

## The Monks

8:30 p.m. The zendo is silent. Light leaks from the lone incandescent bulb casting indistinct shadows on the twenty-odd motionless figures as white curls of pungent-sweet incense drift lazily upward from the Buddha altar. The master is silent again after giving one of his sermons, something about a rich old merchant and a traveling monk. The moral: Jump! Throw away your preconceptions! Hmmm. Easy for him to say. There he sits, one link in the chain of enlightened Zen men. Not the type you feel comfortable getting close to. Liable to ask you something like, "Who are you?"

One of the monks is making the rounds with the *kyosaku*. You can just barely hear—no, it's more like you *feel*—the soft crush of straw sandals padding by as his shadow, almost ten feet tall, skims the *shoji*. Then you hear it. Or do you? At first it's so faint you're not sure. It could be the wind whistling through the trees, or just your ears playing tricks on you.

No, that's it, all right—like a dog whimpering in the next room, like the low wail of a police siren miles away. It gets louder, more intense, demonic. Something is gasping for breath, a hoarse and desperate howl pleading for help. Slowly, the howl degenerates into a horrible gurgling, a creature drowning in its own fluids. A cold hand slips around your heart. No matter how many times you endure this waking nightmare, you never get used to Tange's fits.

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Tange was twenty-seven when he came to Hosshinji after leaving his job as an aluminum siding salesman in Niigata. His face slanted slightly to the right, giving him a faintly comical air, something his nicotine-stained teeth and pigeon-toed gait did nothing to dispel. But Tange was soft-spoken and good-natured, a refreshing change from some of the other, more overbearing men of the cloth. He entered the monastery for a three-year stint to get his priest's license, and with it eligibility to assume charge of a small temple in his hometown. His first seizure occurred one week later.

It happened at a coffee shop in town with the master and another monk. Tange was lighting a cigarette when the lighter slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor, his trembling hands making no attempt to retrieve it. Customers began exchanging glances of alarm when the eerie whimpering began. Howls followed, until the horrible, Mephistophelean gurgling forced every person in the room fast against

his chair back. Tangen toppled over into the lap of the monk next to him, his body convulsing like it was being riddled with machine-gun bullets. He came back to himself a minute later, seemingly puzzled as to why was everyone staring at him.

Tangen's attacks followed the same general pattern: the whining, the howling, the gurgling. Sometimes he became quite mobile, beating the floor or romping short distances like a gorilla. In the grip of his sickness he lost all concern for his own safety, his face frequently carrying the cuts and bruises from his last attack. Finally, his body went limp and he crumpled, as if whatever possessed him had left. During work or meals, the monks could prevent him from sustaining serious injury, but in the zendo there was nothing anyone could do. My saddest experiences at Hosshinji were listening to Tangen's robes billowing the several times he fell the three feet from his sitting platform and the sickening *CRACK!* of his shaved, shiny head against the rock-hard floor.

Tangen was bullied by several Japanese monks just after he entered, frequently singled out for washing underwear and other unenviable chores. His most persistent tormentor, a brash young kid who, although ten years his junior, had several years of seniority and karate training, liked to use him as target practice. Tangen never fought back, until an attack afforded him some well-deserved payback. One afternoon in the reception hall, the kid got him in a headlock and began leading him around like a bull. And then, there it was: Tangen's blood-curdling wail. The kid let go as if he had been electrocuted and backed away, eyes bulging. Tangen cocked his head at him, once, twice, gave him the otherworldly gaze and began a loping pursuit, emitting a frenzied cackle that might have been the Devil himself. The kid screamed and ran out of the temple, slinking back late that night after everyone was in bed. He never went near Tangen again.

With a disability like epilepsy, Tangen was clearly not cut out for a career as a salesman. He didn't do so badly as a monk, however. He stuck out the bullying, the early mornings and the cold for three years, and returned to Niigata if not enlightened, at least licensed—his seizures largely a thing of the past.

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Many teams and organizations have their Cinderella story, someone who bursts on the scene

from out of nowhere to provide, in his own zany way, encouragement for those with less natural talent. The 1921 Boston Red Sox had Babe Ruth. Apple Computers had Steven Jobs. Hosshinji had Rinsai.

