

Bury Me in a Shallow Grave:

When the Yakuza Come Calling

The history of the yakuza is murky. There are two major types: *tekiya*, who are essentially street merchants and small-time con artists, and *bakuto*, originally gamblers but now including loan sharks, protection money collectors, pimps, and corporate raiders. Almost half of the yakuza are Korean-Japanese, many of them the children of Koreans brought over as forced labor during Japan's colonial period. Another large faction is made up of *dowa*, the former untouchable caste of Japan that handled butchering animals, making leather goods, and doing other "unclean" jobs. Even though the caste system is gone, racism toward *dowa* remains.

There are twenty-two officially recognized yakuza groups in Japan. The big three are the Sumiyoshi-kai, with 12,000 members; the Inagawa-kai, with 10,000 members; and at the top the Yamaguchi-gumi. There are 40,000 members of the Yamaguchi-gumi and more than a hundred subgroups. Each group is required to pay monthly dues, which are funneled to the top of the organization. In essence, every month the Yamaguchi-gumi headquarters takes in (at a conservative estimate) more than \$50 million in private equity. The Yamaguchi-gumi originally began as a loose labor union of dockworkers in Kobe. It began to branch out into industry in the chaos following the Second World War. Japan's National Police Agency estimates that, including the Yamaguchi-gumi, there are 86,000 gangsters in the country's crime syndicates, many times the strength of the U.S. Mafia at its violent peak.

The yakuza are structured as a neofamily. New recruits pledge their

loyalties to the father figure known as the oyabun. Ties are forged through ritual sake exchanges, creating brotherhoods, and those who are in the business world are allowed to become *kigyoshatei*, or corporate brothers. Each organization is usually a pyramid structure.

The modern-day yakuza are innovative entrepreneurs; rather than a bunch of tattooed nine-fingered thugs in white suits wielding samurai swords, a more appropriate metaphor would be “Goldman Sachs with guns.” A 2007 National Police Agency white paper warned that the yakuza have moved into securities trading and infected hundreds of Japan’s listed companies, a “disease that will shake the foundations of the economy.” According to “An Overview of Japanese Police,” an English document by the National Police Agency distributed to foreign police agencies in August 2008, “*Boryokudan (yakuza)* groups pose an enormous threat to civil affairs and corporate transactions. They are also committing a variety of crime to raise funds by invading the legitimate business community and pretending to be engaged in legitimate business deals. They do this either through companies, etc. which they are involved in managing or in cooperation with other companies.”

The yakuza have long occupied an ambiguous position in Japan. Like their Italian cousins, they have deep if murky historical links with the country’s ruling party, in Japan’s case the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Robert Whiting, the author of *Tokyo Underworld*, and other experts point out that the LDP was actually founded with yakuza money. It’s such an open secret that you can buy comic books at 7-Eleven discussing how this happened. Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s grandfather was a member of the Inagawa-kai crime group and heavily tattooed. He served as a cabinet minister and was referred to by his constituents as *Irezumidaijin*—“the tattooed minister.” In the past the yakuza’s reputation for keeping disputes between themselves and not harming the families of other mobsters, or “noncombatants,” protected them from the ire of citizens and the attentions of the police. They were considered a “necessary evil” and a “second police force” that kept the streets of Japan safe from muggers and common thieves. Yet they were still considered outlaws.

That ambiguity was supposed to have ended in 1992, when the government introduced the toughest antimob legislation in a generation, punishment for the excesses of the yakuza during the booming 1980s, when they shifted en masse into real estate and other legitimate businesses. But the state still hasn’t made membership of a criminal organ-

ization illegal or given the police the antimob tools long considered crucial in other countries: wiretapping, plea bargaining, and witness protection.

It seems unlikely that such radical tools to dismantle the yakuza will soon be given to the Japanese police forces. In many ways, the yakuza are stronger than ever despite almost seventeen years since the first laws targeting them went on the books.

