

You See Me Now?

The line of cars outside the entrance to the Mukoshima Outlet Park and Gardens complex, a short drive from downtown Osaka, stretched back a good 300 meters, and was steadily building in length. Only two hours after opening, the car parks were already filled to capacity on a bitterly cold Sunday morning, and there was a steady freezing rain beating down to compound the misery. Many of those trapped inside their vehicles, despite the advantages of heaters on full settings and hot beverages, were beginning to question their decision to venture out to this mother of all retail opportunities on a Bank Holiday weekend. For the guard men and women working feverishly to direct this winding, snake-like stream of vehicles into parking areas and individual spots, it was fast becoming a logistical nightmare. Even though he was dressed in the long, quilted coat and poorly fitting cap provided by the company, Shigeo, one of the oldest members of this small army of dedicated wand wavers, was feeling the effects of the sub-zero temperature more than most. At 68 years of age, his old bones and arthritic extremities did not favor such continued exposure to the elements, and despite an extra pair of socks and some cheap, discount store gloves, he was suffering badly.

Shigeo had been an employee of the company, 'Minoru Security and Services', for coming on ten years. A decade of monotony and bitter regret. He'd been in the game long enough to know that on days like today the fluid movement of vehicles, and the wellbeing of their drivers and passengers, was of the utmost importance. He and his colleagues would need to be on the top of their game. However, he also knew that on this particular day he definitely had his work cut out. The majority of his team were rookies. High school and university students drafted in from a temp agency to deal with the holiday rush who, it was quickly becoming apparent, did not have a clue how to give directions or manage a free-flowing traffic situation. They had been

complaining about the cold, and whining like babies for the past two hours, and when they weren't sneaking off for a crafty cigarette break, raiding the drinks machine for can coffees, or mock fencing with their wands, they simply stood around with their hands in their pockets looking miserable. One or two of them appeared to have taken in some of the information handed out at the pre-shift briefing, and were make a reasonable fist of it, but the rest just didn't seem to give a damn. Shigeo had to concede that this was going to work out to be one tough day, and he would need his years of experience to keep this wobbly train on the tracks.

Jeez, it was times like this when he had to question what the hell he was doing. No, what he had DONE, to deserve such a pitiful existence. It was enough to make a man cry. For Shigeo had not always led the life of a top wand operative. He had not always spent hours pointing people in the right direction and taking verbal abuse when they did not agree with his decisions. He had not always worked interminably long shifts for a pittance, and returned home from his labors each day with no recollection of anything interesting or essential that had happened over the preceding hours. Nor had he always felt that what he was doing was insignificant or hopelessly unrewarding. Because Shigeo had been somebody once. Shigeo had mattered.

From the tender age of 18 to an unwelcome and forced redundancy at the age of 58, Shigeo had steadily worked his way up, the admittedly short, career ladder of 'Nakagawa Fixtures & Fittings', a medium-sized company in the Tennoji area of Osaka specializing in the outfitting of premises connected to the entertainment industry. These premises included such garishly decorated establishments as karaoke boxes, hostess bars, love hotels, and the occasional small-screened porno-movie palace, which had meant his coming into contact with some of the more nefarious characters in the Osaka nightlife scene. Though initially not especially inclined towards frequenting such places himself, with each step further up the promotional staircase,

moving eventually from lowly fitter to head of sales, he found himself more often than not taking meetings on-site and out of hours, and with people who demanded he partake of the pleasures their lifestyle afforded.

Despite being a married man with a couple of kids back at home, over time it became almost impossible for Shigeo to separate his working and social lives, and almost to the degree that every temptation placed in front of him needed to be succumbed to as a necessary evil for the good of the company. And Shigeo was a loyal and faithful company man. Truth be told, the older he got, the less concerned he became. And the less concerned he became, the more he managed to justify his actions to himself. The drinking into the wee small hours, the playful fumbblings in the bars with mini-skirted young ladies, the gambling and lying and cheating. All just work. His wife, though, at home night after night alone with his children and a household to maintain, was not quite so accepting.