Rinsai was the head monk at Hosshinji when I arrived. He sat next to the master in the meditation hall, where he led sutras after sitting each night, during sesshins and before and after meals—his deep, resonant voice coming to symbolize Hosshinji for me. But Rinsai was no mere “head monk.” He was enlightened just three weeks after arriving at the monastery—the kind of tale found in Zen books.

But it was what he *did* with enlightenment that confounded anyone with traditional notions of what that exalted higher plane of consciousness was or should be—monks included. In my own case, he perhaps taught me more about satori than the master himself. Not that he showed me what it was, but rather, in dispelling many preconceptions, he demonstrated what it wasn’t.

For starters, it wasn’t sobriety. Rinsai was a confirmed drinker; enlightenment did nothing to change that. He was the last to go to bed at temple saké parties and a regular at several bars and late-night *yakitori*<sup>1</sup> shops around town, a proclivity that made him the unnamed target of several of the master’s meditation hall sermons on the subject of limiting our after-hours drinking excursions.

It wasn’t pacifism. Although usually placid enough, Rinsai had a quick temper, and never shrank from the use of violence. From the time he entered Hosshinji until two foreign monks came to blows three years later, he was one of the participants in—usually the instigator of—every fistfight at the temple.

It wasn’t humility. The “stink of enlightenment,” as Zen books referred to it, clung to him like a rash. He seemed to laugh at the system and everyone who so diligently strove for enlightenment, never letting us forget that we were, in the Zen scheme of things, ignorant beginners groping in the dark.

It wasn’t liberated thinking on sexual or even racial equality. Rinsai was both a male and Japanese chauvinist. To him, women existed to serve men. And foreigners existed to serve Japanese, only somehow it hadn’t worked out that way. The temple was no place for women. Gaijin, either, for that

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<sup>1</sup> *yakitori* Bite-sized pieces of chicken meat barbecued on bamboo skewers.

matter.

Most foreigners and Japanese alike, while respecting his accomplishment, had either tangled with him or resented his superior, opinionated attitude. I got along with him better than any other Japanese monk. There was a refreshing simplicity about him, a childlike innocence yet dramatic strength that could only be described as charismatic. And if he carried the stink of enlightenment, well, that was because he had it.

It was also Rinsai who, during my second sesshin, gave me one of my most memorable lessons at Hosshinji. The last sitting of the morning concluded, I uncrossed my legs for lunch after three hours in full lotus—the relief bringing tears to my eyes. I swiveled on my cushion, lowered my gaze and waited as the serving monks filed in. After receiving my side dishes, I presented my soup bowl to a robed figure with a wooden vat of miso broth. He ladled it full, then held it out to me in his palm—standard serving protocol. Leaning forward, I grasped the rim. Between the heavenly smell of the miso and the warmth of the bowl, my koan was lost; even the pain in my legs abated as the anticipation of pleasure heightened.

I leaned back, still holding the bowl's rim, but it remained in the server's palm, tipping precariously. I instantly envisioned soup covering the floor and thirty hungry Zen diehards glaring at me, the hopeless bungler. Only then did I realize the server had his hand tightly cupped around the base of the lacquer vessel. I looked up to find Rinsai's eyes sparkling as he relaxed his grip—just in time. It was a joke, but at the same time, it wasn't. It was a Zen joke: Be aware, idiot! Get it?

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Rinsai was a confused twenty-four-year-old construction worker in Yokohama when he began reading books on Zen. The more he read, the more intrigued—and dissatisfied—he became. What about enlightenment? He talked to monks who ran temples in the area, but gleaned little about satori. Finally, not wanting to believe the centuries-old tradition of *inka shomei*<sup>2</sup> transmission had been broken and enlightened Zen masters no longer existed, he quit his job and set out to find one.

His travels took him north to Niigata and Sadogashima, where prisoners were shipped to work

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<sup>2</sup> *inka shomei* Lit. "seal of approval." In the Hosshinji tradition, *inka shomei* is the confirmation by a master that a student has become "an enlightened successor of the Buddha."

in the gold mines during the Edo Period, then south through Honshu, the Noto Peninsula and Gifu Prefecture, on to Shikoku, Kyushu and back—almost a thousand miles in fourteen months. And, like the Zen men of old, he did it on foot. Many temples turned him away, especially the larger complexes like Soto Zen headquarters at Eihei-ji, where an introduction was the sole means of entry and months were required before trainees were allowed to meet the master. Others opened their doors, but the Zen men he found failed to satisfy the longing within him.

