpoint, Morioka's loss would be sorely felt. Heard him give the order not to touch Morioka as long as he remained in his employ.

Murata nodded, then rose to leave. He wondered if Noguchi had found out about Sudo. Was his refusal a disguised lesson in obedience for the one time in his life Murata went against the will of his oyabun? At the door he turned and pointed a finger at Morioka. "Leave Kobe, and you're a dead man."

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Three months had passed when the phone call came.

"Yeah," Murata answered, taking the receiver from the soldier on duty.

Noguchi said one word. "Morioka."

"Yeah?"

"He's yours."

Noriyuki Morioka disappeared, apparently with a hostess from a bar in his neighborhood in Nagata-ku. At last report, he is still at large.