

One Day, A Naked Man

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It was when his naked body was covered from head-to-toe in a mixture of soap and shampoo that he realized he was screwed. He turned the knob back-and-forth, from left-to-right until the squeaking sounds became too unbearable to hear. He left its setting too far to the right. If the shower head decided to turn on at that exact moment; may he experience the equivalent of hell's inferno restricted into an equivalent of the modern man's hell landscape, also known as a one-room apartment Japanese bathroom. Much to his irritation, he raised his palms from the wall and turned them into closed fists. The feeling of earth-shattering shockwaves ran through the ceramics on his side into the bathroom on the other side. About ten seconds passed before several shockwaves, much weaker ones, reached him in exchange. He shouted 'sorry!' and got the reply of several shockwaves following their predecessor. He would then whisper 'sorry' under his breath, before stepping out carefully from the bathtub and facing himself away from the shower head.

Fortunately for him, he had already brushed his teeth, as the doctor ordered. While he was adamant about following his dentist's orders, he was not so much with his nutritionist. Most of the advice he had gotten to improve his diet was ignored, stating about how a good workout helps to suffice any man's choice of diet. His nutritionist and dentist strongly disagreed with this line of pseudo-intellectual thinking, but he never listened to the former as expected. The latter would advise him that taking care of his teeth would benefit just that, his teeth. Those diets needed to be followed in order for him to take care of what was inside. To these kinds of answers he would reply with some cheesy dramatic lines he might have found somewhere in a movie or some sort of other entertainment media he had consumed with such replies being 'what counts in the inside is the beauty of our soul and spirit' or 'please accept me, both in-and-out, because I am a whole, even if my wholeness is full of ugliness'. It was not clear to the people around him what his intention was to quote such things or even why hinder the progress of one but not the other.

When he had gone out of the shower, he had a towel wrapped around his lower torso. Wearing any clothes would be impossible in that situation as the soap and shampoo had already been partially washed, and as a result, it lingered as foamy and thick substances around his body. He contemplated just using the towel to get the soap and shampoo off and call for a plumbing service to come as quickly as possible. He would have done that had the electricity not gone off alongside the water, and a working cell phone was not in his possession at that time. Checking the breaker box, he found nothing wrong with it. He was skeptical about those exterminators he hired at one time, but it seemed to turn out that they did a good and honest job, rats were definitely not causing any problem.

Turning it on-and-off as his first instinct would be, bore no result whatsoever. The situation was looking dire in this bachelor's household. It was after he had done pondering upon his tower of empty tall beer cans which he had done shortly after marching back-and-forth his six-by-four *tatami* living space in a circular motion where he stretched his upper body joints to the fullest degree to the left for several times, that he realized an extreme measure must be taken for him to be able to take a shower.

He must become a man of focus, commitment, and sheer will. He definitely could be that man if looking at the clock hanging by the wall didn't remind him that it was already past noon. No sane Japanese would be around at this hour, taking a shower as their top priority. Everyone would either be at work, school, being fried alive while basking in the sun, or kidnapped because of a very peculiar repercussion. Not to mention, he wasn't living in an apartment complex that had the best reputation. Although it had only ten rooms divided into two stories, many tall tales had been told through the walls which confine its residences from the past. Cases of serial killings, planning of domestic terrorism, black market gonzo porn production, and others were common stories that fill the pastime of old men playing cricket at the park, high schoolers outside the convenience store, or housewives buying discounted last-batch groceries during the evening. Though in recent times, these rumors have been chalked up to being made-up by a starving author wasting his days away as a NEET whose writing validation nowadays can be summed up to shitty erotica for internet losers. The same person can be seen living on the first floor, room 103, of the apartment block.

The man remembered that not far from his apartment block was an *onsen*, a public bathhouse. Owned by a pair of grandpa-and-grandma, their business was regularly visited by their neighbors of similar age groups. The owner of this *onsen* unfortunately was one that was still ardent about the 'No tattoo' rule, especially when the individual that would soon step inside his business being a former *yakuza* member. It was an age-old rule that tattoos are taboo, and especially for these people who have lived through the golden age of the *yakuza*, there was no chance that they wouldn't put up a fight. Yet, seeing as there was no other way, this was the only measure, only extreme measure, that can be taken.

Still donning the towel before, he made his exit sporting sunglasses in addition to his less than conspicuous attire. The sunglasses would protect him from the blazing summer afternoon's sun and the towel to protect both him and passerby from a freely dangling manhood. Nevertheless, that still left his *yakuza* tattoos and soapy-bubbly bare body in predicament. Much like the apartment block, he didn't sport the best status around the neighborhood. People knew he was an ex-*yakuza* and that deemed him a label of scariness, intimidating, and such. Although, taken into consideration, being labeled a pervert stood far worse than anything that could be measured up from being a *yakuza*. He may have left the life of a criminal behind peacefully, with only one finger missing and that was because of the respect he had shown during his resignation, but if words got around that he was some sick pervert, the people of his former life would come breathing down his neck faster before he can pronounce '*Wasshoi!*'. He must exercise utmost caution.

