

The Young Punk

Murata looked around him. The sights, the sounds, the smells were different. City sounds and smells. He liked them. Everywhere he looked were flashing neon lights and people—more people in Kabuki-cho on Saturday night than he saw in Obama in a month. This was a different world, faster, things to do.

With him were Mura, Taira, Kadowaki and Igarashi. They had arrived from Obama a week ago for their first look at a big city. Home for the moment was with Murata's sister, who worked in Shinjuku as a secretary and had a two-room apartment outside Kabuki-cho.

Kabuki-cho, Shinjuku's entertainment district, covered an area of several city blocks. At night it became a neon fantasyland of colors and action. The sex industry thrived, hawkers tempting passersby with promises of every act imaginable, in any setting imaginable. Further back, up a small grade, stood rows and rows of love hotels, signs advertising both all-night and two-hour rates. The entrances glowed an eerie neon purple to prevent customers from being seen—or photographed—on their way in and out.

Drugs were rife. Little old men with long matted hair wandered the streets spouting the incoherence of years of paint thinner. High school gangs prowled the streets, knives concealed under their school uniforms. Prostitutes were on every corner. So were yakuza.

Kabuki-cho was the territory of Sumiyoshi Rengo, Kanto's largest, most powerful syndicate. It was a place some people walked into and never walked out of. They enter what looks like a regular bar for a few drinks. But on the way out, they discover their bill is a thousand dollars. They don't have that kind of money, they protest. Maybe they make trouble. Hey, what kind of a place is this? I want to talk to the manager! But the manager doesn't appear. Yakuza do. The customers are taken upstairs and persuaded to find ways to raise the money. Call the wife or relatives. Some do as they are advised. Others "fall" out third-story windows.

Igarashi nudged Murata. Up ahead a couple was walking hand-in-hand, heading for a love hotel, no doubt. Murata waved him off. "Not 'less we get desperate. They had money, they wouldn't be here."

"But it's so *easy*."

“But it ain’t no fun.”

Their second night in town they had followed one pair down a winding path into a nearby park. Murata could still see it—the lovebirds sitting on a bench at the elbow of a secluded curve. He and the gang watched from the trees, waiting. The couple started out slow, her hissing, “Not here!” But within minutes she was groaning, legs wide as he worked his hand under her skirt. The pair didn’t slow down as the gang came around the corner like loud, staggering drunks—fifteen, ten, then five feet away. Murata took a quick step sideways and half kicked, half pushed the guy backwards over the bench, leaving the girl holding air. They got away with \$2.50. Nah, couples were no fun at all.

Now *there* was dinner, standing beneath a street light at the mouth of a dark, narrow alley. Six of them. Several squatted as if evacuating their bowels in the woods, a traditional Japanese resting pose adopted by delinquent gangs as a sign of rebellion. Maybe three looked like they could put up a decent fight. Leaning against a lamppost with his hands in his pockets was a guy several inches taller than Murata. That one was his.

The gang walked by in a loose cluster. Each member had a knife with a long, curved blade taped to his calf for shaking down *chinpira*¹ or emergencies. These punks didn’t qualify as *chinpira*, and this was certainly no emergency.

Mura, on the outside, gave one of the punks a shoulder.

The punks bristled. “*Kono yaro!*”² one yelled. Five of the six sprang to a fighting stance, chests puffed out. Only one squatter remained in position.

Murata’s group wheeled and took a step back, saying nothing, like they didn’t understand what all the hard feelings were about. Murata had changed his tactics since coming to Shinjuku. Now he didn’t always start out acting tough. Sometimes he liked to play with his victims first, the way Clint Eastwood did in “Dirty Harry.” Stay cool, get ‘em wondering. *Then* hit ‘em.

¹ *chinpira* A young unaffiliated hoodlum or petty criminal on the lower fringe of a Japanese crime syndicate.

² “*Kono yaro!*” Lit. “This fellow!” but closer in meaning to, “You sonofabitch!”

Murata stepped forward nonchalantly, placed the sole of his shoe on the squatter's forehead and pushed. The punk toppled over onto his back.

Mura and the rest sniggered.

The punk righted himself, snarling, "Kono yaro!" The veins in his neck hardened. But nobody did anything. What did it take with these guys?

Murata stepped forward to face the big one. "That all you boys can say?" He spoke in a low tone, serious but not threatening.

The big one was looking at him funny, confused.

"That little shit bumped into my friend here," Murata continued, "and when my friend gets pissed, people get hurt. If I were you, I'd show 'im you're sorry." He turned to Mura. "Whaddya say, Masa? Ten thousand yen do it?"

Now the big one understood. "Baka—!"

Murata hit him in the mouth. His head shot back, ricocheting off the lamppost with a dull, metallic thud. He staggered two steps forward, then went to his knees.

Murata saw a flash of silver. "Taira!" he yelled.

More metal gleamed. Taira swinging a length of chain around his head, lashing it like a whip. It wrapped around the kid's hand as Murata drove a fist into his stomach. The knife clattered to the sidewalk. Taira kicked him in the face, sending him into the alley.

Cars began slowing down to watch the fracas.

The last punk still on his feet took off running. By that time the others littered the sidewalk. The gang dragged the bodies into the alley. They walked out with sixty dollars and tomorrow off.

Now *this* was fun.

For two months, Murata and his gang haunted the streets of Kabuki-cho. It wasn't a bad life. They usually scraped up enough money to stay full, and if they didn't, there was always something on the stove at Murata's sister's. They went drinking, had girls.

They *had* taken a few knocks. Taira got cold-cocked. Mura took a superficial flesh wound in a knife fight. One of Murata's female victims bit his knuckle down to the bone protecting her purse. But more than anything, it was beginning to feel like work.