Noriko began her married life infused with much the same idealism and optimism of many a young bride, and in the early years she worked, scrimped, and saved alongside her husband, a fun, very attentive, and extremely hardworking Shigeo. His salary back then was relatively low, but she worked a couple of jobs herself to help maintain a comfortable home life for both of them. In those early days, they rarely ventured out of their tiny apartment at night, content to sit together sipping on beers and watching TV, more often than not falling asleep together on their small discount store sofa. Little by little though, they had accrued enough through careful saving for the deposit on a loan for a tidy, wee terraced property on the eastern outskirts of Osaka City. Not quite a palace but it was all theirs. Then when the first of their two children came along, Noriko gave up working to build an even stronger life for them all, in their humble refuge and love-filled abode. Somewhere Shigeo could return to at the end of his long working

day, and where she and the children, present and future, would be waiting. A real family, united and bonded together as a unit.

For a long time they rumbled along like so many of their peers, enjoying the boom years of the Japanese 'bubble' economy in the 1980s, with Shigeo's company's order books filled to the brim to cater for the increasing demand for places that over-worked salaried staff could pour into at the end of their shifts, keen to let off a little steam. The willing and industrious Shigeo soon caught the eye of his bosses with his visible work ethic, and over a relatively short space of time was rewarded with pay rises, bonuses and promotions. But this meant far longer hours and a good deal more time away from home. Noriko knew he believed he was doing his best for the family, but the nights became lonelier and their lives more and more separate. And once their two kids had flown the coop, it had reached a point where they barely interacted at all, rather sadly becoming more a marriage of convenience than true love. And then the bubble burst.

In 2009, after struggling along for years following a general bottoming out of the Japanese economy, along with a subsequent decline in the corporate entertainment industry, Nakagawa Fixtures & Fittings took its last breath and shut up shop for good. Poor management, dire accounting practices and the lack of vision required to reform and update the business contributed overwhelmingly to its death, and proved to be more than the dedicated workforce could overcome, despite their best efforts. Redundancy payments were miniscule by industry standards, and as it turned out, the pension pot had been plundered surreptitiously by the unscrupulous owners over the course of several years, leaving Shigeo and his colleagues with little more than some company stationery and their name cards as mementoes. The Japanese

economic miracle came to an abrupt halt for Shigeo on the day NF & F closed for business, and at 58 there was no new version on the horizon.

It was also the final nail in the coffin of his marriage to Noriko. Faced with the prospect of Shigeo brooding over his misfortune at home every day, not to mention the devastating financial impact on their lives, she activated a plan long in the making and left the family home for good. As guardian of the domestic finances for decades, she had managed to divert enough of their income into savings over that time to help her set up a new life away from her spouse. Though Shigeo came to view this as nothing less than treachery, Noriko felt not the slightest tinge of guilt, seeing it rather as a just payment for all the days and nights she had struggled alone to maintain their home, bring up their children, and suffer the humiliation of her husband's indiscretions and self-indulgent behavior. Unlike Shigeo, she did not feel the need to remain a loyal employee. And she most certainly believed that was how he saw her. Within weeks, she had filed for a 'silver divorce', packed her bags and set off for Tokyo to be close to her son and daughter and their families. There she knew she would be most welcome. Sadly, Shigeo would not. And there was worse to come.

