

Fri, 2 Nov 2007

7:19 AM

1968

The man sat on a bar stool at the end of the counter, drinking beer. Couples, singles, men, women, came and went. He spoke when spoken to, in short simple sentences that made it clear he was not there to talk.

At about one in the morning he left the bar and walked down towards the river. In the middle of the city as he was, miles of cement and asphalt, with tiny oases of shrubs and small trees, extended in every direction around him, except for the river. Its presence loomed as he approached it.

He sat on an old box of some sort and stared at the water flowing in the river. "The river's flow is ceaseless, and yet the water in the river itself is never the same?" we see the same river but different water in it each time we look at it.

He did not hear the young men come up behind him. Perhaps he had dozed off. In any event, the first thing he knew of it was when the metal pipe hit him on the back. He turned as he fell away from them, and counted three, maybe four, before the second blow, this one to his head. He tried to crawl away, but they were kicking him from every direction. He tried to protect himself, but they pulled him up, holding him exposed, as they punched his face and chest, and kicked him in the genitals.

Hey, he's got money, said one who had discovered his wallet. As he made that exclamation the man vomited, his stomach reacting both to the large amounts of beer which had been consumed and to the incessant kicks it had received. The vomit only increased the violence of his attackers.

One had a knife. In the wild confusion of his mind, in the intense drunken state, the intense fear, the pain, he saw death coming. One of them pulled him up, and another stepped back, winding up what would be a killer punch, while the kid with the knife laughed, flashing at the horror filled expression on the man's face.

In the ultimate throes of desperation, the man jerked free, ran to the river, and jumped in. He let himself sink as far as he could, then swam as far as he could under water. He surfaced as quietly as possible, breathed quickly, and submerged again. During the time his head was exposed he neither saw nor heard anything. In the cold of the water, his mind cleared, and with it came the pain. Several ribs, at least, were fractured. He surfaced again, this time taking time to look back at the place where he had been beaten. They were still there, looking for him, and spotted him soon enough. They cursed, threw whatever was handy,. But he was out of their range. He shivered, and felt a cramp growing in his left foot.

He had no idea what to do next. His clothes pulled at him down, making it difficult for him to float. He was in pain, exhausted, and knew he could not last long. The current had him now, and he drifted away at a faster pace. He saw the place where he had been beaten grow smaller and smaller..

As he floated he tried to remember the name of the town he was in, but couldn't. He tried to remember the state, but that was impossible, too. Slowly he worked his way back towards the bank of the river. Reaching a landing, he crawled up onto it, and lay there for a moment, completely exhausted. Fear would not let him stay, however, and he half-dragged half-walked to what he hoped would be safety, behind some garbage cans. As he passed out, he

wondered if there might be some rats to worry about.

The garbage collectors reported him to the police the next morning, and they, in turn, called an ambulance. He was taken, unconscious, to the hospital. An early morning walker had found and turned in his wallet, which was now missing both the money and the credit cards which had been in it. Enough remained, however, to identify him—his driver's license, travel insurance, employee ID. He was Japanese, an executive in the US on business. The police phoned the Japanese embassy, who merely thanked them for their call. Not interested, it seemed.

"Mr. Saito," the nurse called his name, or what she assumed was his name, when she saw his eyes flutter. He opened them briefly, and tried to say something. Unfortunately his lips were too badly swollen. Both his eyes were black. He had bruises over most of his body. It was still impossible to know the extent of the internal damage, but four ribs had been set, and cuts and scrapes had been cleaned and bandaged.

"Mr. Saito?" the nurse called again. This time he opened his eyes. "Good morning. Konnichi wa." His eyes registered recognition, his mouth tried to make a smile.

"Are you Mr. Saito? Kiyo-ichi Saito?" She said the name slowly, unsure of how to pronounce it. He nodded, and as he did seemed to come to the realization that he was in the hospital. She reached over and took his hand. "You're going to be ok," she said, wondering how much English he understood. "Arigato," he replied, then closed his eyes.

He remembered his wife and children, and suddenly felt overwhelmed with loneliness. He tried to move, but discovered a tube in his arm, a strap to hold it steady, a foot in some sort of sling. It was then that the pain struck. He grimaced. The nurse watched, became worried, pushed the call button, and summoned the doctor.

Kiyo-ichi Saito. Forty-two years old. Graduate of the University of Kyoto, where he had majored in English literature. In the US for several weeks, on a business trip. It was his first trip to the US, and it had not been easy. Beside the business there was little to occupy him during his trip. He was traveling alone, and soon took to the hotel/motel bars as an after-work source of diversion. But he had trouble understanding the bar tenders, so only ordered beer—one bottle or mug after another. It became routine. Meetings with prospective clients during the day, drinking alone in hotel bars at night. The longer it continued, the less confidence he had. He wanted to go home, but was only halfway through his trip. Now—who knew what would happen?

He tried to turn to see where he was, but the pain in his neck was just too strong. Instead, he let out a cry of pain. It shocked him, because it came from a place—a part of the body—that he was not familiar with.

At that moment the doctor came in. She looked at him, said hello, with a very serious smile, and did a quick check of his vital signs and figures regarding his present condition. He explained to Saito how the