"I'm gettin' tired a this shit," Kadowaki announced. "Why don' we lay off'n kick back for a while? Shit, take a vacation."

"What're we gonna take a fuckin' vacation *on*?" snorted Igarashi.

Murata shook his head. "You sayin' we rob a fuckin' bank?"

Kadowaki brightened. "Hey! Remember Yasue, that broad I used to bang in Osaka? I could bring her here and we could sell her. To a toruko or something—make five thousand bucks easy. She ain't worth shit anyway, fat bitch."

Murata looked at him. "You'd do that?"

"Why not?" said Kadowaki. "Then we could really take it easy. Besides, wouldn't you?"

Murata didn't answer.

Kadowaki left the next day. And didn't come back.

* * *

Mura slowly fanned out his five cards. "I'll see your ten and raise you ten."

"Call," said Taira, throwing a ten-yen piece in the pot, and laid down jacks and sevens. "All right, let's see 'em. I'll bet you ain't got shit."

Mura grinned as he spread his hand out on the tatami—three fours. He raked in the sixty-cent pot. The gang was down to their last three dollars.

Murata got up from the corner where he had been watching television. "Hey," he called, working his muscular arms into his shirt, "gimme fifty cents. I'm gonna get a bowl a *ramen*³."

The loose change jangled in his pocket as Murata lumbered down the stairs from the apartment and turned right, toward Kabuki-cho. He hadn't decided what to do about Kadowaki. He'd been gone ten days and they still hadn't heard from him. They'd called the girl in Osaka and his folks in

³ *ramen* A popular Japanese dish of noodles and various toppings served in broth.

Obama, but nobody had seen the sonofabitch. They'd even talked about going to Osaka to look for him. But that cost money, money they didn't have. Kadowaki was probably okay, just shacking up with the broad before unloading her. Still, he should have called.

Murata noted the lone figure standing across the street, a punk leaning against a mailbox. He had the feeling he'd seen this one before. Where? The punk straightened when he saw Murata, flicked his cigarette into the street and walked off towards Koma Plaza.

The smell inside the noodle shop made his stomach growl. It was 3:00 p.m. and he hadn't eaten all day. He spotted the four chinpira after he sat down, talking loud, flashing rolls of bills. Enough to keep Murata and Co. in high gear for days. He only wished he had time for a bowl of noodles before going back to get the boys.

"What'll it be?" the master yelled from behind the counter.

Murata was already out the door. They needed a good score. The chinpiras were holding at least three hundred dollars. Maybe use the money for train fare to Osaka to see about Kadowaki.

He was walking fast now. There was little street traffic, few people out. They'd wait for the chinpiras in the alley across from the noodle shop. Two boys were tossing a baseball in the middle of the street. Neither seemed to notice him as he strode past, but they reminded him of something—the punk. He didn't like people knowing him and him not knowing them. Maybe next time he'd rough the kid up, discourage him from loitering.

Murata was too busy thinking to notice the group of ten toughs walking out of a side street half a block ahead. When he looked up he recognized two as members of a bunch they had rolled several nights before. Then he spotted the punk. The little fuck had been on lookout duty; they had staked him out.

He glanced over his shoulder as six more toughs emptied out of an alley behind him. The closest building said "Sato Dry Cleaning." Murata bolted.

"What—?!" belched Mr. Sato, holding up his arms as Murata rounded the counter. Murata pushed him out of his way, driving him backwards into a long, movable rack of suits hanging in plastic bags. The rack toppled over, leaving Mr. Sato swimming in plastic.

Murata bounded over the rack and dashed into the family's TV room. Like most traditional city houses, this one was long and thin, rooms lined up along a hall. He ignored the stairway on his right and kept running. Get trapped upstairs and he was dog meat.

He sprinted out the back into a small dirt yard littered with old appliances and cinder blocks. There was a small fence with a wooden gate leading to a narrow alley. By now his pursuers were in the house. To the left stood a deserted building, a six-foot cinder-block wall separating the two plots. Murata scooped up a brick and shattered a second-story window. From the top of the wall he chinned himself up to the window ledge, the glass in the molding digging into his stomach as he wriggled in. He had just thudded onto the floor when he heard the toughs burst into the yard below. They ran through the gate and down the alley.

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The boys were still playing poker when he returned. So the gangs had finally put their heads together and tracked them down. During the last two months he and his group had left over a hundred toughs lying in the streets. Now their victims knew the neighborhood, maybe the apartment. Tomorrow the entire block would be crawling with every chinpira and tough in Shinjuku.

Mura glanced up at Murata standing in the doorway, his shirt torn and blood stained. "What the hell happened?" he blurted, dropping his cards.

"I'm gonna wash up. Get our shit together," Murata said, calm now. "It gets dark, we're leavin."

* * *

Murata's sister had a mouth and she lost no time using it on the subject of loaning them money: "All five a you freeloaders? To fuckin' Osaka?" But if it meant getting them out of her hair . . .

Kadowaki never made it to his girlfriend's. They found the girl, who now complained about waiting two hours for "the no-good sonofabitch," and told Murata to tell Kadowaki to get lost. They asked around the neighborhood. One old guy said he saw the cops hauling away a young kid three weeks earlier. There had been a fight. The kid was just a bystander watching from the crowd. Then the

cops came. They took a knife off him and threw him into the paddy wagon with the others. The old guy said if he was a cop, he would have searched the kid, too. He looked like a yakuza.

Murata turned to the others. "That's him."

They got the rest of the story at the police station. Kadowaki was doing six-months in juvenile detention.

That night they hit couples until they had train fare to Obama.

