

Chapter 1

My Family

The year of my birth was an ignominious one etched in big black characters in the annals of our nation's long history. Amidst the confusion that followed Japan's defeat in World War II, I was born on October 25, 1945, the fourth and last child of a family in Fukakusa Fukuine Takamatsu-cho, Fushimi Ward, Kyoto Prefecture. My father, Miyazaki Kiyochika, then forty-three, was the founder-leader of the Teramura-gumi, a yakuza organization based in the Fushimi area.

He was a gambling boss. But he also ran a construction company—a demolition business, to be precise—with a score of *tobi* (scaffolders) and navvies working under him. The second son of a poor peasant family in Ide village (in Tsuzuki-gun, Kyoto Prefecture) along the Kizu River, he left for Kyoto at an early age and launched himself into the world of the *tobi*. He remained illiterate all his life, so I suppose he was barely in his teens when he first arrived in Kyoto. With his small and slender build, he was well suited to the work, and it wasn't long before he began to make his mark. With success came money—and with money, an infatuation for gambling.

Being a *tobi* was a dangerous occupation in which a rough character and fiery temperament were advantages. Most *tobi* lived from day to day, acting on

momentary impulses. The *tobi* guys I knew in my childhood were always drinking, gambling, and whoring, and rumbles were pretty much a daily routine. I guess my father's youth had been spent no differently, so just as the Kizu flows into the Yodo, it was only natural that he would end up a yakuza.

I am not sure exactly when he pledged his loyalty over a cup of sake as “younger brother” to Nakajima Gennosuke, then the chairman of the Nakajima-kai, a gang organization that was the forerunner of the Kyoto-based Aizu-kotetsu syndicate. As boss of the Teramura-gumi my father was one of the founders of Nakajima-kai, along with people like Togoshi Toshikazu, who would later become the Aizu-kotetsu's third chairman.

My mother, Fumiko, had a strain of yakuza blood in her veins, too. Her father, who came from a poor peasant family in Wakayama Prefecture, was a yakuza in Haginojaya in Osaka's Nishinari district. Fumiko was his fourth daughter, born in a slum in Kamagasaki, Osaka. I never met my maternal grandfather in person, but it seems he never rose above mediocrity as a yakuza. The family was so poor that his eldest three daughters were either sold into bondage or sent out into service.

As for my mother, at the age of five or six she was put to work in a match factory—one of the area's going concerns at the time—which kept her from attending school. Still, every once in a while she would sneak off and stand outside the classroom window, listening to the lessons. It seems she taught herself reading and writing. In sum, my family tree on both sides traces back to people who wriggled around at the bottom of the social scale.

When I began to understand what was going on around me, my father had thirty to forty gang members under his command in the Teramura-gumi. They were very different from today's yakuza, who have developed a taste for fancy clothes and flashy women. By day a majority of them were legitimately employed as either *tobi* or navvies. They were a rowdy bunch who reeked of muck and sweat, and in that sense my father looked more like the boss of a construction crew than the head of a gang.

Although he would spend everything he earned on gambling and women, he took his legitimate trade extremely seriously. Yakuza fall into two categories: *toseinin* and *kagyonin*. A *toseinin* is a yakuza who makes a living solely from gambling or related activities. A *kagyonin*,

on the other hand, has a legitimate line of work—construction being one example—while also leading the life of a *yakuza*. I am under the impression that my father never made it as a full-fledged *toseinin*, since he never had enough resources to survive on gambling alone, and had to remain a *kagyonin* all his life. But he really loved his construction business, that's for sure.

He would get up at five in the morning to prepare for the day's work, no matter how late he had stayed up womanizing or gambling the night before. Should his young henchmen and workers happen to oversleep because of the previous night's excesses, he would walk straight into their sleeping quarters with his shoes on and kick them in the head: "Get up, you bastards! What time do you call this?"

He was just the same on the construction site, running around haranguing his men in a loud, rasping voice, and bossing them about.

I think my father had quite a talent for demolition work. In the Kansai area it was disdainfully known as *kobochiya*, a reference to combing through debris for anything that can be recycled. Hardly any capital was needed to start this kind of business, so it traditionally drew impoverished roughnecks who dreamed of becoming their own bosses. Demolition men undertook contracts to knock down all kinds of structures, from shrines, temples, homes, and bridges to bigger buildings and towers. Large amounts of scrap iron resulted, and the best part of the job was being able to sell it off. Apparently my father could tell in advance precisely how much scrap he would get from a project just by giving the structure a casual look-over beforehand.

Scrap was worth a lot during the war and afterward, when iron was in extremely short supply. In those desperate days, people ran around in search of anything made of the metal—from lengths of wire to shoe nails—hoping to exchange it for cash. In 1957, in what became known as the Girard incident, a housewife was shot to death by an American soldier by the name of William S. Girard while she was collecting spent cartridges inside a U.S. target range at Somagahara, Gumma Prefecture.

Since most cities across the country had been reduced to charred and smoldering wasteland in the war, demolition workers had little difficulty getting contracts, except in Kyoto, which had been spared from attack. So my father would always be rushing off to wherever a contract was up for

grabs, from Tokyo in the east to Kyushu in the west. He told me later that muscle and moxie were what got people through those troubled times. As a matter of fact, the people who ruled the construction industry back then were almost all yakuza or yakuza-like types.

It was a rough world, for sure, one in which work and fighting went hand in hand. It seemed there were quite a few occasions when my father had to push hard to get his way. One day, he came home seriously injured. It appeared that he had been in a rumble with some local yakuza in the Tokyo area, which he was visiting on business. When his wounds were almost healed, he went back to the capital with a large troop of his men to retaliate. As usual, he wore a tweed cap on his close-cropped head, a pair of breeches, leather shoes, and gaiters. No matter where he went, his outfit was always the same.

