

Otsuki

I was getting a haircut in the area of Nagata, Japan when one of my students, Otsuki Ohara, walked in with her school uniform on and had a sad face with no hint of recognition for me. She rushed past me towards the back door. My barber said in hushed tones (definitely not meant for my ears, but I heard them anyway) that it surely was a shame.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

My barber, Tetsuo Suzuki, demurred by pretending he hadn't heard the question and simply did what many Japanese people do when asked a difficult question: he changed the subject.

It turned out that he didn't need to tell me. I had my answer a few minutes later.

Otsuki walked out of the back room, traveling through the barbershop in what appeared to be the skimpiest clothing that I had seen yet in Japan outside of the red light districts of Shinjuku. I thought to myself that she must have been on a date. Her skirt was nearly bikini length and she had a very low cut tank top on, despite the cool weather of autumn. Many girls of that area even braved the cold Japanese winters in their short skirts, but not without something warm on top.

Before she walked out, an older man, perhaps mid-sixties walked into the barber shop, took his hat off and stopped just in front of the door. Despite the cloudy day, he was wearing sunglasses and he had a black suit on. I was watching this nonchalantly from my chair. Mr. Suzuki continued to cut my hair as if nothing the matter was happening.

As usual, the place was immaculate. There was hardly a hair or piece of dust out of place, and I knew the workers were up at 5 am, as most shopkeepers were, sweeping the entire place clean, both inside and out.

The old man gestured, and Otsuki, who had previously stopped herself and was tugging at her hair, made no eye contact but moved towards the elder gentleman who had just come in.

When she came within range of the older man, he impatiently grabbed her hand and pulled her away. I noticed at the last moment that he had placed his other hand on the back of her neck.

I asked him immediately in Japanese: "Was that her father?"

"Oh? Who are you talking about?"

There was no one else in the shop but us.

"That man who came in, just now," I said with a rising sense of agitation.

"I don't know," he replied absentmindedly

I was far enough along that I impatiently threw off the blanket, gave him some money, and pursued my student and her visitor.

When I got outside, it was clear what was happening. They were both seated in the back of a black luxury car. I could see through the window only a glimmer, but it was enough. The old man was playfully kissing the girl with his hand on her cheeks. She was clearly not enjoying the experience, but the old man did not care. Perhaps it was none of my business, but she was my student. I felt a duty to at least enquire about what was going on, so I moved towards the vehicle, but before I could get there, I felt a strong tug at my left arm. It was Mr. Suzuki, and he made a motion with his head that I should not carry out my plan. At this point, I was upset about the turn of events, so I pulled my arm away and continued unabashedly. I reached the vehicle just as the man and Otsuki saw me. She saw me first, and her eyes widened and a slight smile trickled out before being replaced with the cool placidity that was common in formal situations.

Ignoring the man completely, I said to her in Japanese, "Otsuki, are you all right?"

She could only look up at me—poor girl. The man only glowered at me. The driver sped off, and at that moment, Mr. Suzuki had reached me. He pulled me around with a visibly angry expression.

"You fool," he said with wide eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Get off me," I said to him. "She's my student. You know that." And then I said, "What's wrong with you?"

He said nothing and pushed me slightly before going back to his barber shop.

I later realized how upset he was when I checked my wallet. I had overpaid him by at least twice the normal fee, but he hadn't paid me the difference. This would have been unheard of normally in Japan, but he had been so unnerved by my actions that he didn't make up the difference. I knew then that I would have to be much more careful, but I was still determined to find out if Otsuki was in any danger.

I would not give up on her.

The next day was a Sunday, but I was meeting my co-teacher for a casual dinner. His name was Shinsuke, and he was my closest friend among the other English teachers at the middle school, so I felt that I could find out some information about the incidents that had taken place. I decided to introduce the subject lightly—but I knew I had to find out something.

"I saw Otsuki the other day," I said to him in English over some sushi rolls at a popular local restaurant. The sushi rolls came to us on a conveyer belt, and we simply picked up whichever plate we wanted.

"Oh, how is she?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. She didn't seem too happy when I saw her."

"Oh? What was wrong?" he said, looking at me now as he placed a small piece of sushi into his mouth.

"I don't know. I wanted to ask you how her family life is," I said. Shinsuke answered without the least hesitation. "I think her family is fine, but they are a bit poor."

"You mean financially, right?" I asked. Sometimes things got lost in translation even when speaking in English, and I wanted to be sure of his meaning.

"Yes, that's right. Her father recently had some hard times. Her mother told me that she might have to be late sometimes because her father could not bring her to school on time."

"What about her mother? Why couldn't she bring her?"

"I don't know exactly, but I think it's because she's sick quite often."

"What do you mean? How did you talk to her then?"

"She has to stay in bed at home—mostly," he answered. "She calls me often, asking me how Otsuki is doing."

"That must be very expensive," I said.

"What is very expensive?" he asked.

"The home care—for her illness."