* * *

Murata's fists were still clenched. People gathered around, curiously looking at the contorted figure lying between two overturned tables. Went down mighty hard, one onlooker said. Is he breathing? another asked. The bar owner loped out from behind the counter. His shoulders drooped.

"I told you, don't hit anybody," the owner said. He looked tired. "You hit somebody, this is what happens. You're a bouncer. You're supposed to throw 'em out, not *kill* 'em."

"Asshole was about to take a swing at me. Hell, I only hit 'im once," Murata replied.

"Well, for your sake, I just hope he ain't a dead asshole." The owner turned to the barmaid behind the counter. "Junko, call an ambulance. You," he turned to Murata, "just went on vacation."

* * *

Murata and Igarashi took the 7:00 a.m. train for Kobe.

They roamed the city, sleeping in alleys, parks, looking for a place to lay low. Four days later their arms were bloody from scratching mosquito bites, their money about out. Getting picked up for vagrancy now would mean juvenile detention hall for Murata.

The sixth day they got lucky; the owner of a pachinko parlor said they could work at his place and sleep on the second floor. Murata's room looked like it hadn't been lived in in years—with mice, cockroaches and paint peels the size of maple leaves as evidence.

He called Taira the next day in Obama. He couldn't stay in a pachinko parlor forever. What had happened to the guy in the bar? If he was out of the hospital, there was a chance Murata could return to Obama and get off with a fine.

The news wasn't good.

“Man, you come back here, your ass’s in a sling.” Taira sounded scared. “The guy you hit’s still in the hospital with a broken jaw an’ a concussion. The cops—fuckin’ Honma—barged in here the next day looking for you an’ wavin’ a warrant for assault’n battery. Says he’s gonna nail you for this one.”

Murata stared at a spider wandering along its web in the corner.

“Oh, one more thing. Aya’s been lookin’ for you, calling here every day. Sounded pretty bad last time, cryin’ an’ all.”

Aya was different from the other girls. That was clear from the start. Ever since she walked right up to him on his bulldozer while he was clearing land for Route 303 that went past her house and said, “Want some cold tea?” Ever since he climbed down from the dozer and followed her home, past the kitchen, straight to her bedroom. The second time she’d told him she wanted his baby.

There was a silence until Taira said, “You still there?”

Murata blinked. “Yeah.”

“Where the hell *are* you, anyway? Gimme the number, case I hear somethin’.”

Murata pulled out his wallet and squinted at the numbers scribbled on a piece of newspaper. “Oh seven eight, four five two, six three five six.”

“Where is that?”

“Pachinko parlor. Me an’ Igarashi got rooms on the second floor.”

“You need anything, let me know.”

Murata pressed the cradle down with his finger, the receiver still to his ear. He pulled a handful of ten yen pieces out of his pocket, fed them into the slot and punched 07706-2-5788. The phone rang several times before he heard a click.

“*Moshi moshi*,” came a woman’s voice.

• “*Moshi moshi*”: “Hello.”

“Aya?”

* * *

She arrived the next day. The owner looked confused when Murata brought her in, looking for a job, too. Then he shrugged his shoulders. Sure, he said, they could find something for her to do in the office.

Things went smoothly for a month. Murata and Igarashi did their jobs and stayed out of trouble. The owner took a liking to them. Keep this up, he said, and in a couple more they'd get a raise.

Three toughs Murata's age walked in several days later. The neighborhood, one of the worst sections of Nagata Ward, was a breeding ground for the gangs of Kobe. These three were straight out of the mold—slicked-back Regents, leather jackets studded with silver stars. One wore GI combat boots. The other two, lace net clogs with wooden heels. Murata looked at Igarashi. Igarashi nodded. Be fun to roll these creeps.

They soon got their chance. Murata was repairing a machine when he heard the sound of shattering glass over the brain-numbing pings of tens of thousands of plummeting steel balls. One of the toughs held his sandal in front of his machine, the front pane smashed in the shape of a multi-pointed star.

Murata grabbed the kid by the collar, dragged him to the door and hurled him into the street. When the other two rushed up, Igarashi joined in and ejected them the same way.

The next day the toughs were back, looking for a fight.

But not there, they said. There was a vacant lot not far from the parlor where they could settle the matter without interference. It was surrounded by old apartment buildings on all four sides. No worries about the police, either; the neighborhood boasted Kobe's highest concentration of Yamaguchi-gumi soldiers. Even if someone called the cops, they'd never come.

Murata and Igarashi followed them to a narrow, trash-strewn alley twenty meters long. "The lot's at the end. This is the only way in or out," one tough said.

"You first," growled Murata. He didn't like being on unfamiliar turf *and* with his back to the enemy.

The three of them started down the alley, kicking at milk cartons and bottles like they were soccer balls.

They went too easily, Murata thought, too sure of themselves. “Keep an eye out behind,” he whispered to Igarashi.

The lot had been the sight of a torn-down building. The foundation jugged out of the ground like huge, jagged molars. Cinder blocks and rotting boards were everywhere. Tenements walled the enclosure, laundry hanging from open windows and rusting fire escapes.

Murata heard the pounding of footsteps behind him—a trap. Herd them into the lot, then call out the neighborhood. “Run!” he yelled to Igarashi, as he whirled and took off sprinting for the alley.

Six more toughs with wooden clubs poured into the lot. Once inside they fanned out, converging on Murata and Igarashi in a rapidly shrinking circle. The three toughs in front were also coming in pursuit.

Murata scooped up a brick, and threw it as the first attacker began his swing. The kid, barely sixteen, grabbed his chest as he fell. He took the kid’s club and slammed it into the ribs of the next assailant.