My mother stood by my father unwaveringly, playing an important role, though in the background, in both gang and company affairs. She was a small woman, standing only 1.45 meters tall, with distinctive slanting eyes. Reticent to a degree, she worked extremely hard. Rising at four in the morning, she would fix breakfast for the employees; then leave for the construction site, where she would work alongside the navvies all day, carrying heavy straw baskets filled with earth and gravel. Around nine in the evening, after she finished clearing the table and washing dishes, she would start on mending the employees' clothes. It wouldn't be until after midnight that she could finally call it a day. But I don't suppose my mother was a special case; most women had their work cut out back then.

Of all the duties she performed, the most important task was keeping an eye on her husband to make sure she got some cash for the family. Traditionally, contracts for demolition work were won by tender. In practice, under the *dango* system of rigged bidding, the outcome was decided in advance. In a violent industry dominated primarily by yakuza, anyone who refused to cooperate or ignored the rules did so at risk to his life. The *dango* system dictated that the person who really wanted the job would have to put up 10 percent of the total value of the contract, to be distributed equally among the failed bidders. In most cases, the minute they received their cut they would turn the place into a gambling

joint. Although my father was a gambling boss, he wasn't much good at winning and would usually end up running through all his money and coming home stone-broke. To avoid the inevitable, my mother would often accompany him to the meetings, grab the *dango* money before he could wager it away, and hurry home.

Although my parents made a strange pair, their business, helped by the confusion that reigned following the war, was going quite well by the time I was born. Not long afterward, on June 28, 1948, a big earthquake struck the city of Fukui in Fukui Prefecture, which borders Kyoto Prefecture. It was this disaster that really jump-started their business.

The magnitude of the Great Fukui Earthquake, its epicenter located right beneath the city, was comparable to that of the Great Hanshin Earthquake that rocked the Kobe area on January 17, 1995. The Fukui quake claimed 4,000 lives and left all the houses and buildings in the city completely destroyed or burned down, with the exception of about 1,000 buildings that included the prefectural office. This was too good an opportunity for my father to miss. He wasted no time in dispatching a large convoy of trucks loaded with tons of lumber and steel girders to Fukui.

Sitting in the passenger seat of the leading vehicle as it negotiated the quake-damaged route, my father repeatedly prodded the driver in the head and made him squeeze around obstacles whenever the road appeared impassable: "What are you afraid of, man? Keep going! Force your way through!"

He knew this was a golden opportunity, and his sheer recklessness and adventurous spirit were rewarded with exorbitant profits that provided him with ample funds that were to help him grow the business.

At the same time as he was earning big bucks in his legitimate trade, he was also engaged in the turf wars and gangland strife that were part and parcel of being a yakuza. A situation of near anarchy prevailed after the war, aggravated by the lack of police presence, due to the destruction of the country's power structure. Taking advantage of this vacuum, kamikaze survivors, "third nationals" (as Korean and Chinese residents were known), and *gurentai* (street gangs) ran riot, and bloodshed and violence were rampant. I heard that my father's gang organization, the Teramura-gumi, was kept pretty busy battling other yakuza and street gangs.

This was the background to an incident in which a group of third-national mobsters assaulted the police station in Shichijo, Kyoto. My father was one of many yakuza who rushed to the aid of the police. The only weapon he took with him was a sharp carving knife, since any decent hardware such as handguns and Japanese swords had been confiscated by order of GHQ,* leaving only kitchen knives and bamboo spears to hand. Despite their handicap in weaponry, the ad hoc yakuza troop fought well, managing to drive away the better-equipped third nationals and save the police. In all, seven third-nationals and one yakuza were killed.

Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe all witnessed similar incidents, and it was the yakuza—certainly not the police—who took on these marauding gangs of third nationals and helped impose peace and order. In Osaka and Kobe, security was maintained by numerous yakuza gangs, most of them now under the Yamaguchi-gumi, while in Tokyo a similar role was played by local mobsters and influential street gangs such as the one controlled by Mannen Toichi, known as the “God of *Gurentai*” and a man I would get to know later in life. What we learn from this is that at a turbulent turning point in history, brawn and recklessness have their uses to society.

At any rate, when I was born, my father was simultaneously pursuing two different roles: yakuza and businessman. By taking advantage of the opportunities that came his way as a result of the chaos following Japan’s defeat, and then a natural disaster, he reaped a windfall after playing and winning a series of power plays peculiar to yakuza.

The city of Kyoto is divided into two distinct areas, Kami (Upper) and Shimo (Lower), just as Osaka is split into North and South districts. In Kyoto, the dividing line is Nijo (Second Street), the area north of which is called Kami and includes Kita and Sakyo wards, while the Shimo district covers Sanjo (Third Street) and below. Located in the Kami district are the Imperial Palace, Kitano Temmangu Shrine, the Nishijin textile makers, Kyoto and Doshisha universities, as well as numerous offices of large corporations—in other words, a concentration of the city’s political,

*The General Headquarters overseeing the Allied occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952.

economic, religious, and academic centers. The district is also lined with affluent neighborhoods that are home to Kyoto gents and college professors. In contrast, the Shimo district has a much earthier atmosphere, with stores, factories, and the homes of the middle and lower classes.

My parents' house was in Fushimi Ward—the southernmost city ward and adjacent to Jujo (Tenth Street). Within walking distance were the Fushimi Inari Shrine, the ruins of Fushimi and Yodo castles (both constructed about 400 years before), and twenty or so Imperial tombs, including the Fushimi-Momoyama Mausoleum of Emperor Meiji. In the past, Fushimi had flourished as a river port, with good-sized vessels calling in on their way between Kyoto and Osaka. Because of its location, it was the scene of many disturbances toward the last days of the Tokugawa era and was the site of the 1868 Battle of Toba-Fushimi between the forces of the new imperial government and those of the military feudal regime that had ruled Japan since 1603. It also witnessed the Teradaya Inn incident, in which a raiding party attacked the inn being used by Sakamoto Ryoma, one of the most influential figures in the days leading up to the Meiji Restoration of 1868. (He narrowly escaped.) In addition, Fushimi was famous for its sake breweries. Lined up in a row, they were an imposing sight, and great places for imaginary swordfights when I was a kid.