The Yamaguchi-gumi has a high-walled central compound in one of the wealthiest parts of Kobe. They own land, and are impossible to drive out. Of course, that's because the yakuza are recognized as legal entities in Japan. They have the same rights as any corporate entity, and their members have the same rights as ordinary citizens. They are fraternal organizations—like the Rotary Club. Even in cases where they do not own the property where they have set up their offices and are simply renters, they are almost impossible to remove. The Nagoya Lawyers' Association advises that many businesses and landlords should insert an "organized crime exclusionary clause" into any contract drawn up, to make it easier to sever ties with yakuza tenants or businesses when the time comes. Nagoya is the home of the Yamaguchi-gumi's leading faction, the Kodo-kai, which has roughly four thousand members.

Problems with organized crime in Nagoya are so extensive that in 2001, the lawyer's association issued a manual of sorts entitled *Organized Crime Front Companies: What They Are and How to Deal with Them*. There are lawyers who specialize in dealing with yakuza.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Police compiled a list in 2006 of roughly one thousand yakuza front companies in greater Tokyo;* about a fifth of them are real estate firms. The most recent list shows further movement into securities, auditing, consulting, and other areas generally associated with the finance world.

A 1998 NPA examination of the front companies of the three major crime groups in Japan listed construction, real estate, finance, bars and restaurants, and management consulting as the top five types of yakuza front companies.

Some police officers in Tokyo use the word "Realtor" as a synonym for yakuza, so strong are the connections. In March 2008, Suruga Cor-

* The Japan Anti-Social Organized Crime Database (JASOC), a private corporate database, as of March 2009, lists more than 2,400 in the Kanto area.

poration (formerly listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange Second Section) was revealed to have paid more than 14 billion yen (\$146 million) to Yamaguchi-gumi and Goto-gumi affiliates over several years to have the yakuza remove tenants from properties it wished to acquire. The scandal that followed resulted in the firm being delisted and again cast light on the tight relationships between the yakuza and the real estate industry.

What is also significant about this incident is that on the Suruga board of directors were a former prosecutor and also a former bureaucrat from the Organized Crime Control Bureau of the National Police Agency. This suggests that the people who are supposed to be policing the yakuza are easily deceived by them or perhaps knowingly working in collusion with them. There certainly exists case after case that suggest that the authorities are unable to contain the yakuza and/or are afraid to even try.

All this simply goes to show that the yakuza are very well aware of how the law protects their rights to live and operate where they wish and they will not easily be removed.

The major gang bosses are well-known celebrities. Bosses from the Sumiyoshi-kai and the Inagawa-kai grant interviews to print publications and television. Politicians are seen having dinner with them. They own talent agencies that the general public knows are yakuza front companies—such as Burning Productions—but that does not stop major Japanese media outlets from working with them. There are fan magazines, comic books, and movies that glamorize the yakuza, who have metastasized into society and operate in plain view in a way unthinkable to American or European observers.

As the yakuza continue to evolve and get into more sophisticated crimes, the police have had a tough time keeping up. The so-called *marubo* cops (organized crime control detectives) are used to dealing with simple cases of extortion and intimidation, not massive stock manipulation or complicated fraud schemes.

The Yamaguchi-gumi have been notoriously uncooperative since Shinobu Tsukasa took power in 2005. The police used to be able to play the various organizations against one another to extract information—the Yamaguchi-gumi would rat on the Sumiyoshi-kai, the Sumiyoshi-kai on the Yamaguchi-gumi, and so on. But now the Yamaguchi-gumi is increasingly the only player in town and it has no reason to cooperate. In fact, the Aichi police, when raiding a Kodo-kai

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office in 2007, were horrified to discover that the faces, family photos, and addresses of the detectives working organized crime were posted on the walls of the yakuza headquarters. The names of all the organized crime detectives of another major police agency in Japan were leaked onto the Internet last year. The yakuza, especially the Yamaguchi-gumi, are not only not afraid of the police anymore, they are saying, essentially, “We know who you are, we know where you live, so be careful.”