For a while he held his own. But when Igarashi went down under a rain of clubs, the seven of them turned their undivided attention to him, beating him until he lay helpless. The gang leader snapped his fingers. The rest backed slowly away.

Murata struggled to all fours. He dimly made out a pair of legs in front of him. The body pitched back, then forward.

With it came a cinder block.

* * *

The heat was brutal. The only ventilation in the room was a lone window leading to the roof, now blistering hot in the afternoon sun.

Murata lay stretched out on the bed, his head grotesquely swollen and knotted. His lips shone a ghastly purple, almost phosphorescent. But he was lucky to be alive. Had the leader caught him with a corner of the cinder block, he’d be on a slab with a tag around his toe.

Aya sat on the foot of the bed. "Are you sure you don't want to try to eat?" A pitcher of water, a glass, a spoon and a bowl of rice gruel were on the night table next to his bed. The owner had left them there that morning.

"Ain't hungry."

"But you haven't eaten anything since yesterday."

"How's Igarashi?" Murata's pride wouldn't let him tell her it hurt too much to chew.

"He doesn't look half as bad as you do." Aya glanced at her watch. "I'm already late," she said, with a worried look. "I'll be back on my next break." She kissed him lightly on the forehead and walked out, her slippers slapping against the stairs until the downstairs door closed behind her.

Murata closed his eyes. Where was he going to go now? Couldn't go back to Obama. He'd been a fool, getting set up like that. He'd thought he was smarter . . .

His ears caught the creak of the door opening downstairs. Aya coming back with more food he couldn't eat? No, heavy footsteps on the stairs. Sounded like an army. Soon a crowd of fuzzy shapes appeared in the doorway. He tugged the ice bag from his head. Shit. Was he really looking at an Obama detective and a room full of uniformed cops?

Honma, the burly Obama plainclothesman in the lead, tilted his head at different angles, hesitant to come any closer to the thing on the bed. Then he caught himself and straightened—once again the smug cop. "Hey Killer," he smirked, still scrutinizing Murata's bruises and lacerations, "go a few rounds with a bulldozer?"

Murata rolled over onto one elbow. "Accident on the job," he replied matter-of-factly. The reality that they did not recognize him was beginning to sink in.

"Yeah, I'll bet," croaked Honma with a sneer. He crossed the room and shoved a snapshot in Murata's face. "Ever seen this guy?"

Murata squinted painfully through purple, swollen eyes. Out of the blur came a face, his face. It was a picture of him.

He looked up at the detective. "What's it to ya?"

"You know, Killer," scowled Honma, "a mouth like that, I see why your head looks the way it does. You either answer the fucking question or I'll haul your ass down to headquarters."

Murata lay back down and stared up at the ceiling, trying to look contrite. "Yeah, sure, I know him," he said. "Name's Murata. Comes 'round most every day." He fell silent again, thinking. "Say, what time you got?"

"Four."

"Fact is, he usually clears outta here just about now. Can't say for sure, but you still might catch him downstairs at the machines."

Orders flew. "Spread out! You two take the front door! Saito, you cover the alley!" The group thundered downstairs.

He knew they'd be back.

He sat up. The room swayed. He pushed off the bed to his feet and fell against the wall for support. His head throbbed, like it was going to leave his body. He couldn't straighten up as he limped his way to the window. Dressed only in a pair of white Jockeys, he slowly made his way down the fire escape into the alley below.

* * *

**Missing
Aya Morita
\$500 Reward**

Height: 5'4". Weight: 105 lbs. Face: round.
Distinguishing marks: mole on chin, small scar on left cheek. Last seen in the vicinity of Kaminaka Station. Any persons having information regarding the whereabouts of Miss Morita, who resides at 1-45 Kaminaka, Onyu-gun, Obama, are urgently requested to contact J. Morita (07705-3-5679) or Obama Police Department Missing Persons Bureau (07705-2-0101).

The notices sat stacked in piles of one thousand each. Six of them. Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Mrs. Morita shook her head. She and her husband had been to the police. They'd been to see the Muratas. They'd been to the printer's. Aya was an only child. Now she was gone, and there was only one place she could be—with that scum.

She'd tried to stop it from the beginning, ever since she came home early from work and walked in on them doing it like animals right there on the tatami. Aya was a pretty girl; she could get a good husband easy. They were fairly well off. So what does she do? She takes up with a hoodlum.

The Muratas didn't seem like bad people. The rest of the kids were okay, too. The oldest, Toshio, had been at the top of his high school graduating class and was now training for the number one spot in his stepfather's construction company. Satoko had a good job with the South Korean Embassy and her own apartment in Tokyo. But if their daughter wasn't returned, the Muratas were going to pay.

* * *

It was cooler now, almost chilly. Murata was stiff. He'd been hiding in the alley behind a row of garbage cans all afternoon. The streetlights had come on about an hour ago, the mouth of the alley bright now. The blinking neon signs from the few shops he could make out looked like the bulbs in the pachinko machines at work, random bursts of red and green in the patch of white light.

Several times he'd seen a cop nosing around the entrance; Honma'd no doubt left a lookout at the pachinko parlor. He had to get word to Igarashi or Aya, but he couldn't walk the streets in his shorts.

Near the entrance to the street was a set of sliding doors, a light fixture directly above. Murata couldn't imagine anyone living in this alley. The walls were crumbling brick and corrugated tin sheets—all the windows were boarded. It looked like some kind of storehouse.

The light went on as if he had wished electricity into it. He crept toward it, down the alley.

Dark shapes seemed to jump from the shadows as he stepped onto the hard-packed dirt floor of the cramped entrance. In front of him, in the feeble light of a bulb far over his head, he saw a narrow hallway of raised floorboards and a pair of old, hand-carved shoji, the paper gray and torn. Through it flickered the shapes of a television.