Around the time I was enrolled in kindergarten, my family moved to another house in Fushimi Ward, this time in Kaido-cho, which was both the family home and the headquarters for my father's business and gang organization. This area was more popularly called Keidai-cho, as it was a residential area located within the *keidai* (compound) of the Fushimi Inari Shrine. Fushimi Inari was the head shrine of about 40,000 Inari shrines across the nation and was also known for its *sembon torii* (one thousand vermilion archways) and numerous stone statues of the fox deity worshipped there. It was always very busy. Even on weekdays, thousands of people visited, passing in front of our house all day long.

Given its location in the depths of Lower Kyoto, Keidai-cho also had a slum quarter smelling of sewers. Sakaguchi Ango, a well-known novelist, lived here for a year or so in the 1930s. In his book *Koto* (Ancient Capital) he described the general area as follows:

At the exit to Inari Station on the Keihan Line, there was a sign for a caterer. As I followed the sign into a side alley, I saw stone steps descending to the bottom of a slope flanked with overflowing drainage ditches and packed with dark houses that looked as if they never saw the sun. Turning a corner a few steps later, I spotted the caterer and a few brothels. It was a dead end. I wondered how such a filthy, dark alley could ever attract any customers. The house in question leaned to one side somewhat, with its walls crumbling and some weatherboards falling off, and it was pitch dark inside. It was a house that would defy anybody—not just customers—to enter.

Some time had elapsed since Sakaguchi lived in the area, but I would say in general appearance and atmosphere, the area was unchanged when we moved in. The memory of those stinking ditches still comes back to me every once in a while. Sakaguchi continued:

I would describe this area as the garbage pit of Kyoto. A lot of bar hostesses working in the Shinkyogoku area, particularly the less enterprising among them, all choose to live around here. Derelicts, wishing fortune to smile on them again someday, make a meager living around Inari Shrine and spend most of their time consulting written oracles. No matter how crowded the approach to the shrine may be, there is not a single person among the inhabitants of this area who gets swept up in the liveliness of the bustling crowds.

I can relate to Sakaguchi's observations. Fushimi, as I knew it, certainly fitted this description.

Against such a backdrop, the new house my father put up with the gains he made helping to rebuild Fukui was quite a mansion. It was built in authentic Japanese style and had many rooms, including one for tea ceremony. Our land covered an area of about 300 *tsubo*, was surrounded by a black fence, and even had a pond and miniature artificial hills. In short, it was the sort of showy property favored by the nouveau riche. But it also had some features peculiar to the yakuza lifestyle.

First of all, the entrance hall had an unusually spacious dirt floor, which served as a stage for the host to exchange formal greetings with

visiting yakuza, as well as a place to kindle a fire to raise the spirits of the men before launching a raid. This particular part of the house held great symbolic importance for any yakuza family. Secondly, all the corridors were much narrower than normal, barely wide enough to let one person through at a time—a defensive consideration to prevent rival gangsters from storming the house en masse. There were other similar features, such as sturdy storm doors that could not easily be smashed or torn off.

Living in these fortified surroundings were about twenty young gangsters and navvies, three or four maids, and three menservants, in addition to my immediate family. It was a communal lifestyle, akin to a primitive form of Communism. Life revolved around a thirty-tatami-mat dining and living room. Everyone who lived in the house ate and relaxed there together. Gambling sessions were a daily occurrence.

Mealtimes were an impressive sight. About thirty of us would sit at a large long table at six in the morning and start eating breakfast at the sign from my father. The young guys all ate a lot, since they were working as manual laborers, and easily finished off four of five large bowls of rice each. They ate super-fast, too. Eating at great speed was an attribute usually associated with yakuza who had spent time behind bars, but the *tobi* and navvies working for my father were certainly a match for any yakuza in that regard.

We all ate the same thing. Large plates piled high with food were placed in the middle of the table and we helped ourselves to what we wanted. I guess our meals were on the sumptuous side by the standards of the day. At dinner, sake was served. Although my father was by then a teetotaler, he was happy enough to let his henchmen and *tobi* drink, as long as they didn't overdo it. But if they did, he would come down hard on them: "You fucking idiot! What use are you as a yakuza, pissed out of your brain like that?"

Fueled by the sake served with dinner, my father's henchmen would head into town every night, where naturally they would get up to no good. What else could you expect of a bunch of guys who lived for drinking, gambling, and getting laid? In particular, the evening wouldn't be complete without a scrap or two. Given their day jobs, they had robust physiques and were unbeatable fighters. A few times when I was out in an

amusement quarter such as Kawaramachi with one of them, some young toughs bothered us. On each occasion, the guy I was with took them out—three or four of them—in a matter of seconds. He would finish the job by hoisting them shoulder high one at a time, then slamming them down on the street.

Most of the Teramura-gumi henchmen had evil features that scared the hell out of anyone who saw them. You wouldn't have thought it possible to find such faces on this earth. They really were a far cry from today's yakuza, who look a lot more presentable by contrast. Beneath a close-cropped head was, with almost no exception, an expanse of rugged face trimmed with an angular, protruding jaw and set with a pair of fierce, bloodshot eyes that slanted upward. Caked in mud and sweat from their day's work, the henchmen usually gave off an offensive odor. There was only one word to describe them: devils.

It is said that "devils" were often seen in Kyoto in times past, and I like to think they must have been the medieval counterparts of rowdies such as our henchmen. I kid you not: there really are people in this world who look like nothing other than devils incarnate. Moreover, the devils of the Teramura-gumi were violent-tempered to boot. If somebody returned after coming off worse in a rumble, the others wouldn't let him be. Eventually one of the senior guys would lay into him mercilessly and tell him, "Go back and finish the job, you fucking sissy!"

In those days, yakuza underlings were pretty hard up. Those who worked in construction for a daily wage would not be able to do much more than sack out after swilling cheap sake at night. Occasionally, when they had a bit of money in their pockets, they could buy a woman, but that was about it.