While his apartment block was not facing directly into the street, instead of being built like a vertical L-shaped block that you would see in *Tetris*, he decided to crawl on the ground with one hand gripping tightly the end of the towel while making his way downstairs. There would be four other apartments on the second floor that he must pass. Unit 204 was blaring music just loud enough that the sounds reached outside; easily passable. Unit 203 was vacant so it was the same case as before. Faint noises were heard coming out from unit 202, then as he almost made his way through, there was a thud that banged on the door. It became clear that these sounds were you-know-what, and for some reason, these sounds may have made their way across to unit 204. If he remembered correctly, unit 201 was owned by a couple, though it seemed that the two of them had gone off to work, nothing eventful to note from them. Unit 105 was where that staving author lived, nothing apparent can be heard coming from inside his room, yet it might be better not to imagine what was actually happening inside then. From unit 104 to 101, it was smooth sailing, now came the challenging part, getting around the neighborhood to reach the *onsen*.

The *onsen* was located just a few blocks down from the apartment block. It was tucked away in a side street, so that would minimize the risk of getting spotted had it been near one of the bigger roads. It would still be tricky getting there as he must pass through several mom-and-pop stores and residential houses. There weren't that many trees or alleyways to keep him out of sight either. Nevertheless, just thinking things through without taking any actions behind the slab barrier beside his apartment's dumpster would pose another type of risk on itself. Being all sneaky would be more suspicious than faking confidence to a certain degree, therefore, he went with the latter, opting to just walk like a normal everyday pedestrian through the street until an authority figure or what have you would choose to confront him. That would be when he could either make a run for it or flash his tattoos and the *yakuza* trademarked shit-eating grin.

It didn't take long until a disaster happened. Road works were being done on the short-route that he had planned. Had it only been those low-level workers present, he might have been able to intimidate them to let him through, weird as he looked at that time. But they had their higher-ups with them. Those guys always got some speed dials ready. If they had to deal with your law-abiding citizens, a call to the police would be sufficient, but a *yakuza* would have to face three-times the amount of *yakuza* members if they insist on causing trouble. For that reason, he was forced to take the long route around.

Beforehand, everything had gone pretty smoothly. There were, as expected, some senile old folks that just had to comment something just loud enough to be audible even though they had intended to whisper. As well as the shop owners and advertisers backing away and trying to divert their customers' attention. Thankfully, it was still school hours and past lunch break for most workers, though he wouldn't expect any sort of those crowds to hang around his neighborhood out of all places. One of those assumptions soon was proven to be wrong as he remembered that a groceries wholesaler store was just around the corner, right outside the corner that separated the short route and the long route.

He saw this group of delinquents hanging outside of the store loitering around. Smoking, drinking, being loud, revving their motorcycle, and having these girls around which looked semi-willing, likely there for free cigs and boozes. It reminded him of his time back in middle to high school. Being in a motorcycle gang, sometimes before that gang got assimilated into the *yakuza*. Unlike these kids, who sported their bikes just to impress girls like a poser, his gang was the real deal. Causing havoc from one highway to another with police chases alongside the regular bloody parking lot battles that had to happen at least once every week. Having retired from those kinds of lives, he now understood why authority figures did what they did and he felt the urge to act like them, whom he once despised. He puffed out his chest; one fist clenched, the other holding onto the towel; neck muscles straightened; teeth bared alongside his patented the shit-eating grin; and sunglasses pushed as far back and high as possible, hiding the tiger's vision.

Those kids were occupied with their own little stupid world to even slightly notice the man approaching them. It took them seeing him pull out a cigarette from one of the boy's mouth and stomping it underneath his foot. Everyone's jaw was hanging open except the man with shit-eating grin. The girls hid behind the boys while repeating the word 'pervert'. The boys didn't look exactly weak, though they were pale in comparison to the man standing in front of them. One of them tried to launch a jab straight to his face, but it was slow, and it didn't help that he had to scream first before launching his attack like it was an action movie. The man easily overpowered him and pushed him onto his motorcycle, the two fell down but the latter got more attention.

"No...no...no! You asshole! You broke my bike!" It was only the mirror that got broken aside from the minor scratches it got from scraping against the ground. The boy was exaggerating.

"Yeah, asshole...You broke his bike, pervert asshole!" His girl replied.

"Shut the fuck up, Yumi!" The girl meekly returned to her friend's side after exclaiming a high-pitched surprised sound effect.

"Stop smoking, start studying." Those were the only words that the man said before he turned his back against them and walked off. The boy

who owned the bike got up and tried to punch him again, but every color from his eyes drained when he saw the tattoos on his back. The man looked to the left and saw the shop owner peeking from the door. They exchanged silent glances, before the shop owner's daughter came rushing to her side, looked up at him with her finger pointed up, and exclaimed, "It's a pervert!" He immediately fell into the ground when those words struck him as fast as lightning.