"Sumimasen," he called.

The dancing patterns of the television were obscured by a silhouetted form rising, its outline growing sharper on the shoji. The door slid open and a middle-aged woman appeared, tying the belt of her yukata. Her hair was streaked with gray, pulled back from what once had been a very handsome face. Through the open shoji Murata noticed a ceramic saké flask and cup on the kotatsu.

When she saw Murata she staggered backwards a step.

"Hey, lady," he said, "take it easy. I ain't gonna do nothing. I just wanna use the phone."

The woman steadied herself, then slowly raised her finger toward the black telephone atop the shoe rack.

"Thanks." Murata dialed the pachinko parlor.

"Yeah?" came the reply. Thank God, Igarashi.

Murata looked up. Her eyes were fixed on the bulge in his white briefs. He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "I'll be outside in the alley. Bring my clothes and some money."

"We ain't got no money. Payday's next week."

"Get an advance on our salary."

"The boss ain't here."

"What about Aya?"

"Out lookin' for you."

"I don't care how the fuck you do it, get some money!" Murata placed the receiver back in the cradle and nodded. "Thanks, lady."

Her face looked softer now, friendlier. "I'm sorry, I was . . . well . . . what happened to you, young man?"

"Got in a little scuffle."

"You should see a doctor." She smiled. "Would you like to wait inside? In the sitting room?"

He looked at her. "Sorry, lady. I gotta go." He opened the door and ducked back into the darkness.

An hour passed before Murata made out the dark form approaching from the mouth of the alley. "Yasu?"

Murata stood up. "Over here."

Igarashi emerged holding a brown paper bag. "Here."

Murata snatched it out of his hand. "What the fuck took you so long?"

"I had to pawn some things. First two places were closed. Finally, I dragged the owner out a bed'n made 'im open up."

"Oh. Thanks. How you feelin'?" He began putting on his clothes.

Igarashi gently stroked his right eye, swollen tightly shut. "Sore. Fuckers musta kept hittin' me after I went out."

"Cops still around?"

"One. Honma was steaming when he found out it was you upstairs. I could hear him from my room, what he's gonna do to you. Listen, he . . . uh . . . musta called Aya's parents. They came to the pachinko parlor while I was out hockin' the stuff." Igarashi kicked at the dirt. "Took her back to Obama."

Murata stood expressionless, staring at the street light at the far end of the alley. The sonofabitch. Aya's parents wouldn't let her go out for a pack of cigarettes now. And Honma'd be all over his ass if he went back after her. Unless maybe there was a way he could turn it around . . .

Oh," Igarashi said, reaching into his pocket. "Here." He handed Murata an envelope.

Murata counted the money. "I'll be at that flophouse, one next to the tracks." Then he smiled.

"Honma said that, huh? Pack your shit. We're goin' home tomorrow."

"You crazy? They'll declare a fuckin' town holiday on you!"

Murata was grinning now. "Honma don't know it yet, but he's gonna *welcome* us back."

* * *

"Obama Police Department."

Murata recognized the gravelly voice of the semi-retired sergeant on telephone duty. He'd watched him one time, Murata sitting on the wooden bench in front of the counter, waiting to be interrogated for one crime or another. The old bastard would snarl into the phone as if it had called him a name.

"Get Honma," Murata barked.

"Who is this?" the sergeant demanded, full of authority.

"I got a story'll have him out pounding a beat. Now *get* the fucker."

Murata smiled as the receiver thudded against the wooden counter top. That got the old guy moving.

"Who is this?" another voice insisted.

"That you, Honma?"

"Yeah."

"You remember me—'Killer'—the pachinko parlor two days ago? Nice detective work. Finished filling out your report? Anyway, I'm coming home today and wondered . . . you wanna see *my* report? You know, the way it *really* happened? Names and badge numbers of the Kobe backup? If you don't, I thought maybe your boss, or the newspapers might like to."

"Where are you?" came the noticeably more subdued voice. "You talk to anybody?"

"Not yet."

"Meet me four tomorrow at that coffee shop on Route 27 past the Matsushita plant towards Takahama—'Hero' I think it's called. And don't show your face until then."

* * *

The coffee shop had a nice view of the inlet across Route 27. Like most cafes along the shore route, it was packed with sunburned college couples on the way back to their *minshuku*⁴. The two men in the booth furthest from the door looked out of place—one dressed in black and a face that looked like he'd gone the distance with Muhammed Ali, and the other with the white short sleeve shirt and navy tie who couldn't sit still.

Honma rested his elbows on the table and crossed his legs again. "Your face looks better."

"Yeah," Murata smirked. "People recognize me now."

"You know this could be embarrassing."

⁴ *minshuku* A guest house, less expensive and luxurious than a Japanese inn (ryokan).

Murata sat expressionless. The sonofabitch was sweating. Good. He knew exactly how much sympathy he'd get from Honma, or any other cop, if the tables were turned.

Honma looked down at his hands, rubbing his palms together. "I got a proposition."

* * *

The next day, Murata walked into Obama Police Headquarters. Straightened his tie and buttoned his navy blue suit jacket, and walked up the front steps, past the counter, up one flight of stairs to the second floor, across the tile floor black with scuff marks. He stopped at the desk of Detective Hideharu Honma.

Honma slowly raised his eyes from his paperwork.

"My name is Yasunori Murata. I was visiting friends in Kobe when I heard there was a warrant out for my arrest. I'd like to turn myself in."

Every cop in Obama knew Murata. A couple in Honma's sections had busted him. Movement in the room stopped as the department tabled their work to stare.

"Siddown." Honma nodded to the chair in front of his desk.