A detective from the Osaka Prefectural Police Department concurs. “Since the anti-organized crime laws went on the books in 1992, the numbers of the yakuza have changed very little—hovering around eighty thousand—for sixteen years. They have more money and more power than they ever had before, and the consolidation of the Yamaguchi-gumi has made it a huge force to be reckoned with. In many ways, the Yamaguchi-gumi is the LDP of organized crime, operating on the principal that ‘Power is in numbers.’ It has capital, it has manpower, it has an information network that rivals anything the police have, and it is expanding into every industry where money is to be made.”

In the old days, the yakuza left the general population alone. But that was a long time ago. No one is off limits anymore, not even journalists—or their children.

Like many reporters, I covered the yakuza for quite some time without actually ever dealing with them directly. That changed very quickly when a call came in from Naoya Kaneko, aka “The Cat,” the number two man in the Sumiyoshi-kai for all of Saitama, who left a message with The Face. He wanted to speak to me. This unnerved The Face, and when he passed on the message, he asked nervously, “You’re not in trouble, are you? Why does the Sumiyoshi-kai want to talk to you?”

I told him that I didn’t think I was in trouble and that I had no idea why he wanted to talk to me. I thought to ask Yamamoto how I should proceed, but then I thought twice: he’d probably say to ignore the call or dispatch a senior reporter to go with me. I told The Face I’d handle it.

This was at a time in my life when I was a regular at the Maid Station, ostensibly teaching English after hours to some employees. Maid Station was in the “image health” genre of adult entertainment. The

girls dressed as maids, referred to the customers as “master,” and would bathe you, massage you, and blow you. Five of the girls were planning a holiday to Australia, and their solicitous manager, whom I had known when he drove a cab in Saitama, arranged for them to have private English lessons. I was the teacher.

The club was located in Minami Ginza, in the heart of Sumiyoshikai territory, and I pondered the possible reasons why Kaneko had called. Was I misbehaving on his turf? Maybe he was going to blackmail me? But what for? I was a single guy, and in Saitama during the nineties, going for a “sexual massage” was as Japanese as sushi.

I really didn’t know what to do, but my cop source assured me that Kaneko was not a threat and that it could actually be good for me as a reporter to know him, so I called Kaneko’s office from a public telephone.

The guy who picked up was loud and surly. I identified myself, and there was a long pause while he seemed to be figuring out how to address me. I had to repeat my name seven times. Then the guy spoke to Kaneko. It went something like this: “Hey, there’s this fucking gaijin on the phone, and he says he’s a reporter. Do you know this asshole?”

Kaneko roared at him, “Cover the mouthpiece of that phone, and treat the man with respect. I’ve been waiting for his call.”

I’d expected Kaneko to come off as a raspy, threatening, unintelligible thug, but when he came on the line, his voice had an amazingly smooth finish. He sounded like Ernst Blofeld in *Diamonds Are Forever*. He had what the Japanese call a cat-stroking voice, a kind of purr. “So you’re Jake,” he began. “I apologize for calling you at work. I didn’t know how else to reach you. And please forgive my underlings. They are rude, impolite, and uneducated. Please take no offense.”

“Umm, none taken. What can I do for you?”

“I have an unusual problem. It’s rather sensitive, and I was hoping that you might be able to help me solve it.”

“Well, I’m not really in the habit of solving problems for yakuza.”

“Of course not. I realize that I’m putting you into an awkward position. However, I would very much like to talk to you about this personal matter. I could make it worth your while . . .”

“I’d be happy to talk to you. I just can’t accept anything from you.”

“All right. When would you be available?”

“How about after lunch tomorrow?”

“Good. Thank you. Here is how to find me . . . If you get lost, just ask around. People know where I am.”