It's generally regarded as a cowardice move to strike a man when he's down, but a coward for a while justifies winning in the long run. At least, that was what this other boy thought when he saw the *yakuza* in front of him on his knees with his hands spread out and whole face lifted to the sky, like something straight out of a movie. That was his chance until, like a samurai ready to unsheathe his *katana* whose blade only barely bared against his opponent, the *yakuza* made a move like a samurai. His naked eye appeared only as a glance but it made the boy take several steps back just to trip on the body of his friend who was trying to get back on his feet. He fell onto the motorcycle that his friend owned, the one that had been 'broken' just shortly before. By the time he realized what he was leaning on again, his friend was sitting on top of him ready to pounce, barely being held back by the girls. The man had run quite a distance away but he was able to overhear the friend's group, likely an ex-friend's group now, arguing with each other, always including at least one curse word in each person's exchanges. Then came several sounds of them being hit by a broom alongside shouting ordering them to leave by the store owner's furious wife, finally ending with the sounds of motorcycle engines being revved toward the opposite direction.

He made it safely to the *onsen* shortly afterward. The *onsen*'s building had an architectural style that resembled traditional Japanese architecture. By implementing various woods in most of its exterior features and decorations, it made the *onsen* stand out in both looks and doing more than it should. Had it been done somewhere else like in a commercial district at Roppongi, the owner would have made great fortune and a name for themselves. But they chose to settle down in this quaint neighborhood with little to no foot traffic other than seeing the same worn-out old faces. The sign did say that it was open, so he decided to enter.

The old man who owned the *onsen* was standing behind the counter with a sport's magazine open on top of the counter. He raised his head and fixed his glasses to see the man who had just entered. Greeting the man with an unenthusiastic welcome, he fixed his blank gaze on understanding the man's eccentricity. It didn't take long for him to know the man's true nature, beyond the speculation that he was a perverted exhibitionist. Pointing to a sign by the right side of the entrance's wall, he exclaimed,

"No *yakuza* allowed." His intonation was blank but he meant it. He was as expected the kind of *onsen* owner who stuck to that principle.

"I got money." The man replied.

"No *yakuza* allowed." The old owner repeated with his gaze now back on his magazine.

The man ignored the feeble old owner and tried to step into the man's section. Suddenly, he felt that his arm was being twisted, and another second afterward, he was on the ground, having his whole body locked in a submission. The old owner knew judo, and he did as well. They took turns grappling with each other across the grounds, with neither of them being able to dominate the other for more than a few seconds. They continued to roll around the room until they heard the sound of a sliding door being opened. The old owner, who had the man in his hold, immediately let go of him and stood up.

"Are you done with your work?" The old man addressed his speaking partner, who turned out to be a girl in her early twenties, wearing a light blue jumpsuit, dirty with so much paint.

"Yeah, the mural's all done, you can check it out yourself." She replied.

As the man got up, he saw the old owner had finished taking a bow and rushing past the woman to get to the next room. Now, he and the woman stood near each other, exchanging glances of curiosity. It didn't take long for the girl to blurt out the word '*yakuza*' while pointing directly at him. Yet, there was neither fear nor anxiety in her eyes and tone, only a peculiar interestedness. She practically jumped around to look at him from all sides, paying closest attention to his tattoos and muscular features. Had he still been young, he would have loved to be showered with this kind of attention by girls. Now, it just irritated him, especially considering he just wanted to take a shower to wash everything off and go home, safe and sound.

As she was inspecting his facial features, rubbing her hands around his cheeks, making them contort in their shapes, he grabbed both of her waists and pulled her up. It was an easy task considering her petite frame compared to his body and the recognizable height difference between them. He looked into her eyes and said,

"My fair lady, because it's you who exists to me today, I hope to seek through you a guidance to my woe." His face was blank.

"Ehhh? Gross...That's so corny and your delivery is so flat too." She replied with those words while still maintaining her excited wide-open eyes and smiled.

'This shitty brat...' He thought to himself. It would have been one thing to have his theatrical mocked, but he didn't expect her straight-to-the-point remark on the delivery. He felt like shaking this girl around until she was dizzy and vomited for merely a petty revenge. Before he was able to act this carelessly, the girl spoke up again.

"Okay, look, I'm sorry, Mister *Yakuza* Man. I overheard your little fight with the owner and I get what you were asking him about. I'll help you if you just let me down. Let's exchange favors, if you help me, I'll let you shower at my place. Pinky promise, no trick."

He wasn't one to seriously hurt an innocent person so he let her go. He wanted to ask her about details until the owner came out of the room he had just gone to. His smile turned to an immediate disappointment when he saw his pest problem was still lingering in his establishment.

"I already told you; no *yakuza* allowed!" This time, the owner was mad.

"Yeah, and your business is failing, man, so why don't you look the other way and make it easy for both of us?" This time as well, the *yakuza* was not one to resort to a cheesy quote.

It was clear that another fight was about to ensue so the girl quickly pulled the man out from the *onsen* before the owner's hands could tackle him to the ground once again. She rushed him to her van that she had parked on the dirt lot right beside the building. He rode shotgun with the strange girl. He was about to initiate the conversation but got quickly interrupted by her.

"Listen. I can't just bring you to my place. I have to ask you for a favor in exchange for what you need. You understand, right? Being in the *yakuza* and all that."

"Right. What do you need from me?" Considering his current position, he couldn't just outright reject her. However, he was still cautious. It would not be unlikely that she would just drive straight to the police.

"I need you to be my model. For a painting."