Honma stood up and began pacing, hands behind his back, his face severe. He spoke of Murata's responsibility to both his parents and society, pounding the desk for emphasis as he heatedly denounced the use of violence. A man was in the hospital as a result of Murata. Could Murata guarantee the family's means of sustenance until his return to work? And what plans did he have for gainful employment in the future?

Murata sat docilely, following Honma with his eyes. Sonofabitch'd probably written out the whole monologue—rehearsed it, too. This was justice? It would almost be worth leaking the story and taking the consequences.

The charges of assault and battery against Tadaaki Murata were dropped. After a thorough review of the incident, Detective Hideharu Honma, who conducted the investigation, found the suspect's actions, although "somewhat in excess, justifiable in consideration of his duties as security personnel at a drinking establishment." There were also extenuating circumstances: for one, the suspect had come forward voluntarily to surrender himself into custody.

On September thirteenth, 1969, Tadaaki Murata was arraigned in Tsuruga Municipal Court on charges of disorderly conduct in a public place. He pleaded guilty and paid a twenty-five dollar fine.

Igarashi, Mura, Taira and a crowd of happy faces swarmed around him as he emerged from the courtroom. Others honked their horns from the curb. Aya waited for him in the passenger's seat of his car. "How the fuck'd ya beat it?" asked Igarashi, clapping him on the back.

"Musta given up on tryin' to reform me." He didn't mention the one condition behind his good fortune—not revealing to the Chief of Police or, say, the local media, just how Obama's Finest went about getting their man.

* * *

The stationmaster tugged down his short Japan National Railways jacket and smiled—that hadn't been so hard. He had a station to run, and vagabonds using his waiting room as a hotel was not the first thing he wanted visitors to Kyoto to see. There had been some tense minutes at first, afraid the stocky kid was actually going to attack him in front of everyone. But when he said the word "police," well that took the fight out of him. The two of them just picked up their bags and walked out.

The stationmaster turned as he opened the door to his office. The stocky kid was still staring at him from just outside the station entrance. He'd call security next time.

The door closed. "Gonna get that sonofabitch," Murata muttered.

Igarashi turned up his jacket collar. "You keep *gettin'* people, there won't be *no* place left we can go. When you gonna find out about that guy you got at the stoplight?"

"Pro'bly out a the hospital by now. Don' worry, another month, we can go back."

It was 6:00 p.m., already dark. They hadn't eaten since the night before. They stood huddled in a corner, beating their sides to stay warm. Kyoto in December was even colder than Obama. Murata pulled out a Peace cigarette package, shook it, then peered inside. "Shit," he mumbled, crushing it. "How much we got left?"

Igarashi emptied his pockets. "About three bucks." They had been looking for work for a week, looking for anything, finding nothing.

"Something don't happen soon, gonna have to start hittin' couples."

Something moved—a man walking toward them from around the corner of the station. Looked like a day laborer, middle aged, gray work jacket and pants. The guy was smiling now. “Hey, how you boys doin’?”

Murata scrutinized the intruder. “We’re doing fine, buddy. *Without* you.”

He stopped. “Sure, whatever you say. Just didn’ look that way to me,” he said reassuringly. “Hey, just tryin’ to help. I seen you two gettin’ hauled outta the waitin’ room just now. Thought maybe I could do you some good. Maybe you could do me some good, too.”

“Yeah? How?” Murata didn’t think he liked this guy.

“Work. Construction work. We got an outfit not too far from here could use a couple strong boys. It ain’t easy, but it’s honest. And you get a place to stay.” He moved a step closer. “Tell ya what. I’ll even front ya the train fare till next pay day.”

Igarashi raised his eyebrows, his eyes darting to Murata’s. “Where ‘xactly is this place?”

* * *

It was 7:30 when they stepped off the Keihan Line at Umeda Station and began jostling their way through the crowd. Murata still didn’t know where they were going. But the setup sounded too good to be true. Not only did they get a place to lay low for a while, they got paid for doing it. Room, board, uniforms, everything provided.

“There it is,” yelled their escort, now billing himself as the foreman of one of the work crews, “Mitosuji Line, Platform Fourteen. I’ll phone ahead to have a car waiting.”

Mitosuji. They were going north.

Murata was asleep at 8:30 when the foreman shook him. “Hey, time to get off.”

Igarashi yawned. “Where are we?”

“Suita.”

Murata had heard of it. But outside the station, he saw nothing to distinguish this place from thousands of other “bed towns” all over Japan—the returning commuters, the waiting taxis, the random lineup of pachinko parlors, bars and beauty salons disappearing into the darkness.

As they approached the curb, the foreman looked around, then raised his arm at a mud-splattered white panel van parked across the street. The engine coughed as it lurched toward them. The foreman didn't acknowledge the driver, a 5'6" 200-pound study in obesity with small eyes, oil-stained mechanic's uniform and a smile like Indian corn.

"Climb in back," the foreman told his charges.

Murata swung his head around, hesitating. Now the guy was giving orders.

The foreman looked back. "Well?"

Murata took his time climbing in.

The two recruits settled onto a set of old tires on the floor as the van started to move. There were no windows in back, and a set of curtains separating them from the driver's compartment made it impossible to see where they were going. Murata tried to keep track of their direction and distances between turns, but lost count in the maze of rights and lefts. After ten minutes the van jounced onto an unpaved road, Murata liking this less and less.

They stopped suddenly, the van skidding a couple of feet. The back doors swung open. "Get out," said the driver, in a tone similar to the foreman's.

Murata stepped out to find himself staring at what looked like a small warehouse in a maze of wet rice paddies. A forest surrounded the perimeter.