Thirteen months into his odyssey, a monk in the mountains of Gifu told him of an enlightened master living in a small town on the Japan Sea. The monk knew a little of the master's history; he had trained at a small temple deep in Shikoku's interior, then wandered the country for years after his enlightenment before settling in the obscure town. But the monk knew only the master's name, Yamada, and the town, Obama.

On March fifteenth, 1975, Rinsai approached the police box at Obama Station. A monk named Yamada? the cops smirked. There were over a hundred and twenty temples in Obama. That's why they called it "Little Nara." But after a time-consuming search, Rinsai found Hosshin-ji. Unlike the masters at large institutions, Sekkei Yamada agreed to see the young wanderer on the strength of his desire to practice Zen and that alone. And unlike the monks at small temples, there was something about him that spoke with the authority of *knowing*. Hosshin-ji was Soto sect, and Soto doctrine disavowed the active pursuit of satori. But Sekkei Yamada said it existed and that Rinsai could achieve it.

In contrast to Rinsai's preoccupation with Zen itself was his ingrained prejudice against the monastic community, which he referred to as men of "idleness and charity." After being accepted at Hosshin-ji, he kept to himself, walking in the mountains when not occupied with temple duties. What little conversation he did engage in with the monks, usually during afternoon tea breaks, revealed his contempt for monastic life and its brotherhood. His attitude earned him a chilly reception, inciting the brothers to denigrate him as hopeless of ever finding the Way.

On April first, the opening sesshin of the year began. In Rinsai's initial dokusan, the master gave him a koan, then told him to throw away his preconceptions. Forget himself, forget everything. What did that mean? He had no idea, but returned to the meditation hall to find out. The days passed. His knees

ached, he was cold and dirty and he couldn't get a straight answer from the master in dokusan.

Sometimes the little man with the sparkling eyes sat silent, sometimes he chuckled. Other times he raised his hand, as if to strike him. But the koan had begun to assume a tangible existence of its own, until he didn't know whether he was wrestling with it, or it with him.

On the fifth night, after group sitting finished at 9:00, his roommate, a monk named Hoko, suggested they do *yaza*, or late-night zazen. Rinsai had gone directly to bed every other night on the assumption that if eleven sittings a day weren't enough, the schedule would call for more. But this night, he agreed to join Hoko in the Founders' Room. There, among the pictures and centuries-old carvings of past Hosshinji masters, they sat until 10:00, when Hoko announced he was taking a nap, set his alarm clock and curled up on the tatami.

Rain had been falling since morning, the patter of drops on the tile roof seducing Rinsai to semi-consciousness. He fought to stay awake, slapping his face whenever he nodded off. It had been five days and he had nothing to show the master. He vowed to persevere—awake *or* asleep. Then, at 11:00, the alarm rang.

His body rang with the clock, as his eyes opened to a different world. Gone was the old one. In this one there was neither up nor down, only cascading into a black, bottomless void. "The falling away of heaven and earth!" he exclaimed. "So, it's this!" Hoko silenced the alarm and crawled off to their room, but Rinsai continued to plummet into the sound of the rain, through the scent of the burning incense. The ash fell to the base of the brass holder below, igniting an explosion within him that unleashed a torrent of joy. He left his cushion and moved through the shadowy forms of the Ancestors' Hall. Walking felt strange, like it wasn't *him*. Who was doing it? It was happening without thought, without consciousness. Up to now, Rinsai had believed *he* made things happen. But no, they simply happened. There was no "I," no actor, only action.

Rinsai was first in line for dokusan the next morning. He burst in, smiling wildly in abbreviated prostrations, barely able to contain his desire to be tested. Later that day, the master announced in the meditation hall that one of the sitters had achieved a significant level of enlightenment. But before nightfall the temple buzzed with the news: Rinsai, the new recruit, the construction worker who had disdained

monkhood, had what all the monks wanted.

Satori was such a rare event, even for monks with years of training, that it tended to get lost as the ultimate goal of temple life, taking on a chimerical existence. Now, in the possession of someone in their midst, it assumed a new immediacy. And after only three weeks! The monks' harsh judgment of him was forgotten. Now they surrounded him at tea breaks, showering him with questions instead of abuse. Was sitting essential? How much was necessary? What about desire?