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Since I have no sense of direction, I did get lost and had to ask the tout at a “pink salon”* to point me the way to Kaneko’s office. The tout politely drew me a map. He then mentioned that I’d be welcome to come in and sample the salon’s pleasures. Normally foreigners weren’t allowed, but any friend of Kaneko’s was a friend of the establishment. Besides, he added wryly, business was slow in the afternoon.

I declined. I had a job to do.

Located just past a row of sex clubs, a Vietnamese restaurant, and a taxidermist, The Cat’s headquarters looked like a branch office of a small construction firm. There was a company name on the glass door that slid open at my touch. In the reception area, a scary-looking fellow was sitting on a sofa, thumbing through a pornographic magazine. He looked up, stood, and, saying not a word, knocked on the door to an office.

Out stepped Naoya “The Cat” Kaneko. He was about five feet seven, probably in his late fifties. His eyes were narrow, he was a little thin on top, he had a goatee. Dark suit, white shirt, paisley tie, black loafers. Two gold rings on his right hand. He looked more like a politician than the second in command of the Sumiyoshi-kai organized crime group.

We shook hands, and Kaneko motioned for me to sit on one of the three dark brown leather sofas. He sat down opposite me. The scary-looking guy stepped out of the room and came back with two cups of green tea served in lacquer saucers (meant to show respect).

Kaneko sipped his tea, but I let mine sit.

“You don’t want the tea?”

“I’m not a big green tea fan,” I replied, waving my hand.

“How about coffee?”

“Sounds good.”

“Right.” He turned to the scary guy and barked, “Bring him some coffee.”

He seemed relieved when the coffee came and I brought the cup to my lips.

* Otherwise known as blow job parlors; hand jobs are also available. Usually 3,000 yen (\$30) for thirty minutes. You get a cup of coffee in addition to the gratification. There aren’t many of these parlors left in greater Tokyo. According to one magazine that targets women who want to work in the sex industry, there is the occupational risk of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Now we began our formal introduction. Kaneko handed me his *meishi* (business card), which I took with both hands and bowed. I then handed him my card, which he in turn received with both hands and bowed (but not as deeply as I had).

The rituals of *meishi* exchange are well known. This is what I was taught: You hand your card over with one hand to show that you are a lightweight, a nothing, and humble. You take the other man's card with both hands, to show that he is more substantial and weighty than humble you. You lift his card up slightly to eye level, look over the card, and assess your mutual social positions to determine the proper mode of polite speech. You take his card and put it in your card holder if you are both standing. You never fold, spindle, or mutilate the other person's card, which would be a grievous insult. I glanced at his title and the ornate lettering of the card before deftly putting it into my business card container. He likewise looked at the writing on my card, then slipped it into his business card container, which appeared to be made of solid platinum.

We made small talk. He asked me how a foreigner had gotten hired by the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, and I summarized my life in Japan up until that point, including going to school at Sophia University. He listened and we chatted; all seemed unnervingly normal.

"I wish I'd gone to college," he said. "It would have been a different life for me. I could have gone. You're lucky that you had the opportunity."

I acknowledged that and then cleared my throat and got to the point: why had he called me?

"I heard that you're trustworthy and that you're good at what you do."

"Who did you hear this from?"

"That would be telling. Let's just say I've heard good things about you. There's something I need to know, and I think you could find it out. I think you would keep it to yourself too. People say you're like a Japanese, an honorable man."

"That's news to me. You sure you have the right *gaijin*?"

"I'm sure."

It's not often a *yakuza* pays you a compliment. It was probably insincere, but I didn't mind.

So I returned the favor. "Well, I hear that for a *yakuza* you're not a total scumbag. I hear that you're a gentleman and more of a white-collar criminal than a thug. In your line of business, I guess that would mean you're like Mother Teresa."

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He chuckled at that and asked who I knew that knew him. I told him that that would be telling. It was a touché that made him smile.