"Yes, I suppose so," he replied. So far, it seemed that he was not the least bit curious about my line of questions—on the outside at least. I decided to wait it out and see if there was any new information to be offered.

There was none. He soon was talking about something else: the school party for one of the teacher who was retiring after the school term was through.

I wanted to make one more stab at getting information.

"Do you ever see her with an old man?" I asked.

"See who?"

"Otsuki," I answered in an almost confrontational voice. I was getting fed up with my quest for information—even if it was unreasonable. The truth was, I wanted him to ask why I was asking about her.

But he didn't take the bait.

"No," he said simply.

"Then why did I see her in the back of a car with an old man at the barber shop yesterday?" I asked. The cat was sure out of the bag that time. His answer was surprising this time: he didn't respond—at all. And that was how I knew that something was very wrong. For the first time, I realized that he was deceiving me.

I was confirmed by this notion when he broached a new subject without any mention of my question.

"Do you like it here in Japan?" he asked.

"Yes, I do. The people are very polite," I said. It was the stock answer—one that seemed to please just about every one whenever I was asked that question.

"Oh that's good, he said."

I gave up, and we moved on to other things. He never once asked me about the questioning nor explained why he did not answer. The next day, I would find out what was happening.

Ryuhei Yamaguchi was a class clown, but I liked the kid. He used to stand in the back of the classroom during my English lessons and pretend to shoot me with a tennis racket—cute kid.

One thing about Ryuhei that I loved was that he always cut to the chase. Whenever there was something going on at the school—say something embarrassing that no one wanted to tell me about, Ryuhei would tell me unabashedly. He hadn't developed what the Japanese call *honne tatemae*—or

what in Japan is used to describe one's inner feelings and outward appearances. He was simply Ryuhei around the clock.

"What do you know about Otsuki," I asked when there were not many students or teachers around.

"She's a nice girl. I like her," he answered.

"Does she have any trouble?" I asked point blank.

"Yes, some guy in the yakuza is crazy about her. He really loves her." The yakuza was the Japanese mafia. They were particularly strong in that area. I was completely stunned. Could it be that bad for her?

"What does she do about that?" I asked.

"She cannot do anything," he said. We were of course speaking in English. Another nice fact about Ryuhei is that he spoke much better than any other student, so if someone did overhear us, it would be discreet.

"She has to do what he says. Her family needs the money," he said. "They owe him money," he said.

Stunned, I continued onto my next question.

"Is she in danger? I mean her life?"

He thought about it for a moment. For him, this seemed to be something normal in life. There was no sense of outrage about Otsuki's situation. It was as if we were talking about video games.

"I think she—"

"Silence," the voice said in clear Japanese.

I turned around, and there was my vice principal. Instantly, I knew that he and everyone else in the school knew about what I had seen at the barber shop. Not only that, but I was pretty sure that Shinsuke had relayed information about our conversation as well.

I didn't say anything as Ryuhei left. I stood there as the vice principal walked in. I bowed, as was the custom. He surveyed me with grave eyes.

"What are you doing?" he asked me.

"I think Otsuki is in danger," I said simply. It was the only thing I could think of.

"You don't know anything. You are a fool," he responded.

"She's in danger, and she's my student," I said. "We have to help her."

"You should leave now and not come back. Never come back here again," he said.

I was completely stunned. Never had I thought he would do that.

"Why?" I asked.

"You are involving yourself in something that is not your business. You should mind your own affairs, but you do not. Instead, you ask rude questions about things that are not your concern."

At one point, I thought the vice principal was ready to strike me, so I left.

When I got to the teacher's room, I saw Shinsuke reading a paper. It was his break time—as it was mine a few minutes before.

"I'm leaving," I told him.

This time, it was his turn to look surprised. "Why?" he asked.

"You know. I've been fired by the vice principal. I was asking too many questions about Otsuki. You know all about it, I'm sure."

"I don't know anything—I swear," he said.

I ignored him while I gathered the few things I had collected at my desk. I learned from my years of teaching English not to store too much junk in the office. This had served me well, and it certainly served me well at that moment.

But before I packed anything else, Ryusuke said, "Please hold on. I will talk to the vice principal and see what is going on."

"Sure," I said without slowing down. The truth was, I was fed up with the whole thing. If this is how it was going to be, it was not something I wanted to be a part of.

He returned about five minutes later—just the time when I had finished packing everything into a large bag that I had stored on the shelf near my desk.

"Derek, I'm sorry. The vice principal has agreed to let you come back." I merely looked at him.

"What's the problem? Don't you want to stay here?"

"No. He fired me."

Without waiting for an answer, I headed for the exit.

"Her mother needs his money to stay alive. She would die without it," he said.

I stopped on the way out, thought about it and kept walking. Me and my "dumb American" attitude kept my pride too high to stay there anymore. Of course, there was nothing I could do to help her. She would ignore or resist any of my attempts to help her directly, and without anyone's cooperation, any other kind of efforts I made would be doomed.

So I left, and I haven't been back since.

I only pray that she was able to find stability in her life at some point.