Yakuza who depended solely on gambling for their incomes were even more destitute. I saw a lot of guys wearing thin summer *yukata* even in the middle of winter because they had lost everything else gambling. They would forlornly grill dried sardines in their shabby tenements for lack of funds. But when they came into some cash they would go out and get smashed. Their devilish faces would turn red and they would keep on drinking until their money was gone. Then, when they ran into another rowdy, it was no surprise to see them have a set-to on the spot.

Sometimes, street fights involving our henchmen led to more serious confrontations with other gang families. When I was at home one day, the atmosphere in the house suddenly grew very tense. The minute I noticed the change, I found the place filling up with our henchmen, each of whom came rushing in dressed entirely in black, wearing a headband, and armed with a hunting gun, bamboo spear, or Japanese sword. Before they had time to catch a breath, their lieutenants were directing them to reverse the tatami mats, to give a better footing, and to remove the shutters in preparation for a raid. They were like different guys to the ones who normally lounged about in the main room. Swift and agile, they made a neat job of whatever they were ordered to do. Finally, when everything was set, they gathered in the garden around some oil drums shooting flames into the air, broke open a cask of sake, and began gulping down the contents.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the womenfolk were busy cooking under my mother's command. With the sleeves of their kimono tucked up with sashes, they hurriedly made rice balls with steaming hot rice straight out of the pot, scalding their hands in their haste. In the center of all this activity was my father, sitting cross-legged in his combat clothes with an air of perfect composure—or so it seemed. I guess he had to keep up appearances because he was the boss, but for sure he was feeling uneasy inside. At any rate, whenever gangland strife loomed, the house would be thrown into chaos and uproar—not unlike what occurred during a festival. Although I was too young to make out what was going on, I remember my heart would be thumping in keen anticipation that something really exciting was about to happen.

These, then, were the kind of people I was raised among. We shared a lot together, even though many of them weren't my real kinfolk. But the bonds between us were extremely strong—stronger, I would say, than normal family ties, because I believe we felt, consciously or otherwise, the need to offset the lack of blood relationship. Though our young henchmen were all social misfits with considerable personality defects, their blood ran thick and they were men of rich emotions.

I was the youngest in my family, with two elder sisters and one elder brother, Tsuneo, who was my senior by fifteen years and quite an athlete.

He was on the team when Kyoto Daini High School won the prefectural high-school baseball tournament and went on to participate in the national championships at Koshien Stadium, near Kobe. After high school, he enrolled in the engineering faculty of Ritsumeikan University, a private university in Kyoto. But he quit after a year, when I was about four, to begin his yakuza apprenticeship under Oshima Hideo, one of the big bosses in the Kyoto underworld at that time. This brother of mine, who would later form his own yakuza family, the Miyazaki-gumi, didn't live with us, so I was the only boy in the house in Keidai-cho.

All the Teramura-gumi henchmen took really good care of me, just as if I was their own younger brother. They addressed me as "Bon" (young master, or sonny). No matter how well we got along with each other, though, there was always a clear distinction between us. To them, I was the boss's son and the son of a good family. They treated me with a certain reserve and were always trying to please me, even if they sometimes went about it strange ways.

One incident I remember took place when I enrolled in elementary school.

"Hey, Bon! I wanna give you something for getting into grade school. Anything you'd really like?" asked an evil-looking young henchman, who would have been taken for a devil in times past.

"A gun and a sword," I answered.

A few days later, when I was playing outside the house, the guy came back and beckoned me to his side: "Bon, I've brought the gun you wanted. But no sword; that's too dangerous. Take a look at this. It's the real thing. Why not show it to your friends? I bet they'll be amazed."

With that, he thrust a huge gun into my hands.

Although I didn't know at the time, it was an Imperial Japanese Army-issue Type 38 rifle. He must have found it while he was demolishing a temple or something. There were quite a few temples and shrines in Kyoto where arms and ammunition had been concealed over the years, and it was not unusual for demolition men to stumble upon antique swords dating back many years. The henchman looked quite pleased with himself when he saw me having a good time with the gun. Tottering under its weight, I went off to show my neighborhood pals.

The following day, as I was walking along the street with the gun on my shoulder, mimicking the sound of shots being fired, the local policeman happened by on his bicycle.

“Hey, Bon! What’s that you’ve got there? Looks like a real gun.”

“No, it’s just a toy. Bang! Bang!”

The cop thought otherwise and hurried to my home to report what he had seen to my mother. That evening, I saw her chewing out the henchman who had given me the gun.

“What kind of idiot gives a real gun to a kid? What on earth were you thinking?”

“Hey, I’m really sorry, but I thought only a real gun would make Bon happy. He’s got so many toy ones.”

Though he openly acknowledged his error up front, he looked pretty annoyed. I knew he was probably thinking: “Who cares if it’s real? It doesn’t work. Anyway, Bon really liked it. What’s the big deal?”

Most of these young henchmen were completely lacking in any sort of common sense and didn’t bother themselves with what was ordinarily expected of people. They just came straight out and did exactly what they felt.

For as long as I could remember, I was aware that my house was quite different from other homes. Yakuza in those days were not separate from society, as they are today, and were much more integrated into the community. My father was pretty much counted upon by people in the area and was addressed as the “Boss of Keidai-cho” or the “Boss of Fushimi.”

In fact, I frequently saw our neighbors pay visits to my father for advice and consultation. On several occasions, I even saw married couples come dashing in while yelling at each other, so he must have acted as a mediator in marital disputes, too. In that sense, he was like the presiding judge of a private neighborhood court.

Similarly, whenever he came across local bullies ganging up on an easy target, he would let rip, in genuine fury: “What the hell do you think you’re doing, bullying those weaker than you? Behave like men!”

Still, I had already noticed from an early age the fearful looks that local people sometimes gave my father and his men, as well as the way they flattered them from time to time. I sensed that there was an invisible, yet unquestionable, wall separating my household from others, and

I felt it even more as I got older. Although I was only a child, I had the feeling that I would never be able to escape the shadow that falls on every member of a yakuza family.

My mother did her best to make sure we got a good education. She really regretted that she hadn't attended even primary school.

"Nothing was more frustrating than not being able to go to school," she used to tell us. "I blamed my parents at the time and I never want you kids to feel that way."