He offered me a cigarette, which I accepted, which he lit, and which I tried not to inhale. He, on the other hand, lit up and inhaled so deeply that the tobacco sparked, and then he pointed at my cup of tea, sitting untouched.

“You want to ask me why I don’t like green tea?” I asked.

Kaneko laughed. “No, but the story is about tea, actually. You see, a few detectives from the Saitama police force drop in here once or twice a week. I usually offer them a cup of tea, maybe some pastries. We chat; they leave. That’s the usual protocol. But lately, when I put tea out for them, they won’t touch it. They won’t touch anything. They make a point of refusing.”

“That’s a problem?”

“Let me finish. I asked them why they were refusing my small gesture of hospitality, and they said that the word on the police force is that I’m bribing a cop, that I have one of the detectives in my pocket. These guys tell me, ‘If we take anything from you—tea, candy, even a calendar—internal affairs will be all over us.’ So they refuse.”

“Why is that a problem for you?”

“Because now everyone in the organization thinks that the police are just posing. They think that I’m now an informant for the police, that I’ve turned.”

“Because they won’t drink your tea?”

“Exactly. I think the cops really believe that I’m bribing one of them, but the people I work with don’t believe them. They think it’s a police ruse to make me look like I’m *not* an informant. If this keeps up, I’m going to be in serious trouble.”

“What would serious trouble mean in your line of work?”

“It would mean that my own crew and the people I have raised like my children are going to drag me out to the mountains of Chichibu in the middle of the night, shoot me in the head, and bury me in a shallow grave.”

“Ouch. Could it get any worse?”

“Oh, yes. They might make me dig my own grave, beat me to a pulp, and then bury me alive. But I don’t think that will happen. I’ve been around for a long time. I think I’ve earned enough respect to be buried only after I’m completely dead.”

I was about to laugh and looked for some indication that he was

making a joke. Didn't see one. The Cat must have been pretty desperate, calling me.

"Well, who do you have in your pocket?" I had to ask.

"No one. I don't bribe cops. And I'm not a snitch. That's not how I do business. The cops and I have always had a good working relationship, so I have no idea where this shit is coming from." He was hunched over the table now, almost whispering to me. Our noses could have touched. It could have been my first Eskimo kiss with a yakuza.

"So . . ."

"I'd like to know why the Saitama police are so convinced I'm bribing them. I'd like to know the name of the cop I'm supposed to be bribing. If I knew that, I could handle the situation."

I had to think about this for a little while. It took me another cigarette to figure out what to say.

"Well, Kaneko-san, I'm a reporter, not an informant for the yakuza. And to tell the truth, I really don't like doing favors for the yakuza. I do know one person I can talk to. If I decide that there is information that I can pass on to you, I will. I won't make any promises."

"That's all I ask."

"As long as I'm here, can I ask you a question? Not a favor, a question."

"Go ahead. It's the least I can do."

"How do you make money for the organization? The police release these figures that suggest seventy percent of your cash comes from selling speed. It sounds like bullshit to me. Maybe there are thousands of speed freaks in Saitama, but I sure as hell don't see many of them."

"You're correct. I won't go into specifics, but I'll tell you how this enterprise works if you're interested."

"I am."

Kaneko then proceeded to outline his style of organized crime to me. The Sumiyoshi-kai in its heyday had been very active in jacking up land prices for a kickback from the Realtors or the banks. It had also made money by getting tenants out of apartment buildings or houses that would be worth more if sold on the open market, a practice known as *jiage*, or "land-sharking." With tenant laws in Japan being so much in the favor of the tenant, its services were in demand. Or it would deliberately block the public auction of seized property by moving yakuza into the buildings or apartments. Sometimes it would do it on

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behalf of the original owner, so he could buy the property back at a low price. Sometimes it would buy the property itself and sell it to a front company. Waste disposal—illegal waste disposal—was a good source of revenue, and then there was protection money from the sex industry in Omiya.