The master, however, faced something of a dilemma. He had one enlightened lay disciple who looked contemptuously upon the system that had enlightened him, and many still unenlightened monks who made their living from it. As far as Sekkei Yamada was concerned, there was little meaning to Rinsai's accomplishment if he didn't put it to good use by becoming a monk. A lay disciple had no one to think of but himself, whereas a monk's life was dedicated to easing human suffering. Rinsai wanted no part of sutra readings, funerals and the other tiresome formalities, but without knowing it, he had two options: fulfill the responsibility that came with enlightenment—become a monk—or return to the material world. The master called Daishin, the head monk, to help the new recruit “decide.”

Events reached a climax at a saké party several days after the sesshin, Rinsai being congratulated on his “good fortune” and barraged with questions. What is enlightenment? What about the sound of one hand clapping? What are you going to do now? asked Daishin. I'm going to have another cup of saké, answered Rinsai. As the monks followed his lead, one by one they stumbled back to their rooms, until only Rinsai and Daishin were left.

Irritated by Rinsai's flippancy, Daishin insisted it was Rinsai's obligation as a Buddhist to take the vows, and further that the temple would look bad if he didn't. Rinsai poured another cup of saké and smiled. When an angry Daishin pressed him for an answer to the question, “What is enlightenment?” Rinsai silently held up his full cup. Daishin slammed the saké teapot down and demanded that Rinsai become a monk. To which Rinsai calmly replied, “What is a monk?”

“This!” Daishin's saké cup sailed across the table at Rinsai's head, followed by Daishin himself. His fists rained down on the new recruit, who, possibly due to lack of seniority, made no attempt to retaliate, deflecting the blows as best he could while crawling determinedly toward the safety of his room.

The next morning he showed up for breakfast with blackened eyes and his shaved head bruised and knotty. When another monk asked how his head felt, he replied, "That's just pain."

Six weeks later, Rinsai, another Japanese and two foreign lay disciples shared the initiation ceremony into the monkhood. The beating had helped make Rinsai a monk. It by no means made him a *model* monk. Some said it had come too early, that like an overloaded electrical circuit, he was unprepared to handle such a massive satori without the years most monks logged before the big *POP!* Rinsai had, in Zen parlance, "caught the ox," but didn't know exactly what to do with it. He felt so free, the real world and its rules didn't apply. Rules were just a means to an end—an end he already had.

One means he no longer needed was the temple routine. He frequently "opted out" of work duty to retire to his futon with a stack of comic books and a teapot of hot saké on the hibachi. If he was sleepy, he pulled his bedding out to the Sutra Library for a nap. If he was hungry, he angled the sacred carp out of the temple pond. And much to Hosshinji's chagrin, Rinsai occasionally took his antics to town. There, he became quite the celebrity at some bars and pachinko parlors by trying to enlighten the clientele with drunken sermons on the Buddha's most complex teachings.

Monks and lay disciples alike looked forward to Rinsai's next "eccentricity." Would they find him up a tree, refusing to come down until someone "said a true word?" Tweaking the master's nose? Then, when it came, there would be long, happy hours of discussion divining the enlightenment in it. But no one could find the satori in Rinsai's response to his parents' visit after their five-hour train ride from Okayama Prefecture following his initiation.

Upon being summoned to the business office and told his mother and father were in the master's sitting room, Rinsai nodded and left, heading in that direction. In the master's chamber, the elderly couple waited as they heard of their son's remarkable achievement and the promise he held as a monk. For their part, they couldn't thank the master enough for helping him find a respectable place in society.

Rinsai, however, never joined the gathering. The master sent monks looking, but no one could find him. Finally, long after dark and his crestfallen parents had departed for home, Rinsai strolled back into his room. A small but curious coterie, waiting for his return and hungry for an explanation, asked

him where he had been. Rinsai retrieved a comic book from his collection, poured himself a cup of saké and glanced casually at his audience. "I found some weeds up on the mountain that needed pulling."

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The Hosshinji gaijin were also an interesting lot. One of the most diligent foreign monks had been an assistant manager at the Chicago Playboy Club before leaving to search for truth in Japan. A French monk held the distinction of having spent more time interred in Japanese temples than any living foreigner but one. (Few of us held any hope of his ever being able to return to life on the outside.) There was a German artist, a Spanish pilot, an Australian hippie.