To him, it seemed that this girl was getting progressively weirder with each passing second, but he also quite understood where she was coming from. These artistic folks always got a screw loose inside of their head. He remembered a film director who was foolishly brave to make satirical flicks of his former life. He smiled to himself remembering the times when this director's presence disturbed just about everyone in the *yakuza*.

"Oi, are you listening?!" He saw the girl flicking her fingers in front of his eyes while looking at him with a pouting mouth.

"Pay attention to the road." He pushed her fingers and face back to the front of the steering wheel.

"So is it a yes or a no?"

"Not like I have any choice. So yeah, I'll help you with this favor, brat."

She was so excited that her eyes glimmered and she put both of her hands up. Had it not been for the man's reflex, they would have run through the red light or even worse, end up in a fatal crash after only about ten minutes of driving. That would have been a terrible way to end your life just because you wanted to take a shower.

The two of them continued to talk with each other in the car. The girl laid down the plans that she had regarding her favor. It will only be a one-time thing. The painting will be started and finished on the same day, no matter how long it would take. She will have the full say in how the painting's process would go. The man will be her only model, she wouldn't involve any other party in this. After everything was done, she would fulfill her part by allowing the man to take a shower at her place. It sounded like a simple request, but the girl wouldn't budge when asked for the details about why she had chosen him in particular to do this enigma of a painting. Had he not been at that *onsen* in the right place at the right time, who would she have gone for?

As they continued on their way, they made a stop by a parking lot of a convenience store. They were engrossed in their casual conversation and bantering that they almost didn't hear the girl's stomach rumbling. Having been assured that her place wasn't too far from where they currently were, and not exactly having any say in the matter where she was gonna paint, the man relented when she pulled up to the parking lot. After all, he was quite hungry himself but was already much more focused on just getting things over with so he can go home ASAP.

"What do you want? My treat." She asked him as she was stepping out of the car.

"No need."

"Oh, come on. It's supposed to be the norm in an artist-model contract that we're obliged to treat our model as best as we could. So, what do you want?"

"Tuna mayo *onigiri*, and a cold tall beer." On the mention of beer, she had a slight frown but she had already left without saying another word.

She came back several minutes later with quite a large plastic bag in her hand. He offered to help her. She refused, motioning to him to stay in the car since it wouldn't be such a good thing if someone sees an almost naked man going around the parking lot. Inside the car, he gave him his tuna mayo *onigiri* and a bottle of green tea.

"Where's my beer?"

"I'm not buying you a beer, you goddamn alcoholic. That green tea is a far better choice, don't you think? Be glad that I still decided to get you something to drink, you know."

It was easy for him to notice that the mention of alcohol triggered something inside her. He decided not to bother her by questioning why until at least they have finished eating their lunch. Arguing on an empty stomach often leads to unwanted results anyway. And in his predicament, had he won the argument, he would still lose considering he would have won while being in somebody else's property. After giving her some space, he noticed that she was getting calmer as she munched on her *bento*. The rice, fish cakes, hamburger steak, and side vegetables would certainly serve a much more filling role than two *onigiri*. Although, it wouldn't sit right with him taking advantage of this girl's money, even though, in a way, she was taking advantage of him.

After they were both done, the girl pulled out a cigarette from a newly bought pack. Before she was able to light it, the man grabbed it from her mouth and threw it outside from the car's window.

"Hey! What was that for?!" The surprised girl loudly asked.

"No, no smoking."

"And why exactly, man?"

"You tell me first. Why am I not allowed to get my beer?"

"Cause' it's about one o' clock, I wouldn't want you to get drunk and suddenly trash my van."

The man shook his head, “Not satisfied with that answer. I can see right through you that you’re hiding something from me. Nobody would have acted like you did over a request for a beer.”

She didn’t immediately answer, choosing to look away from him. “Then why don’t you tell me why you acted the same when I was just trying to smoke. In my own car...”

Just like her, he didn’t immediately answer like before. “Let’s...Just go. I’ll tell you later if you insist on knowing.”

After that answer, she took off the ignition key and threw it on top of the dashboard.

“We’re not going until you tell me.”

“...”

“It’s important that I know, believe me.”

“Okay, sit tight. This is going to be a long story.”

He began his story by correcting her assumption, telling her that he wasn’t involved in any *yakuza* dealings anymore. In spite of that, he told her details that were safe to share and relevant to his story. This was to make sure that she understood that she shouldn’t just blurt out the story freely once she had heard of it.

During his time in the *yakuza*, he had achieved a rank where he had essentially become a hitman. Kidnapping, beatdown, murder, and those sort of things were common in his daily life. Having served years in the *yakuza* and having a long list of criminal background before joining, he had grown desensitized to violence. Until one day, he received a task to take out this movie director who was about to rat out his and other clans around the Kanto region through the means of a film production and piles of gathered information being shared to the authorities.

“So we set out, late at night, to his house. Broke in through the front door, plain and simple. Wife and kids were sleeping, but he was in a separate room from his wife. They weren’t the happiest couple. Sedated him and dragged to our car. Took him to a warehouse we owned in Yokohama.”