But the biggest cash cow was extortion. Kaneko put it this way: “You and I are in the same business. You collect information and sell it; so do we. You get paid to put scandalous information in the paper; we get paid to keep that information out of the paper. We’re both in the information industry.”

What Kaneko meant was that the Sumiyoshi-kai would shake down businesses and businessmen that had embarrassing secrets. Or it would sometimes get wind of a company that was struggling financially and approach it with offers to help. It’d strip the company of all remaining assets and real estate, taking the company down after using it for other fraudulent enterprises. Mind you, the struggling company was often a willing participant in the proceedings. The Sumiyoshi-kai would use the company’s real estate to secure loans from midsize banks, which they never paid back. The company would go bankrupt, but it—and the company executive—would have gotten their cut. Finally, when the property was seized and put up for auction, the yakuza would interfere with the process, buy the land and buildings at a low price and sell them off or let a third party buy the property and take a cut of the transaction as a kickback.

The Sumiyoshi-kai also ran several front companies: temporary staffing agencies, loan-sharking operations, even an insurance company. The insurance company was used to generate false claims to rip off real insurance companies. It had a collection agency that recovered bad debts for legitimate consumer-loan companies. It scalped tickets and ran pawnshops trafficking in stolen goods. Of course, it also had a talent agency, which supplied young women to porn producers. The women were paid well. No coercion was involved.

It ran retail shops selling adult goods and teenage girls’ used underwear, which Japanese men are obsessed with. It handled transportation, trucking, shipping, and security for large events. It would get a contract as a construction company and subcontract all the work without doing a thing, except for pocketing the difference between what it paid the subcontractor and what it received.

The fake political organization it had set up not only got a tax break

but was a better venue for shaking down companies. It would get companies to subscribe to the group's newsletter at an exorbitant price, thus collecting hush money in a less obvious fashion.

Kaneko's exegesis on the yakuza economy was brilliant, concise, incisive. In one hour, he laid out the system before me better than anyone else has. When he was done, fulfilling his part of this bargain, I promised to see what I could reasonably find out. As I took my leave, he offered to have his driver take me to my next destination; I chose not to accept.

That night I called my source and repeated everything Kaneko had said to me.

"Very interesting," he said. "I'll personally look into this. My guess is that someone in his own organization is trying to take The Cat down. Ten to one it's a power struggle."

"What does he mean by saying that he has a good working relationship with the cops?"

"Ahh, that. Let me explain. Part of being a yakuza cop is being assigned to Anti-Organized Crime Division 1, which gathers information on the yakuza: How many offices do they have? How many members? Who's in the organization and who's not? For the yakuza cops, the fastest way to get the answers is to go to the yakuza and ask. The Cat is a crafty old guy, so he won't come right out and tell you. He'll just leave the materials lying around the office, and we'll just offhandedly read them while he's on the phone. Sometimes he'll leave them in the garbage can so we can 'steal' them. He never hands them over."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because it's the way things work. He keeps the cops happy so we don't have to find an excuse to raid the office to get the intel we need. It works out well."

"Why don't you just tap his phones?"

"This isn't America, and we aren't the FBI. We couldn't get permission to run a wiretap. It just doesn't happen."

"You don't think he's bribing somebody?"

"If he was, he wouldn't be stupid enough to get caught doing it. He's the smartest yakuza in the organization. I'll find out what's going on and get back to you."

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Two days later, he called me with the goods. The rumor was being spread by one Yoshinori Saito, the number four guy in the Sumiyoshikai. Saito had told one of the detectives in Section 1 that Kaneko was bribing a cop. Saito hadn't named the cop, thus sending the police into a feeding frenzy while they tried to find the mole.