A zeal for education is usually a trait of people who have become rich quickly, but in my mother's case it was more than that. It stemmed from her bitter childhood memories. She believed naively that education would allow her children to choose an affluent path in life completely different to her own.

This idea, so deeply rooted in her mind as to become almost an article of faith, saw me attend a missionary-run kindergarten located near the bridge at Sanjo (Third Street). I was very impressed when I met my classmates on the first day, because they all looked so cool and sophisticated, unlike the kids I had been hanging around with in Fushimi. I learned much later that most of them were the products of liaisons between high-class Nishijin gents, kabuki actors, or movie stars and geisha girls or hostesses in the Gion entertainment district. Some of them looked simply out of this world.

In the classes below mine were many children who were the result of encounters between American soldiers and Japanese girls. When I asked these kids with Caucasian features whether their fathers were American, they would reply "Sure" in the local Kyoto dialect, a mismatch I found puzzling and hilarious in equal measure. I loved talking to them.

Many kids were chauffeured to and from the kindergarten. A huge black car would pull up right in front of the school gates, a chauffeur would alight and deferentially open the rear door, and a kid with a pampered look on his face would slowly climb out. This scene was repeated every day.

I commuted by Keihan Railways and a middle-aged woman always escorted me to and from the kindergarten. She was from the lowest level

of Kyoto society, but very cheerful and strong-minded. One day, when we were crossing Sanjo Bridge, I was suddenly seized by the urge to pee and couldn't wait. The war had only been over a few years and the area around the famous bridge resembled a medieval world of beggars clad in rags, the blind, the sick, and assorted oddballs. I squeezed myself into the crowd and took a leak. At that, one of the beggars, probably because I had splashed him, began cursing me in a loud voice. Hearing this, my chaperone exploded.

"What! What did you say? My Bon's piss is as clean as pure sake! You should be grateful to get some! What the fuck are you saying, bum?" She fixed him with a menacing stare. "He's Bon of the Teramura family of Fushimi! And he goes to the high-class kindergarten around the corner! Don't talk to him like that, you hear me?"

The poor man was overwhelmed and sped off with his rags fluttering in the air, although I'm not sure if he knew of the Teramura gang family.

That was how people talked and acted in my home, even the women. This old lady was very proud of the fact that her young prince was attending kindergarten in Sanjo, so proud that each day she would announce to every neighbor we ran into on our way home, "Here's Bon coming back from the Sanjo kindergarten."

I found it really embarrassing.

Then came primary school. The one I went to, Inari Primary, was located right next to our home. The family business continued to flourish and the house bustled. In the evenings, it would be transformed into a gambling joint. People mostly played *hanafuda* (flower cards) and mahjong. In those days, only "intellectual" yakuza tended to play mahjong, and my father and his devilish-looking henchmen hardly deviated from their flower cards. During the summer, they would strip to the waist, displaying their tattoos, and inject themselves with a stimulant called philopon as they played.

Those who played mahjong at our house included Nagata Masaichi, president of Daiei Motion Picture, who was popularly known as "Nagata the Trumpet." Mr. Nagata was a lucky adventurer. He was born in Aburakoji, Kyoto, and started his career in the movie industry as a tour guide at the Nikkatsu film studios in the city. In due course he started his own film studio, Daiei, relying on his gift of the gab (half of which

was bluff, which was why he was called “Trumpet”) and a talent for producing. Daiei was a leader in the Japanese motion picture industry, bringing out such big hits as *Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Rashomon*. The latter, directed by Kurosawa Akira, won the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice Film Festival. Nagata himself lorded over the industry as the “King of Motion Pictures” for some time.

A man accustomed to living in considerable style, Nagata would go drinking from place to place, taking along big stars such as Hasegawa Kazuo, Kyo Machiko, Yamamoto Fujiko, and Wakao Ayako, who were all contracted to his studio. He led the sort of life that ordinary people could only dream of, and there was never any shortage of things to talk about when the subject of Nagata came up. Later he became the owner of the Daiei Stars, a professional baseball team, and was appointed the first president of baseball’s Pacific League. He was also a political fixer and very active in his efforts to install Kono Ichiro* as prime minister.

My father seemed to have a close personal relationship with Nagata, who visited our house several times. He always came over in his big black sedan, breezily alighting in his trademark breeches, which seemed to be the fashion among old-style cinema types back then.

“I’ve got nothing in common with today’s movie men,” Nagata used to say. “I’m the last of the old school. We really loved cinema.”

To me, Nagata looked quite the dandy, and I guess his style expressed the spirit of the greatest movie man of his age.

I remember hearing Nagata and my father referring to each other as *kyodai* (brothers). But the way he pronounced the word was somewhat strange and it sounded more like *kyorai*.

“Uncle Nagata, what’s *kyorai*?” I asked him.

“Oh, Bon! What a good ear you’ve got!” he replied, roaring with laughter. “They say a boy with a good ear will grow up to be a great man.”

I wonder if my father and Nagata had pledged brotherhood over cups of sake. There’s no way to find out now, but they certainly gave that impression. I presume their association began when they made each other’s acquaintance at a gambling den. It must have been a natural

*Kono Ichiro (1898-1965) was a powerful LDP faction leader and holder of various ministerial posts.

attraction, because I always felt through my contacts with Mr. Nagata that he shared something in common with people like my father and his henchmen.

They had some business dealings, too, as the Teramura-gumi put up and dismantled sets at Daiei's Uzumasa Studios in Kyoto. Through that work, they got to know quite a few movie stars, and I remember my father and his men often talking about them.

I was fascinated when Nagata and the others played mahjong, which struck my childish mind as a very intellectual pursuit. I watched while sitting in his lap, where I would be enveloped by an indefinable fragrance emanating from his breeches and expensive jacket. I guess it was eau de cologne. That aroma was my first-ever whiff of Tokyo.