His crew would then set out to gather and destroy the evidence he had. An informant had helped them to locate the place where he stored the evidence. A mansion located in the hills of Kiyokawa, near Mount Oyama. It was where his mistress, a former geisha, had lived, and where he would stay at most days to work on his films and escape his domestic responsibilities. It took a few hours to drive from Yokohama to Kiyokawa, almost daybreak when they arrived. Nobody expected the arrival of a black sedan full of *yakuza*, but the maids who were the sole inhabitants aside from the director’s mistress were powerless to stop them.

“Gathering what we needed was easy. What fucked me up was this rookie who had to tag along with us. Don’t get why he did, but it was the boss’s order. Anyway...”

Before burning everything that they needed to, they tied up and gathered the mistress and her attendants who were present at that time. The rookie was in charge of watching over them while the man and two others were outside in charge of evidence disposal. Once the smoke rose, they had planned to immediately leave the area and drive back to Yokohama so as to not raise any suspicion and possibly have people coming over to the mansion. Going back to the room with the hostages, he found the rookie was creeping up to feel the women’s bodies.

“I felt like I flew off my feet. It doesn’t sit right with me. The other guys tried to stop me but I remembered that they joined in when they heard what I had called him out for. We gave the kid a good beating. Although—I don’t know. I don’t know if I was right to hesitate.”

The two other men tried to shake him off the rookie. The kid already had bruises, broken bones, and blood covering his whole face, but those weren't enough for the man. He pulled out his gun on the rookie, that was when those two went to the rookie's side. Despite the title that he referred the kid as, he was still trusted by the boss to carry out a task this important. If he had just died in what should be a straightforward job, there would be more than one body buried at the end of the day. Just as he was getting his composure back, the rookie, likely filled with adrenaline, wrestled for his gun. As they struggled, the trigger was accidentally pulled and shot right through the head of one of the maids.

The rest of the women wanted to run off in a panic, screaming on top of their lungs, believing that these men had betrayed the end of their bargain.

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"In situations like that, the rule became 'no survivor'. None of us wanted it to end that way, but we had to. So it went from a 'bang' to 'bang, bang, bang, bang...'"

Bang. The last to be killed was the mistress. She had tripped when she was trying to run through the garden's patio and fell head first onto the ground. It was a sort-of mercy kill compared to leaving her suffering with a busted open head. All the bodies were then dragged outside to the pile of burning mounds of evidence, erasing another pile of evidence. Nobody looked like they had wanted to do it. One of the men was standing by the car, looking down the trunk where they had placed the wounded rookie. The other was looking at the burning bodies as they turned into burnt crisp.

"I distanced myself from them. Went quite into the woods, just letting it all out..." He suddenly put his hand over his mouth, followed by gagging noises. The girl by his side rushed to open the car windows and doors. She then spoke,

"Uhh-It's okay. I-I just didn't expect it to be this serious."

The man, managed to hold onto vomiting, shook his hand in front of her face. "No, no, I gotta finish it. Come on, let's close the windows, don't want anyone peeking or hearing us."

Nobody spoke as much during the drive back. They had considered backing off, taking a day or two to recover from what he had to do in Kiyokawa. Due to the fire being noticed earlier than planned as it spread much faster than they had expected, they had to take the long way around to get to Yokohama. It disturbed him to hear the people who lived close to the mansion unknowingly thinking that there was a case of house fire. He wouldn't expect words to go around considering where Kiyokawa is, yet it didn't shake off the fact that everything that went wrong could have been easily prevented.

As he was about to tell the continuation of his story, he heard the car's engine rustling and he and the girl were on the move once again.

"Let's hold onto that part for now. I would like you to continue when we arrive at where I would paint you." She had her eyes straight on the road, but there was a slight smile on the corner of her lip.

"Aren't we going to your place?"

"Nope, we're not. You'll see."

"And I'll see wh—" The girl put one of her fingers up to his lip.

"That movie director, what was his name again?"

"Oh, him? It was something that started with M...Hmm, Matsumi, Michiru...Mayeda? No, can't be."

"Michio. It was Michio. Michio Masakado."

"How did—"

"He was an indie film director second, a social activist first. Was actively involved in the Tokyo Underground Vision, a radical left-leaning art

collectives which sought to improve the freedom that we're able to have as today's men and women of Japan for that freedom to be entirely on our own hands, free from the corruption of the government, authorities, and other parties that would betray our 'one for all'-ness."

“You sound like an advertising campaign for that group. So let me guess, you’re involved in this group and this painting you wanted to do is some weird artistic statement piece that would get you in good standing amongst your ‘comrades’ or whatever term you decide to use with your buddies.”

“Nope! You got all of that wrong.” She made an ‘X’ by crossing her hands together. “Michio Masakado was one of my dad’s top clients.”

“Client? I thought this Masakado was an anti-capitalist kind of guy.”

“My dad was a lawyer. Mr. Masakado was his *last* client before he decided to retire.”

There was about a solid minute of silence after her last reply.

“Well, considering why we were telling our stories. Did your dad start drinking after Masakado’s death?” The man was scratching the back of his head, becoming more uncomfortable that he couldn’t look in her direction properly anymore.

“Yeah. You guessed it...”