The boss was seated behind a desk inside. He wore a white open-collar shirt and gray chinos that looked slept in. Murata didn't trust him. Around the room lounged five others who differed from the driver in little more than how badly their uniforms needed laundering. The smell of stale sweat hung in the air.

"Here they are," announced the driver.

The boss leaned forward in his chair, his eyes moving carefully over his two new recruits. "Young ones," he smiled. "Good. You boys ready to work?"

"Yeah," they mumbled.

"Well you came to the right place." He pointed at one of the dirty uniforms leaning against the wall. The uniform dragged a ring of keys out of his pocket, ambled to the door and locked the deadbolt.

Murata and Igarashi froze.

This was no ordinary laborers' dispatch station. Murata and Igarashi had stumbled into a forced labor camp, known in Japan as a *takobeya*, literally "octopus room," named for the proclivity of an octopus, in extremely cramped quarters with no food, to eat its own tentacles to survive. Here, those unlucky or gullible or desperate enough to be trapped like Murata and Igarashi were reduced to literal slaves for ten cigarettes a day—for life.

The guards stepped forward, surrounding the two new prisoners. Soon they were parted from what little money and belongings they had. After being issued dirty blue work uniforms, they were taken to a second-floor room and thrown in with the rest of the octopi.

Beneath one bare forty-watt bulb, more than thirty middle-aged men were squeezed into a windowless area no more than twelve by eighteen feet. Dull stares met them in the doorway. No one talked. Some were spreading single blankets over the hardwood floor, placing wooden blocks for pillows. Others sat with legs crossed, rocking back and forth with toothless grins.

Murata looked from man to man.

"Fucking graveyard," Igarashi whispered.

They turned at the creaking sound behind them and saw the stairway from downstairs being raised from below. Soon came the click of a padlock sliding into place.

* * *

"Get up, you scum!" bellowed the foreman at 5:30 the next morning, kicking any blanketed form not already moving. Breakfast was a bowl of cold rice, barely colored miso soup and two pickle slices. They were herded into a canvas-covered truck for the ride to the work site. Murata covered his nose from the stench. The rest of the men couldn't smell it, snoring in contorted poses until they reached the site at 7:00.

This outfit specialized in demolition work, a high-risk occupation under the best of conditions. But the foreman had little time for safety precautions and casualties were common, which meant a supply of fresh labor was in constant demand. Two weeks before, one man was buried alive when a brick wall collapsed on top of him. On Murata's first morning, he was ordered to secure a hook around a beam on

the third floor of an old building to be torn down. He had earlier overheard the foreman saying the floor might not support the extra weight.

Ten guards accompanied the men to the site. All had lead-weighted billy clubs dangling from their belts and used them as if they enjoyed it. On his second day Murata saw two of them converge on an old man who wasn't working to their satisfaction. After repeated blows to the kidneys and head, the aged worker toppled face-down into the dirt. When he didn't get up, they carried him to the truck. Murata found him slumped over at 7:00 when the men climbed back in for the ride home. The body was cold.

The men were allowed a bath every three days, Murata and Igarashi's turn coming on their third day of confinement. The smell of rot from the bare wood walls and floor stabbed Murata's nostrils like ether. Each group of five had fifteen minutes to clean themselves in the murky water.

As their group entered the bathing area, Murata's eyes froze on the lone window. It looked out onto the rice paddies and was just big enough to squeeze his muscular frame through. He stuck his head out and saw a guard eight feet below, the wood club across his lap shining silver in the moonlight.

Still, it was their only chance.

Murata was the last one out of the bath. He took his time drying off in the dressing room. Two workers left as Murata pulled on his trousers, the third still buckling his belt. Igarashi tucked his towel under his arm and started for the door.

Murata coughed, signaling to the window with his eyes as Igarashi turned. Igarashi nodded and Murata stepped back into the bath.

The worker looked up. "Where you going?"

Murata didn't turn around. "Forgot to cover the bath."

"You better hurry. The guard'll beat you if you're in here when he comes to check."

Murata chinned himself up to the window and began wedging himself through, centimeter by centimeter. One sound and his next month of baths would be in leg irons. He readied the shirt in one hand. Then he plunged.

The guard pitched forward with a grunt as Murata landed on his back. He forced the shirt over the guard's head then thrust his forearm around the neck, pulling him backwards on top of him. The guard bucked and stomped his feet, gurgling sounds escaping from his mouth as he tore helplessly at Murata's arms. Murata tightened his grip. The gurgling stopped as the guard weakened, his arms and legs flailing in slow motion. Murata flung him off and sprang for the club, bringing it down hard. The guard's face flew into the dirt, a thick stream of blood trickling down his neck.

Igarashi thudded to the ground behind him.

"Where the fuck you been?" panted Murata.

"Guard walked in the second you went out the window," he smiled, slapping his palm with a club.

They stood over the motionless form listening for voices or footsteps. Mist shot from their mouths in gusts. Ten seconds, twenty. The only sounds were wind in the trees and the dub-dub of blood pounding through their veins. Murata pulled on his shirt, pried off the guard's loafers and handed them to Igarashi. "Here, until Ayabe," he grinned, then turned and began trotting barefoot toward the submerged rice paddies into the night.

* * *

The bartender sauntered over from the far end of the bar with a brown bottle of Kirin beer and empty glass, setting them in front of Murata. "Where ya been, man?" he said. "Haven't seen ya for a while."

"Job down by Osaka," Murata replied. "Pay sucked so I walked out."

"Was a cop come by several days ago, asking if I'd seen ya."

Murata stared into his glass.

"Anything wrong?"

He raised his eyes. "Hiroshi, you like this town?"

The bartender looked puzzled. "You mean Obama?" Then he grinned. "Some days better'n others."