Unfortunately, Daiei Motion Picture went bankrupt in 1971, due partly to Nagata's overindulgence in politics, horse racing, and women. After a while, Nagata and his company managed to make a comeback, although times had changed and he could no longer lord it over the industry as the "King of Motion Pictures." The rising popularity of television made a mockery of his simple yet touching belief that if you made good movies, people would come to see them. At a much later date, when I was a reporter in Tokyo for *Shukan Gendai* magazine and working for the family demolition business on the side, I won a contract to knock down Daiei's studios at Uzumasa (Kyoto) and Chofu (Tokyo). I believe the hand of providence was at work.

Many nights I did not see my father. By now, he was mostly to be found at different gambling joints or with his women. On the rare occasions he was at home in the evening, he and his men squatted around a large oblong brazier in their kimono. At such times he would indulge in a disgusting habit: as he addressed them he would pluck at his pubic hair and burn strands over the charcoal. His henchman would screw up their faces in disgust and beg him not to: "Please stop, boss! It stinks!"

I would often see his men handing money to my father as he sat at the brazier. I guess these were ill-gotten gains; anyhow, they were his takings. Usually a gang boss would give something back to his men as remuneration, but my father would carefully count the wad of bills one by one, then flip them over and start again. As his underling looked on expectantly, my father would simply say, "OK, you can go now."

I couldn't help chuckling when I saw how disappointed the man looked as he departed. Tightfisted, that's what my old man was.

Even with so much cash coming in, my father would lose it all gambling and have to turn to my mother for help. It usually went something like this. In the middle of the night, mother would hear someone moving about in the kitchen. Going to investigate, she would find my father crouching in the dark with his back to her and the distraught air of someone who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

"What's the matter?" she would ask.

"Nothing," would come the timorous reply. Head bowed, my father sighed for good measure.

"Lost your money gambling again?"

"Yeah," he would nod weakly.

This one-act play would usually end with my mother having to run to a pawnshop first thing in the morning.

She had to put up with his philandering, too. When he took a job far from home, he would almost always find himself a sweetheart. In some cases, he wouldn't return for more than a year. With his plain features, he didn't look the sort who could pull women. Surprisingly, though, he always managed to set himself up with a mistress. To make matters worse, he would run through all the contract money having a good time with her. Naturally, my mother wasn't happy about this. But her husband proved to be a gifted actor in this situation, too.

Picture the scene: my father comes home one day, with no prior notice, after a year away. Receiving him in the entrance hall, my mother keeps her cool until she is through exchanging the usual formalities. Then, just as she begins to lay into him, he raises his hand in an effort to hold back her rising anger.

"Hey, listen. I met this woman who looked just like you. So in spite of myself, I . . . uh . . . well, you can imagine the rest."

Mother used to tell me that his performance was exquisite and his timing perfect. Struck by the ridiculousness of the situation, she didn't feel like arguing with him further, but would shut him up by telling him she didn't want to hear any more of his nonsense.

At other times, in a fit of rage at her husband's behavior, she tried to get him to sever his yakuza ties. I imagine she wondered what the point

of it all was, given the way he kept draining money away. She even went to ask Nakajima Gennosuke, the boss of the Nakajima-kai and my father's sworn elder brother, to formally break off relations with her husband. I remember that she took me with her to see him several times.

It was my mother who took on the task of running the Teramura household, as well as sharing some of the responsibilities for the Teramura-gumi. Within the gang organization, there was a clearly defined division of labor between my parents. My father was in charge of the henchmen, and my mother looked after their wives and children. Women would always be coming to seek her advice about the kinds of problems that arise from being married to yakuza. Most of these had to do with money:

"My husband spends all his money on gambling and women, and we've got nothing to live on."

"My old man met this girl and never comes home."

"My kid's sick and I've got no money to see a doctor."

In each case, my mother would make a decision on the spot, either handing them some cash or telling them to get a grip on the situation and pull themselves together.

There were also times when she would send for a henchman and give him a dressing down in a quiet corner of the house. On those occasions she forbade me to come anywhere near, but I did anyway. When I managed to peep into the room, I would see a big guy with the face of a devil sitting on his knees and cringing in front of my mother, who would be rebuking him in quiet but firm tones: "What do you think you're doing? There's no excuse for breaking the hearts of your wife and kids!"

While yakuza like to talk of *otoko no hanamichi* ("man's glorious path"), "manliness," "honor," and the like, the fact is that beneath its macho exterior there is a matriarchal aspect to the yakuza world and maternal principles exert a powerful influence. Men adhered to a code of "take my good name and you take my life," and were extremely conscious of face and obligation. Moreover, many would die young, either killed in gangland strife or burned out by debauchery and dissipation. To help them cope, they needed the emotional anchor provided by something maternal.

The yakuza world wouldn't be complete without its "mother" figures. These women would heal the pain caused by the deaths of menfolk by recounting the exploits of the fallen and transforming their lives into the stuff of legend. Actually, the women often grew quite fed up with how stupid men could be, but would sing their praises anyway—and it was this kind of support that would encourage the men to take leaps into the unknown. So while on the surface it was a typically male-dominated world, the existence of women in the underworld counted for a great deal, in both spiritual and material ways. I am under the impression that there were many times when my father was dancing unknowingly to my mother's tune.

However infuriating my mother must have found my father at times, his henchmen must have seen something in him, since he had more than a score of them under his command. A good number were Koreans and people from the discriminated-against Buraku communities,* and they came from families who lived in filth and darkness at the dead-end of life. I found their living conditions quite appalling on the many occasions they took me to their homes or I visited them on my father's behalf.

I couldn't believe my eyes when a henchman took me to his house in a Buraku area by the Kamo River. His family of five shared a tiny room in a tenement on the riverbank. There was no privy, so they had to discharge their waste directly into the river. When I peeked into one of the shacks lining the alleyway, I saw a young man with a vacant expression sitting motionless in the dark.

"Out of a job again?" asked the henchman.

"There aren't any jobs for me," the young man replied despondently. "You know that."

Next to the tenement was a quarter where several women dressed only in their underclothes were hanging about. Leaning against a pink wall with their thickly painted lips, they provocatively hitched up their slips to expose their thighs.