“Jeez. I’m sorry. Look, I really—”

“It’s okay, you don’t need to apologize, please. I only ask you to listen to my side of the story, and I would listen to yours afterward, okay.” Silent nods followed.

She told the story about her father's professional relationship with his last client, Michio Masakado. During the subsequent production of his last unreleased movie, a magnum opus of satire directed to the Kanto Council's heads of *yakuza*, Masakado has been working with various figures from politics, to law, and even the media across Japan in order to release a mountain of evidence that can put behind bars both high ranking members of various *yakuza* clan as well as important associates of them who lurk in the crevices of society. While Masakado didn't rule out him being killed as a possible outcome in enacting his plan, he had bet on being brought to court, accused of smearing the good names of the people he had hoped to bring down. He didn't expect to win. What he expected was to put up a damn good fight against the defendants, letting the media and the people either know or speculate about the truth whether it gets out or not. Because of that, Masakado needed a lawyer who didn't have a bent moral and ethical compass. He had gone through almost a hundred different potential lawyers who were afraid to represent him after knowing the finer details, until he met the girl's father, Katsuro Kitagawa.

"For about a month straight, dad was not only really busy but also strangely enthusiastic. He would come home late and stay up late working on the case with Mr. Masakado. Mom would have to drag him off from using the house phone when dinners were served so he wouldn't carry on his conversation with Mr. Masakado." She giggled.

The man giggled with her, but he was louder due to his hoarse voice. "I get you. My old man used to be in a similar position every time his friends would call our house to tell him about a new fishing spot they found. We couldn't stop him even though every single thing they talked about one day sounded the same as everything they had discussed from another day" The two broke out of their awkward serious silence to continue bantering like this for a little while more.

Fast forward on her story, when the news broke out that Michio Masakado had gone missing, presumably in hiding because he was involved in the murder of his mistress and her maids, the girl's father couldn't accept that conclusion as he was certain that Masakado had been killed. What made it worse for him was that he couldn't point a finger to anyone. Masakado had many enemies, and anyone could have ordered the hit on him. For a good and honest man like him, losing Masakado meant he had lost the chance to bring down the most important piece of justice upon the modern Japanese society.

“I was still quite young, I didn’t understand why dad had done what he had done.”

It was right around the time that she had gotten into her second-year of high school that her father’s mental condition had deteriorated into turning him into an alcoholic. Her mother was powerless to stop her father’s behavior. She couldn’t file a divorce as well, as she had no more immediate families to return to and the family’s finances were largely maintained by the father. Worse, a divorce could end with her father winning custody over her mother. So, they had to make due living with an alcoholic under one roof.

“As my dad became more abusive the worse his addiction got. Me and mom knew that we had to do something against him if we hoped to continue living.”

After more than a year of planning, the girl and her mother managed to deceit their family’s financial records to dominantly favor the daughter, most of this done through the father’s will and last testament. It was after she had gone home after school during one of the final exam’s day that she found her mother crying on his knees while her father’s cold dead body was slumped against a couch in his office. A whiskey glass had fallen off his hands and broken into pieces on the floor while the bottle was hanging by his left hand, its content having all spilled onto the ground except for the occasional last drops dripping.

“During his funeral, we informed everyone that he had passed away due to natural causes. No way I would want any of them talking behind our back smearing dad’s name because he was an alcoholic.”

Masakado’s case was also exempt from anyone’s knowledge during the procession. The attendances include the father’s former colleagues, clientele, family members, and friends as well as the several friends of the mother and the girl. The ceremony wasn’t as somber as a funeral would commonly be expected. The attendances were sympathetic but also understanding that he had gotten quite old, and sickness, as it is to many, was inevitable.

“To her disappointment, I stayed at our old family house in Karuizawa while she moved to Tokyo. I wanted to take some time for myself, figure out how I would go on living. I told her I would be safe. It went well until she didn’t respond to any of my letters anymore.”

It broke her when she received news about her mother’s passing from her landlady in Tokyo. She had apparently committed suicide for an unknown reason. On top of reasoning her father’s action, altogether, she must also reason her mother’s. She locked herself day-after-day inside the boundary of the house. She was old enough to understand that her mother had taken her own life due to what had happened to her husband, but she didn’t understand; wasn’t able to find a rational conclusion in her mother’s justification.

“It was because of one of the maids that was still working for us that I thankfully didn’t end up like both of my parents.”

At one night, the maid came into her room despite her protests, carrying with her a sketchbook, pencils, and erasers. The maid, who had been working for her family for years, remembered that the girl was particularly fond of art. *‘While I understand, it was a shame that you stopped doing art as much throughout your high school years’*, that was what she told her before leaving her room. Upon opening a page of the sketchbook and picking up a pencil, her mind unconsciously started to draw just about anything. From abstract and geometric shapes, objects around her room, doodles of cute animals, until she poured her feelings she had of her parents, friends, home, the past, present, and future that she understood, she wouldn’t find her answers in rationality. The day after, she set out to Tokyo, with savings enough to sustain her for a lifetime, and a suitcase full of her father’s documents on the Masakado’s case.

“Now as you see, I’m like a full-time traveling artist. Going just about anywhere in Tokyo, making something artistic from whatever I find to be interesting to explore.”