That was on the cop side. On the yakuza side, Kaneko and Saito had long been at odds with each other. Lately, Saito had wanted to sell speed to the convoy of truck drivers who made their way through Saitama, but Kaneko didn't want any part of it. Kaneko's boss, Nakamura, had allegedly been a meth head in his youth, and Kaneko didn't want his boss getting involved in a business that might tempt him to return to bad habits. Saito had deliberately spread the rumor, knowing that it would result, through a certain convoluted logic, in making the organization think The Cat was a police stoolie. Saito didn't have the guts to challenge The Cat himself. He was going to let the organization take care of it.

"So what do you think I should I do with this information?"

"Tell it to Kaneko. As soon as possible."

Reluctantly I agreed to communicate the situation to Kaneko. I called his office and scheduled an appointment for that night.

It was freezing cold, which didn't help because I was already getting the shivers. Besides, yakuza offices are spooky enough in broad daylight. Before I could even knock on the door, Kaneko opened it and gestured me inside. He was wearing jeans and a dark green sweater. He looked like a yachting instructor.

I sat down on the sofa, and this time I drank the tea. I told The Cat everything I knew.

He nodded as I spoke, closing his eyes, fingers spread out on the table. "Thank you. I now understand. I owe you for this," he said.

"Maybe it's not my place to say this," I dared, foolishly, "but rather than having to deal with this crap, why don't you just leave the organization?"

The Cat opened his eyes and took a deep breath. "Look at me. If I dress like this, I look like any other businessman on the train on his day off. But if I roll up my sleeves"—which he then began to do—"that's the end of the pretty picture." From his wrists, extending up his arms as far as I could see, were gaudy, elaborate tattoos. You couldn't see a vestige of bare skin.

“I’m long past forty, and I’ve branded myself for life. I’ve got no education, no diploma. I don’t have social security or health insurance. I have money in the bank, and I have this organization. Where could I go? If I run, the Sumiyoshi-kai will hunt me down and kill me because they’ll think I’ve turned into a dog for the cops. If I stay, I have a chance to survive. It’s not much of a life, but I’m not ready to throw it away. So I’ll deal with this problem.”

I thanked him for the tea and got ready to leave. He put his hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes.

“You’ve saved my life. I don’t forget these things. If there’s anything you need—information, women, money—come talk to me. There are some debts that are never repayable. I’ll owe you until I die.”

“I didn’t really do much.”

“It’s not how much you do that counts, it’s what you get done.”

“Then what I’d like is information. I don’t want it if it has strings attached, though. I don’t ever want to owe a yakuza.”

“That’s not a problem. But I’ll tell you now: I will share information with you on what other yakuza groups are up to, but not our own. Our business remains our business. You can ask questions and I won’t lie to you, but if it involves us I’ll tell you I won’t discuss it. Is that understood?”

“Understood.”

“You sure you don’t need any pussy?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Is it because you like boys?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, then, all right.” He walked me to the door and shook my hand.

Two weeks later the Saitama police were once again drinking green tea at The Cat’s office. I never asked what had happened to Saito; Kaneko and I never discussed the incident again.

From that point, Kaneko and I carried on a very businesslike relationship. I’d drop by for tea every couple of weeks, and I’d always call in advance. He’d give me some leads on a few stories, we’d chat about the predations of yakuza life versus that of reporter life, and then we’d go our separate ways. He’d always try to fix me up with a hot Japanese woman, and I’d always decline.

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Having The Cat on my side was a huge plus as a reporter. Of course, I had reservations about taking his information. I was sure that sooner or later he would lean on me for a favor; but he never did. I also wondered if taking information from a man who was, by his own admission, an antisocial lawbreaker was morally defensible. I suppose that's all part of Informant 101, but still I had qualms. Eventually, I came to understand the lesson that had been taught to me from the beginning: information is neither good nor evil; information is what information is. The people providing the information have their reasons and motives, many of them impure. What matters is the purity of the information, not the person.

Thanks to The Cat, at one point in time, I knew when a gang war was breaking out between yakuza factions before the police did. It helped me stay on the ball. He was the best source a crime reporter could ask for, since it's always better to have one great source than a hundred lousy ones.