"Hey, boy!" one beckoned me. "Come on over! Let's have a good time." She opened her crimson mouth wide and laughed.

*Buraku (literally 'hamlet') people, Japan's largest minority group, are descendants of out-castes under the feudal class system who were allowed to work only in occupations seen as unclean, such as slaughtering animals, and forced to live in designated areas.

“What is this place?” I asked the henchman, who in turn gave me a broad grin.

“They call it ‘Hashishita,’”* he said. “It’s where men and women do something good together.”

I couldn’t even begin to imagine what that “something good” might be, but I knew it must be something I wasn’t supposed to talk about.

This henchman had a younger brother in his early teens. The boy had stopped going to school and was working as a navy to help support his family. They were half-starved and living in abject poverty. On top of that, they were subjected to extreme discrimination and there were virtually no jobs available to them.

I clearly remember the Teramura-gumi henchmen and laborers lamenting: “There are only two options open to us: yakuza or navy. That’s all.”

It was a vicious circle. Discrimination bred poverty, and poverty resulted in child labor. Few paths were open to those without formal education, particularly in the postwar era, when Japan was industrializing and so much emphasis was being placed on one’s academic record. So it was only natural that many of those discriminated against aspired to success in the worlds of entertainment, sports, and the yakuza, where academic background did not matter. These were among the few places where they could hope to find the light that was missing from their lives.

I didn’t become conscious of the existence of discrimination until much later. The Teramura-gumi itself and the people my father knew were among the very ones being discriminated against, so as long as I lived among them discrimination was never an issue.

At any rate, there was no shortage of social misfits among the members and immediate circle of the Teramura-gumi. Of all the unusual characters, “Uncle Yamane” and “Mama Undertaker” were the two who left the strongest impression on me. Uncle Yamane’s real name was Yamane Choji. He was a gambling boss based in the Shichijo (Seventh Street) district, as well as my father’s sworn younger brother.

*Under The Bridge.

Shichijo is an area near Kyoto Station that includes East and West Honganji temples and the site of what was once the flourishing Shimabara red-light district, which in its day was on a par with Yoshiwara in Edo (now Tokyo). It is a working-class area, in direct contrast to the more sophisticated Kamigyo Ward, north of Kyoto Station. From the medieval period through the feudal era, numerous beggars, outcasts, itinerant entertainers, and prostitutes populated the vast expanse of the dry bed of the Kamo River. The riverbed was where criminals had once been executed. It was also the place where Okuni, a female attendant of Izumo Shrine, founded kabuki. In short, it was one hell of a place, teeming with all kinds of indescribable people and reeking of evil. When I was growing up, there was still a quarter inhabited by descendants of the original riverbed dwellers who made a living by various rough trades, including that of “dogcatcher.”

A dogcatcher is a person who captures stray dogs or even house pets without permission and butchers them for the meat and skin. They were also called “dog killers.” There were quite a few households living by this trade in Uncle Yamane’s neighborhood, and one day he took me to visit one.

As I stepped inside the small, dark room with its dirt floor, several members of the family were at work. In the center of the room was a huge chopping board set up at an angle, and in one corner were several dogs on leashes.

“Bring that red one over,” the head of the house directed his wife, who dragged a huge dog over to him.

The dog put up a fierce struggle, until the man dealt it a heavy blow to the head with a thick club. The animal briefly went into frantic convulsions, then fell dead. The man picked up the carcass, placed it belly up on the sloping board and nailed it down by its four limbs. In no time, he set about dismembering it with surgical precision.

Everybody in the room was covered in blood and carried on working utterly indifferent to the suffocating smell of gore and intestines that filled the room. I noticed a boy of around primary school age, his face and body also stained with blood, who glared at me with sharp, challeng-

ing eyes. Chances were good that a kid like him would grow up to be a yakuza in Kyoto.

Although the British and other dog lovers might faint at the mere mention of the fact, dog-catching was once an established occupation in Buraku communities. I believe that Buraku people had been compelled to take it up in order to survive in the face of the vehement discrimination they faced.

Uncle Yamane was one of the two big bosses who between them controlled this area as part of their beat. As might be expected of the boss of such a villainous patch, Uncle Yamane possessed the fearsome looks of a medieval ruffian. He was a short man, but he had an exceptionally penetrating gaze. His entire body was covered in tattoos, and even his near-bald head sported a frightening motif. He would swagger among the tenements, exposing his tattoos to the world, and it seemed that many of those who saluted him, young and old alike, also had tattoos of some kind. All of them had dangerous eyes.

Gambling was Uncle Yamane's "honest" calling. He also had another, illegitimate, occupation: he was a fence, buying and selling stolen goods. This line of work brought him big profits. He beat down the price of whatever he was buying to about 5 percent of its real value, ruthlessly exploiting the vulnerable position of the thieves and burglars who were selling to him. Then he sold the goods on for several times what he had paid for them. No one would dare demand a more favorable deal in the face of Uncle Yamane's intimidating stare.

It was during the confusion directly after the end of the war that he made a killing from fencing stolen rice. Desperate ex-soldiers and bands of outlaws pilfered tons of rice, which Uncle Yamane bought from them after forcing down the price. He then sold it off to restaurants and construction camps.

The way these guys got hold of the rice was quite outrageous. They would simply drive their trucks up to a village warehouse or a well-off farmer's granary, hammer down the doors, and make off with all the rice they could find.

"During the war, farmers treated us townfolk like shit and played all kinds of dirty tricks on us," said one of the guys who took part in the raids. "They got what was coming to them."

I think, though, that there were plenty of times when the raiders overstepped the mark with their excessive behavior.

I guess you could say that Uncle Yamane had cashed in big time on the daredevil attitude of these desperados. Possibly owing to some unconscious feelings of guilt, he was always very generous toward me, giving me all sorts of amazing toys.

“Bon, here’s something for you to play with,” he would say every time I visited.

I saw him as a magician, always able to produce something out of thin air, although I suppose everything he gave me had been stolen.