“Hmm...I get where you’re coming from with being against smoking. But what’s this about your reason to do art full-time again?”

“It’s what I just told you.”

“No, I mean. Look, if you had asked me or any former *yakuza* guy, it’s easy to get the answer that they left ‘cause that life isn’t for them anymore. But there’s always a hidden reason that they’re not telling you about.”

“When you put it that way, even I’m not really able to say my reason.”

“Yeah, I suppose I understand.”

“Well, maybe it’s related to how I’ve been coping with my parents absence. I don’t hate them for what they have done, they have their reasons.

Their beliefs. Just like I have mine. If my dad was to see me be in this car with you, I don’t think any explanation would get through to him.”

“Even then, do you really intend to hold up the deal on your end? Knowingly that I have indirectly ruined your family.”

She smiled at him. “You have your reasons, don’t you? I do too. Whether you believe me or not, or you think I’m outright insane. At the very least, I believe that you won’t hurt me. That’s enough for me right now.”

“...”

“Anyway, let’s hear the end of your story. That was the term of our other deal.”

The man continued his story as he and his crew arrived back at Yokohama. The air inside the warehouse was damp and there was barely any light peeking in. Michio Masakado was tied up to a chair at the center of the building with two men guarding him. Masakado himself had been beaten and tortured from head to toe. Both of his eyes were purple, one ear cut off, the smell of gasoline lingering on his head. His body bruised, ribs likely shattered and lungs punctured, nipples had burnt marks from a car jumper cables. One of his legs bent, while the other's knee smashed, and several toes missing. *'You're all late,'* one of the men said. They made excuses about the travel distances and some security complications, but the truth was that they had to just stop for more than an hour just to get themselves back on their feet.

"That moment was when things escalated. The guy who addressed me got some bad news."

They had been informed that the boss's upper men were constantly trying to get in touch with them because there was additional evidence Masakado had stored in his Tokyo's house. The information was supposed to get to them before they had set out to Kiyokawa but it was a moment too late and their car had gone out of view. Two of the four men guarding Masakado had to be dispatched in their place. Unfortunately, these men made a mess, unnecessarily killing both his children and wife.

"Me and the other guys, we were about to jump on these two. We don't care, we already had one in the trunk. Don't know if bullshitting through three would work, but you know how we felt."

The two men were lucky to be able to tell that those two lunatics had been sent to meet the boss directly for an unwelcome visit. They had assured that the rest wouldn't be facing any punishment, it was only those two the boss had wanted. After receiving that news, everyone sat in silence looking after the unconscious Masakado, waiting for the next order while making sure he was still breathing.

"It was what happened next that got me to quit smoking entirely."

Masakado made a noise, a gurgling faint noise. The other men were about to violently silence him, but the man instructed them to stop. He walked up to Masakado with his ear almost touching his mouth as he listened to Masakado repeating the word 'cig' just audible enough. He got Masakado his cigarette. As he was about to light it up, he heard him laughing. Laughs that sounded forced and painful which made Masakado cough-up blood.

"Do you know what he did when I told him to stop?"

Though his eyes were both unable to be opened, Masakado made the attempt to look up. With all his strength, he forced a grin. Showing his missing teeth, dislocated jaws, bloodied throat, a face that was just generally terrifying. As he bit down on his cigarette laughing, his laugh turned into crying. Now, he repeated what sounded like names, likely being the names of his wife and children. He stormed out of the building immediately afterward. He needed the fresh air brought by the sea waves and the tweeting of gulls to take his mind to literally anything else, even slightly, from Masakado, to his mistress and the maids, and the wife and children. The latter, he thankfully didn't have to go through.

"I don't know how long I had stayed there. Just gazing into the seas, watching as the ships and their men start the day. Then, I heard a gunshot. I knew the deed was done."

After Masakado was made sure to be sleeping with the fishes, the men were called to attend an immediate meeting with their boss. In a discreet hole-in-the-wall soba restaurant, one of the boss's men presented them with a wooden box. Inside, the contents were twenty severed fingers, with an explanation, '*Of those who had disobeyed.*' The man, the one who had been retelling this story, was honorably let go three months after the kidnapping and killing of Michio Masakado had been carried out.

"The best thing I could be thankful for about those days was the fact that the news about Masakado's mistress and maids death did not travel far from Kiyokawa. Nobody caught wind that we met some unwanted outcomes just like those two guys. Can't say the same thing about what the boss and the guys had to go through, though."

The death of Michio Masakado's wife and children were impossible to fully cover up. Their neighbors grew suspicious about their absence with each passing day and it didn't take long for the police to find out that they had a homicide case on their hands. The police had initially ruled a new serial killer prowling the streets of Tokyo, but as months passed and the case's file was building onto a bigger and bigger mountain, they were able to make the connection that the murders had a *yakuza* involvement. A swift, strategic operation guaranteed them success in taking down several notable names in the man's clan. Media attention elevated this story and it even made its way into the world of politics. Those men became eager to crack down on the presence of the *yakuza* in Japan. Even if many of them would not sit comfortably in their positions without the help of those shadowy friends. In a way, the vision of Michio Masakado and the girl's father came into fruition.