"Yeah." Murata nodded, raising the glass to his lips.

“Why?”

“No reason. Looks good to me right now, that’s all.”

It had taken them almost forty hours to reach Obama. They had walked thirty miles, hitched two rides, jumped one train and arrived in Obama half frozen. Murata thumped a cigarette out of the pack, lit it and inhaled deeply. Sipping his beer, he went over every turn in the road from the camp.

When the first bottle was empty, he ordered another. Then he slid off the stool, walked to the pay phone and dialed an Obama number. “Taira?”

“Yeah? Hey, where you been? The boys’n me was startin’ to get worried.”

“The fuck about? Listen, I wanna borrow your car. Yeah, just one day . . . Osaka . . . some things I left at the job I gotta go pick up.”

* * *

A storm was coming. Black anvil-shaped cumulonimbus clouds sailed across the overcast gray sky as groves of small pine trees leaned with the wind. The weatherman on the radio was predicting the first snow of the season, a big one. Murata parked the car well off the dirt road to the takobeya.

“Keep the motor running,” he said to Igarashi. He zipped up his jacket and began to walk, fast.

There were several big pines around the last curve to the house, Murata keeping them between him and the building as he made his approach. He slipped behind the last one, then eased his head out. No cars in front. 3:00 p.m. The men were still at work. Murata crept up to the wooden structure and peered through the office window. One guard and the boss’ wife. The guard was reading the sports, feet up on the desk, the wife in an armchair, a women’s magazine spread across her lap.

Murata kicked the flimsy door open, sent it wobbling like plate glass. The force blew the lock out of the moulding, splinters flying. The guard’s feet shot off the desk. He flapped his arms trying to regain his balance, then tottered for an instant before toppling over backwards against the wall. Both legs stuck straight up from behind the desk. The wife put her hands to her mouth to scream but no sound emerged.

“You got some things a mine,” he said in a menacing, low voice.

“We . . . we don’t know anything,” cried the wife, scurrying for the corner as Murata advanced. The guard was pulling himself out from under the chair behind the desk.

“Then I’ll find ‘em.” He pulled the top drawer out of the desk—nothing but records—and flung it against the wall, the air exploding in a flurry of papers. He pulled books from the bookshelf and flipped through them, checking for envelopes with money, before heaving them into the corner. When this proved fruitless he grabbed a floor lamp and sent it flying into the desk. The guard, climbing out from behind it, hit the floor again. The lamp bounced off the desk, spun on its base and fell, the bulb shattering with a loud pop.

* * *

The guard on the second floor opened his eyes. He threw the covers back and sat up. “Hey, wake up,” he hissed to the guard next to him, “Somethin’s going’ on downstairs.” Three others rolled over.

* * *

Murata glanced up at the pounding on the wooden steps. Then he lunged for the corner and pulled the wife in front of him.

The five guards burst into the room.

“Come in, boys,” roared Murata, his thirty-centimeter knife pressed tightly against her neck.

The guards stopped short, piling into each other from behind. “You. *All* a you,” Murata growled, “get the fuck in here and close that door.” He leveled a finger at the guard nearest the desk. “You,” he commanded, “open them drawers. One by one. Real slow. Dump the insides on the desk.”

Tires crunched on the gravel outside. Murata inched his face to the edge of the window. At the end of the driveway, the boss was climbing out of the white van with two guards and three workers. Twisting her arm tighter, Murata steered the wife behind the door.

The hinges creaked as the door swung open. “Hey!” the boss yelled as he saw the guards lined up against the wall, the room a shambles. “What’re you assholes doing just stand—,”

“Helping me,” Murata announced from behind the door. “Thought I’d drop by and collect my things. Oh, and a couple a days’ back wages.”

The boss backed up as Murata stepped out with the wife.

“You,” Murata snapped at the workers, “go on, get outta here.”

They sprinted out the door, off down the gravel drive.

“You, up against the wall with your buddies.” He waved his hand at the new guards. “Move!”

“Now, empty your pockets on the desk. Then your wallet,” he growled at the boss, digging the knife into the wife’s neck until the skin along the blade turned white.

The boss very deliberately extricated a small notebook and a set of car keys from his jacket, then slid his billfold out of his trousers.

“Now the paper,” barked Murata. To his surprise, out came over five hundred dollars in large bills. Never taking his eye off the boss, Murata guided the wife across the room, scooped up the money and keys and stuffed them into his jacket.

“Now,” Murata spat, “we’re walking outta here. You,” he turned to the boss, “are gonna stay right here. ‘Less you wanna donate her body to science.” He’d read the line in a detective novel. He reached for the phone on the desk, jerked the cord out of the wall and dragged the wife out the door.

Fifty yards down the road they came to the bend that blocked the view from the office. Murata released his grip on the wife’s neck. She stumbled forward a step, hunched over, and grabbed her throat. “Hey,” he said.

He hit her as she turned, hard on the jaw. If they knew she was safe, they’d be on him in no time. The blow lifted her off her feet. She was unconscious by the time she hit the ground. Murata rolled the limp body into the bushes.

He was out of breath as he climbed in the passenger’s seat beside Igarashi. “Step on it,” he panted. Minutes later he held up his hand as the highway leading to the train station came into view. “Pull in behind those trees,” he said, pointing to a grove of cedars.

Igarashi nudged the gas, easing the car across the blacktop and out of sight.

In ten minutes, the white van hurtled down the dirt road, raising great black clouds as it ground to a halt. Crouched low, Murata could see the boss looking both ways, then pointing left. The van screeched off toward the station.

"Let's go," said Murata.

Igarashi pulled the car onto the pavement and began the long trip back to Obama.