Speaking of magic, one day I noticed that a mongrel Spitz dog we kept at our house was missing. I couldn’t find it anywhere, despite searching the entire neighborhood. A dogcatcher had probably snatched it. In desperation, I went to my father, who told me to go and talk to Uncle Yamane.

I ran over to see him, explained the situation, and described the dog. Uncle Yamane gave a henchman who was present some directions. The man darted out of the house.

Within ten minutes, he came hurrying back with another henchman, who held my dog in his arms. As I had almost given it up for lost, this was nothing short of magic. As I stood dumbstruck, Uncle Yamane gave the man an almighty slap in the face.

“Hey, you know whose dog you were about to kill?” he barked. “Thickhead!”

Back then, I found Uncle Yamane an utterly entrancing figure who could do anything. At a much later date, he would again help me out when I really needed it.

As for “Mama Undertaker,” she was one of the very few people who could scare me, as I was a spoilt pup who took it for granted he would be treated as a Bon. In her early thirties, I would guess, she single-handedly managed her own funeral parlor. She was a voluptuous woman in her prime and had a generous temperament. “Come over to my place,” she would say. “I’ve got some candies you’ll like.”

Most of the time, she was really nice to me. But when I got carried away and misbehaved, her manner would completely change. She would grab me by the scruff of the neck and drag me into a room where coffins

were lined up. “Stop fooling about!” she would thunder. “Or I’ll shut you up in one of these!”

The thought alone was enough to terrify me.

“I’m on my way to a funeral. Wanna come along?” she asked one day.

Out of curiosity, I accompanied her. It was when the deceased was being placed in the coffin that she shocked me. The dead man’s family was having a hard time getting the body to fit, and the legs were sticking out. Just as I was wondering what they would do about it, Mama stepped forward and asked the family to move aside. Without further ado, she knelt on one of the protruding limbs, then pushed down hard with all her weight. There was a sickening sound of breaking bones.

After adjusting her kimono, she dealt with the other leg in the same manner, then folded up the broken limbs and placed them in the coffin. She went through the whole process in a very businesslike manner, only interrupted by the need from time to time to rearrange some stray tresses of her hair. In my mind, however, her otherwise charming face had taken on a devilish form, and I remember fleeing to the corner of the room, trembling in terror.

Thinking back on it, there was only one size of coffin available in those days, barely big enough to accommodate the body of an average Japanese, so what Mama Undertaker did may not have been all that unusual by the standards of the time. And it seems to me now that women who went out to work in those days all had faces that suggested they would be quite capable of breaking a leg or two if the need arose.

These were the surroundings in which I was raised. The people I lived amongst were without status or pedigree, and branded unfit by society, but they had a vitality and resourcefulness that were essential to their survival. Knowing these were the only two things sustaining them somehow drew them together. Relations between them were thick and hot. Vulgar and direct, and occasionally even grotesque, they may have lived in a dead-end world of filth and darkness, but in their defiance of it they also lived lives of integrity and brightness.

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Even granted that my circumstances were special, generally speaking I think it fair to say that people were as close as thieves back then. The fevered air of the black markets run by yakuza and third nationals in

Tokyo and Kobe, where low-grade spirits and bootleg liquor were sold openly, bore this out.

As Kaiko Ken wrote in *Nippon sammon opera* (Japan Comic Opera),* “There is no other word but beauty to describe out-and-out vulgarity and baseness.”

I think this atmosphere was prevalent in cities across Japan immediately after the war. Although people were subjected to great poverty, there was a humanity and warmth that came from finding themselves together in such circumstances. To survive, people needed to have consideration for others, and out of this grew the rules and moral standards by which they led their lives.

But as time passed, passions cooled and the unfettered vitality that characterized the early postwar era was gradually brought under control. In 1955, the Liberal Democratic Party was formed as a result of the merger of the Japan Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. In the reformist camp, the Japan Socialist Party, which had been in danger of breaking up, finally saw its left and right wings unite. The Japanese Communist Party, meanwhile, after criticizing its own “ultraleftist adventurism” at its Sixth National Council, gave up its underground armed struggle and returned to mainstream society. These political changes led to the formation of the “1955 system,” a new political framework that was to remain in place for the next three decades. Japan’s postwar era was entering a new phase.

My family life was also going through a major change in 1955, although it had nothing to do with the political, social, or economic trends of the day. My father had a new mistress, and he built another house where they could live together. The gang office moved there, too, and with the live-in henchman gone, my home suddenly became very quiet. So, just as the nation was starting to come together, my family bucked the trend by heading for a breakup. Nonetheless, our house remained the principle residence, so my father and members of his organization would still come and go on a daily basis, even if they no longer lived there.

Immediately after the split, my mother came close to committing suicide and taking us children with her. Around that time she was suffering from an inflamed gall bladder, requiring frequent hospitalization, and I

*A novel set in the defunct Osaka arsenal that depicts a community of scrap iron thieves.

think she despaired of her health. The fact that her husband had taken a mistress didn't bother her, but if she thought her illness was going to cause her children problems, she was the sort of woman who would take her own life and her children's, too, to spare us any worry. So she planned a murder-suicide involving herself, my two elder sisters, and me.

The four of us headed to Futamigaura, Mie Prefecture, southeast of Kyoto. The expedition was so like my mother. We stayed in the best room in the town's top inn, and chartered a large boat to take us sightseeing. At night we ate lavishly and hired local geisha to entertain us. It was a hell of a party, with shamisen and drums, and everyone cheering and applauding like crazy. I guess we had two or three nights of this before returning to Kyoto—as in the end, my mother just couldn't bring herself to go through with her plan.

I didn't learn the real purpose of the expedition until a year or two later, when my mother told me herself. It wasn't by way of sharing a memory of tough times, however. My behavior was getting worse.

"It would have been best if I'd just killed you," she informed me.

Maybe it was the blood of my father and my grandfather in me, but by the time I reached nine or ten I was turning into quite a bad boy and on the receiving end of more smacks from my mother with each passing day. Had it not been for my encounter with the Amagase brothers, I believe I would have continued down this slippery slope and eventually entered the family business—the yakuza side of it, of course.

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