"Heh, feels relieving to finally be able to tell this story in full to someone after all these years. Usually it would just be me talking to an empty can of beer."

"It really does, doesn't it..."

Knowing each other's secret life stories, the unlikely pair bonded ever closer. The stories they shared shifted to light-hearted topics akin to the ones they had on the road before stopping for lunch. The man revealed how he got to know and become appreciative of movies and movie making in general after digging through information about who Michio Masakado is. During times when he was out of work or not hired altogether due to his criminal record, he would turn into movies for escapism as well as a fond interest to learn all that can be learned about them, hoping that one day he could direct his own movie.

“I didn’t want you to know but that’s basically the reason why you might catch me quoting movie lines.”

The girl brushes off that revealing statement to instead say, “Wow, didn’t take you to be an artist as well.”

“No need to flatter me. Unlike you, I have never done anything I can call my own. It’s more like wishful thinking, keep me going through the days.”

The girl bumped her fist on his shoulder. “Don’t say that. You’re in the presence of an artist right now, so why don’t you let me help you finish at least one film production that you can call your own.”

“Is this another favor that you wanted to add?”

The girl shook her head. “Nope. Think about it as friendship. A friend has to help another friend, right?”

“So, we’re friends now? Just like that?”

“What? Are you going to jump out of my car and somehow make your way home half-naked just to refuse to be friends?”

The man put one of his hands on his chest, the other onto the air, looking like someone who is about to serenade. “For a fair lady, what can an honorable man do but be selfless.”

The girl repeatedly bumped her fists on the man’s shoulder. “Gross, gross, gross. Stop quoting things. That didn’t even sound like it came from a movie!”

“Oh, yeah? You just never watched the old stuff.”

Their conversation's topic jumped from movies and film-making to health. They scold each other about their health-dangering vices, the man's drinking and the girl's smoking habits. The man made a promise to her that he would stop drinking if she took better care of her nutritional intake, go for regular check-ups at the doctor, and work-out more. The girl made a promise to him that she would stop smoking if he lets her teach him how to cook, paint, and decorate the apartment room where he lived. The two exchanged these promises as if they had been friends for a long time. While truthfully, it had only been about two and a half hours.

A little while later, they stopped in front of a fancy office building which stood next to a waterfront. It has all the criteria of fanciness, from the contemporary gray brick architecture, usage of greeneries for about a third of the exterior, to the wide tall clear glass that felt almost voyeuristic. The girl stepped out of her car to get her necessary art supplies out of the trunk. A large canvas, a palette, and assortment of brushes and watercolor paints. The girl set up her canvas right in-between the office building and the water it faced.

"Alright, you can come out now." The girl called out for her model.

"Come out?! Are you crazy?! I thought we were going to do this at your place!" The man shouted back from inside the car.

"There's nobody here, just come out and I'll explain the why to you."

The man got out of the car while crouching slowly trying to not be noticed by anybody and anything. He found a dirty blanket in the trunk of the car which he used to cover up his upper body in the meantime. He stood up and walked toward the spot the girl had pointed him to stand.

“That building right there, was where my dad’s office used to be. Well, at least before this renovation.” The two looked toward the building. The girl may reminisce about her father, but the man could only think about what they would do if someone spotted them.

“This took me a while to understand. But, haven’t you made good with both of your parents’ actions? Well, based on what you have told me and how you seem to be carrying yourself.”

“You’re right. And that leaves us with...?’ The man pointed a finger at himself and the girl followed with a thumbs up while flashing a wide smile.

At that moment, he still hadn’t truly understood the girl in front of him. Her whole motives seemed to be unreal. It was truly impossible for him to put it into clear words what this girl had done for him in the span of just a few hours. He could only say,

“Thank you...I’m sorry...Thank you...I’m sorry...” His face drooped down, his hands reaching for hers, like what he needed was just a hug.

“Hey, hey, your hands feel soapy. Ahh, okay, here, here.” The two put themselves together in a distanced hug. They stayed like that for a minute, unbothered by the one or two passerbys. “Come on, I can’t paint you if you look like this.”

Pushing himself off, he walked back to his spot. Without waiting for her instruction, he threw away the blanket and towel, exposing all of himself to the elements. The girl made a ‘*waugh*’ sound, indicating her surprise.

Hiding her face behind the canvas, she shouted, “Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”

“You want a model, I’ll give you a model!” She couldn’t see it, but the man was flashing his patented shit-eating grin.

As she slowly put the canvas back down, she saw him striking a pose resembling Rodin's *The Thinker*, but his face was looking straight at her, with the sunglasses and shit-eating grin put in focus. His back was also turned a lot more, making his tattoos the additional focus to the face. The girl threw her hands onto the air and with a glimmering expression exclaimed that the pose was perfect.

While she was sketching the base of his body, the man asked, "After this, what do you plan to do with the painting?"

Glancing at him from the side, the girl had copied the man's patented shit-eating grin, "Throw it over the waterfront of course!"

So they did. After it was finished, they threw the painting away. Its fresh paints were washed away by the once clear Tokyo's water that only had been painted orange by the sun's nearing sunset.