At least one monk found more than spiritual fulfillment at Hosshinji, in the form of a young female art student from Osaka. The monk was fluent in seven languages and had a promising future at IBM before he left Brazil to study Zen in Japan. The art student had come on a one-day tour of Obama with her drawing class to sketch temples in the countryside. He was taking a breather on the steps of the main gate when she wandered up with her sketchbook. She asked him to show her the grounds. He asked for her phone number. A courtship followed, including a series of "pilgrimages," the monk taking the art student on his off-season begging trips and, when these were completed, using the hard-earned money of contributing believers to enjoy several very unmonastic days with her at a hot springs resort. He later left Hosshinji to marry his artist and assume leadership of a small temple not far from Obama. That and have three children—all without stepping a foot off the path of Zen.

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Tangen, Rinsai, the foreigners—they came by choice; others were sent. Much like the Army in the United States, monasteries in Japan sometimes acted as juvenile correctional facilities in straightening out problem children without leaving smudges on their records. Rinsai, one such monk, was seventeen and looked like a choirboy in his robes. His ticket to Hosshinji? The choirboy had been caught selling the panties of his female high school classmates—after breaking into their houses to get them.

Rinsai was young, horny and confused. He wanted to live it up, go out, find a girlfriend. He could take or leave satori; zazen, sesshins, the winters—those were things you got through the best way you could. But with three meals a day, a roof over your head and enough money to live on, Hosshinji

wasn't such a bad place once you got used to it. Rinsai looked more at the vocational aspects of being a monk, like reading sutras. There was a living to be made there.

Rinsai took a liking to me, frequently showing up at my door to talk about . . . well, sex. The dialogue generally began with complaints about Hosshinji or Rinsai, his new roommate, but the gear-stripping switch to women was inevitable. How many had I done it with? Any threesomes? I tried to discourage the subject, explaining that making love wasn't about numbers or positions, but he refused to let it go. What about doggie style? How many had I gone down on? And the more he interrogated me, even without getting answers, the more excited he became.

When I made the mistake of asking if he had dated anyone before coming to Hosshinji, he told me his only experience had come at a toruko—*after* his arrival. Then he began remembering, his eyes rolling back in his head like a shark before it attacks. He grabbed his stomach with both hands, rolling back and forth across the floor, uttering strange, guttural sounds.

I began ducking Rinsai by telling him I was on my way to town when he showed up, but not before hearing the story of his “greatest orgasm” during his last visit. It happened while he was intoning a sutra for a family come to honor an elderly relative recently laid to rest in the Hosshinji graveyard. Both hands were occupied striking the gong to keep time for his recitation, but the sight of the deceased's sixteen-year-old grandniece made them unnecessary. What's more, he swore no one was the wiser. From what I'd seen, I doubted it.

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Kuriyama was not a monk, but a fifty-one-year-old alcoholic, sent to Hosshinji to dry out. Like many alcoholics, he was agreeable enough when sober, but turned surly with any amount of booze in him. And booze was *not* hard to come by in Hosshinji. The monastery kept a large supply of saké received as gifts, and it was child's play to smuggle in a personal stash from outside. So when it became clear that Hosshinji was keeping Kuriyama anything but dry, the master forbade drinking in his presence and instructed temple personnel to report any sightings of the old guy tossing down a few on the sly.

Kuriyama's eventful last day at Hosshinji began one work-exempt afternoon in mid-December that found him cold, alone and chafing at the “discrimination” of his sobriety sentence. It wasn't long

before this unhappy combination of circumstances drove him to his emergency stash—a flask of Suntory Red, the Thunderbird of Japanese whisky—for a few nips “just to keep warm.”

Two hours later, Kuriyama was burning up—wasted and furious at losing his one pleasure in this hellhole, and finally, his drunken anger got the upper hand. Vowing to give the master a piece of his mind, he stumbled downstairs and outside to the tool shed, stumbling out minutes later carrying a large scythe. Now he marched resolutely back in and straight to the master’s quarters, where he bellowed an ultimatum to come out—or he was coming in. The master was seated at his desk with his female personal assistant. There were no locks on Hosshinji’s interior shoji, and he wasn’t about to hear Kuriyama out. Fortunately, his quarters had two entrances, and they wasted no time in making their exit through the rear one and out of the temple to safety.