Shigeo soon found that he was woefully unprepared for life as a single man. Nearly every aspect of his existence had been catered for by his wife, and he seemed to have to face a new and daunting challenge on an almost daily basis: cooking, washing clothes, grocery shopping, paying bills. The list was endless. And on top of everything, he missed his wife. He really missed her. Night after night he sat alone in the empty house, knocking back cheap beers and sake, gorging himself on junk food, crying the salty tears of self-pity, repeatedly pressing the button on his flip-top cellphone that speed dialed her number, only to be met with the "this number is no longer in operation" response. For the first time in his life he actually felt

completely and totally alone, desperate, a brooding and overwhelming tide of regret washing over him, housebound and in the dark. And worst of all, completely broke. The laughable amount he received in unemployment benefit, barely covered the cost of food and living essentials, and as the divorce demanded a splitting of the marital assets, he soon found the family home needed to revert back to being a simple building once more, or perhaps a new home for a new family. Dark days for the 'King of Sales'. But even at one's lowest ebb, there are glimmers of hope, and Shigeo caught a break. A chance meeting with an old acquaintance from the Tennoji days, who had heard of the misfortunes surrounding those caught up in the N F & F debacle, led to a job offer. If he could put aside his pride and more readily accept his new situation, he could get regular work and, more importantly, a place to lay his head. And he grabbed it with both hands, starting at rock bottom as a security guard with 'Minoru Security & Services', a subsidiary of a large construction company. Minimum wage, no overtime, uniform and dormitory room provided. The late Autumn of his life maybe still had a little color left in it. And ten years later he was still treading water in exactly the same place.

Now, as he stood in the rain, on his 68th birthday of all days, soaked through and an hour away from any kind of break, he started to ponder over, as he had become increasingly wont to do of late, what might have been. 68 years old and reduced to this pathetic state. No wife, no family, no friends, surrounded by idiots. It was his birthday for chrissakes and he hadn't received so much as a phone call or text, let alone a card or small present. Nobody knew and nobody cared. For ten years it had been the same. Every day. Solo drinker. Sad old bastard. Mr. Invisible. Really. What was the point.

Over to his left, several of the young guys were starting to drift off towards the main building, presumably to get out of the rain. But they were in mid-shift and really needed to get these cars moving. Shigeo yelled over to their retreating backs,

“Hey, lads. Where you going? You can’t just sneak off. Get yer arses back here!”

The boy at the back turned around, and to the laughter of his friends, flipped Shigeo a middle finger, before running to catch up to his pals and head inside. Shigeo shook his head and brought his hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose between two fingers. Humiliated and utterly defeated by the blatant rudeness of the act, the disrespect itself so casual, he couldn’t lift his head to face anyone for fear he would burst into tears and disgrace himself. And then the loud and insistent blaring of a car horn directly ahead shook him out of it. Jerking his head up, he could see the front fender of the car was actually just inches from his shins. And then the horn blasted again, even longer and more ferocious this time. Wide-eyed, Shigeo stared point blank at the driver of the vehicle, whose face was contorted in rage, soundless words spilling out of his mouth and directed at the hapless guard. To his right sat a woman, most likely his wife, who was obviously preoccupied with texting something on her over-sized smartphone. Both were around the same age as Shigeo, smartly dressed, safe, warm and dry in their vehicle. A large, black sedan. An immaculately detailed older version of the Toyota Crown. The very same make, model and color of car that Shigeo had had the pleasure of driving while working for N F & F. A car that had he had taken the most immense pride in owning and driving. A car that represented everything that was right and good about his former life. And at that moment, something burst in Shigeo’s brain and he snapped. Raising his wand hand high, he scrambled up onto the hood of the car, and screaming and yelling an unintelligible stream of invective, with a determination born out of years of suppressed rage, began to slam the orange-colored

baton down again and again and again onto the shiny hood. Not remotely finished, he staggered to a standing position, before jumping as high as his tired old legs would allow him and stamping down hard onto the metal covering Once. Twice. Watching it crumple underfoot each time. On the third attempt, however, the rain-slicked surface chose to curtail his theatrics and he skidded off to one side, almost cartwheeling his way to the ground. And there he lay, gazing skyward, as the man and his wife exited their broken vehicle, and joined by one or two other curious motorists, made a tentative approach. Looking down, all they could see was a rather disheveled old man, flat on his back, blubbering through tears of laughter, perhaps even pain, over and over, the same manic mantra,

“You see me now?” You see me now?” “You see me now?”