Kizan, then the temple cook, was leaving his room off the kitchen to begin the evening meal, when he heard shouting. He hurried to investigate, but recognized the gravity of the situation only when he saw a silhouette in the master’s rooms slashing the shoji with a round, blade-like object. Panicking that the master might be in there, he ran back to his room for his wooden *kendo*<sup>3</sup> sword, calling loudly for help, then headed back to disarm the perpetrator.

Kuriyama spun around when he heard the voice and staggered back out into the main hall, stopping momentarily when he saw Kizan and the sword. Kizan warned Kuriyama to drop the scythe, telling him he didn’t want to use his weapon, then yelled again for backup. But Kuriyama grinned and began advancing, lashing out at the air as he came. Kizan tensed, raising the sword to shoulder level and finally over his head—ready to strike.

Kuriyama jerked the scythe back like a boomerang, then snapped it forward in a roundhouse slash. Kizan whipped the sword down on the blade, knocking it away, but Kuriyama kept his grip. Now that the master was out of danger, he could let Kuriyama tire himself out—which, this drunk, shouldn’t take long. But Kuriyama retaliated with a quick uppercut, driving Kizan backwards on the balls of his feet and almost taking a chunk out of his arm.

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<sup>3</sup> *kendo* Japanese swordsmanship

Five minutes later, Kizan was still giving ground. Having practiced kendo for many years, he could always bring the incident to a quick, if painful, conclusion by knocking Kuriyama unconscious—which he would be forced to do if the old lush didn't give it up soon. Finally, Kuriyama shrieked and rushed in with another roundhouse. Kizan swung hard, the sword squarely meeting the scythe and taking its blade deep into the wooden shaft. When he jerked the sword back, the embedded scythe came with it. Kuriyama looked forlornly at his empty hands and slumped to the tatami.

Just then, one of the foreign monks appeared in the doorway leading to the zendo, yawning as he mounted the wooden steps to the main hall. He looked curiously at Kuriyama sitting with his head hung, then at Kizan panting as he leaned on his sword. "Anything the matter?"

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The yakuza heard the ruckus from the other end of the hall. He pressed his face out as far as it would go between the bars. Several others drifted over. Sounded like they'd have company soon.

The yakuza smirked at the three cops struggling with the old guy. A detox case if he'd ever seen one, big square face, broken capillaries like road maps on his red cheeks. One cop was opening the cell door now, the old man still ranting. Were those teeth in his mouth?

The guards threw Kuriyama in the cell and clanged the door shut. He staggered back and forth like a fighter about to go down, then tottered over against the bars and began pounding them with his fists. "Discrimination!" he bellowed.

"Hey old timer," the yakuza looked over, "whatcha in for?"

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"Hi," I said, walking into headquarters. "Mind if I have a Coke?" Murata and a soldier I didn't recognize were sitting on the couch.

"Hey," Murata grunted, "get us a beer while you're there."

The soldier stared at me as I set the bottles down in front of them. Murata looked curious, too. "You know an old rummy name a Kuriyama?" he asked.

It had been a month since the incident. "Kuriyama? A rummy?" I shook my head, thinking. "Uh uh."

He sat up. "You mean you don't know the guys in your own temple?"

"Ohhhhh!" I laughed. "That Kuriyama. How the hell do you know him?" I had heard about the scene in the Hosshinji parking lot. Two police cars screeching in. Families pouring out of their houses. Two patrolmen dragging the unruly drunk out the four-hundred-year-old gate.

Now Murata recounted the eyewitness account of the soldier on the couch. Kuriyama ranting until being transferred to the holding tank to dry out. A sober Kuriyama being returned to the cell the next morning, silent and contrite, mumbling that this time he had maybe "gone too far."

The soldier continued to stare at me, trying to grasp something very new and very large, as if his father had just confronted him with the facts of life. Like the rest of Murata's gang, this yakuza's working knowledge of Hosshinji went as far as me, and no further. Now here was this old drunk in jail, a potential count of attempted murder against him.

The soldier was trying to say something, but not finding the words. Finally it came. "Just . . . who are those guys and what the hell goes *on* in there?"