



Buddhas Without Connections

Tokyo crime reporter **Jake Adelstein** stumbles into an unsettling shadowland when he investigates the mysterious deaths of a couple virtually no one can recall.

I RECENTLY HAD MY PALM READ, for a lark. It was part of an event at a boutique hotel—wine, cheese, and a palm reader. The woman seemed pleasant enough, maybe early forties, with black curly hair, long red skirt, leather jacket over a purple blouse, and an Egyptian ankh dangling from her neck on a black silk rope.

We made small talk as she took my hand and concentrated on my palm, lightly pushing it with a thin finger. Then she said something a little odd: “You have a square in the mount of Mercury. You will lead and have led an exciting life shadowed by fatality wherever you have been and will go.”

“Couldn’t I get a slightly cheerier reading?” I quipped, and she laughed. I pretended I had to meet someone and was late, and left.

I don’t need someone to tell me that life involves fatality. I’m familiar with that little Buddhist adage on why we are mortal:

“The cause of death is birth.” Besides, as a crime reporter, death is part of my business.

For many, the coming of spring is symbolic of birth, rebirth, vitality. For me, it’s a reminder that a lot of people are going to start dying, and that I’ll be busy.

People are a little less active in the fall and winter—the cold slows them down, cools down tempers, bodies don’t rot quickly, the odor doesn’t give away their secrets. But in spring and summer, what has been laying dormant begins to stink, and what’s killed rots quickly. Temperatures and tempers rise, anger flares in sync with sunspots. Hot tempers lead to fatal mistakes, impulsive murders, rapes, arsons, lethal assaults. Hasty attempts to cover up crimes don’t go so well. The missing are uncovered and their deaths known much faster.

As a reporter, I didn’t dread the summer. Deaths make good

stories. They're always tragic, and there are plenty to choose from. But in Japan, it's not enough to find a tragic event to write about, there has to be something special about it. And, sadly, sometimes a tragedy is just a plain tragedy.

Covering the Fourth District of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, there was enough crime and sleaze just in the notorious red light district of Kabukicho alone to keep me busy. But I had to cover a wide area and a lot of police stations. The Totsuka Police station was one of them.

On a weekend in July, the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Akutagawa were found in their apartment. He was sixty-two and she was

As background information, the detective working the case told me the couple not only had outstanding loans on their condominium apartment, but likely had a significantly large consumer debt as well, and probably had borrowed from loan sharks.

They'd drunk poison. The husband had boiled a pack of cigarettes, either Peace or Hope brand, in some alcohol and water. There is enough nicotine in a pack of smokes to kill you if you distill and drink it. She'd died first and he'd died shortly afterward. I gathered that death had been quick. Painless or not, I didn't know.

The assistant chief told me, "He was a faithful salary man that had gone through

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fifty-nine. It looked like what the Japanese call a *murishinju*. In medieval times, *shinju* meant the suicide pact between lovers, or even a whole family. *Muri* means unreasonable. Together, the term refers to a murder-suicide in which one person kills a loved one and then himself or herself. My boss asked me to see whether I could get a human interest story out of it.

I went to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Akutagawa before going to the Totsuka police station. The door was slightly open, so I could see into the place. Their apartment was filthy, totally covered in trash. Newspapers, magazines, clothes were randomly strewn about and a TV was on the floor. The neighbors had stuck close to ten notices on the door asking the couple to clear the hallway and the area in front of their apartment. Empty plastic ramen bowls were stacked outside the door; the postbox was filled with bills.

At the police station, they didn't have much to tell me, but one cop broke protocol and showed me photos of the pair. One was a crime scene photo in which a towel had been placed over Mrs. Akutagawa's face. There were no signs that she had put up a fight at the time of her death.

company restructuring, and had just started at a new job, then that didn't work out. It happens like that. A guy gets put in a situation where, even when living a relatively simple life, he can't save enough to repay loans, and this eventually leads to suicide becoming an apparent solution to the problem. It is evident that the guy was not skilled in money matters. Gambling was most likely involved."

"You can call it double suicide," he said, "but if he killed his wife without her consent, it's murder. He should be prosecuted for it accordingly, with all facts investigated and necessary paperwork submitted."

The cops do this in Japan a lot; they file papers on dead perpetrators. Just because you're dead doesn't mean the wheels of justice stop turning.

I tried to flesh out a story by finding people who knew Mr. Akutagawa, but no one did. I had gotten a photo of him from the police. I thought that would be helpful. It wasn't. He was practically invisible. He had been temporarily employed at a construction company in the Shinagawa Ward of Tokyo. If he had any friend, or even acquaintance, in the area, no such individual could be found.

“I didn’t have a personal relationship with the man, though he had seemed a bit strange,” the woman managing their apartment complex said. “I didn’t notice any indications of ruckus related to debt collection.” When told that he may have had a heavy loan burden, she said, “It could be true. It does seem that he enjoyed pachinko and gambling, but I just really can’t say for sure. We’re not supposed to speak about that in public or to the media, even if it was true.”

Another resident, a middle-aged woman working part-time, said: “We were living in the same apartment building, but I never got to know him. I may have met him before, but I can’t place his face. Since I’ve moved into this complex, I haven’t gotten acquainted much with those living around me. Yesterday, I was told that someone else, the wife of the person living in Room 201, had died. I thought it must have been a double suicide, but it wasn’t. She just killed herself. It probably would have been helpful if she had someone to confide in, but it seems that she had no one she could talk to.”

Questioning the owner of a pub next door resulted in: “I am not familiar with the man. If he was a customer, I would most likely recognize his name.”

On the first floor of the complex was a beauty salon, but questioning was not possible due to Tuesday being the salon’s off day. An attempt to gain further clues from speaking with someone in the salon was set for the following day, as was a visit with the elderly woman working at the nearby ramen shop, which I hoped would give me something to go on. I came back the next day. No luck.

It’s amazing to me that people can live in an apartment complex right next to each other for years and not know each other at all, not even in passing. This was the case with the Akutagawa family. They had no friends; they had no social life or interaction with the neighbors. Mr. Akutagawa lost his job, they ran out of money, and they made a suicide pact. A lot of Japanese people hate to ask others for help—even close friends.

That was the whole story. All they could tell me at Mr. Akutagawa’s former company

was that he worked hard and didn’t talk much. Work was slow, they had to let people go and Mr. Akutagawa wasn’t young or fast or particularly good at building. So they laid him off. He’d only been working there a few weeks.

I went back to the Totsuka police station and asked them whether they had found anything else about the husband and wife or the circumstances leading up to the suicide. The detective showed me the note he had left behind; it was addressed to no one—they didn’t have any children.

The note said simply: “Don’t worry about us. We’ve been dead for a long time. Sorry, we didn’t clean up before we left. We didn’t have the energy.”

Very Japanese, very apologetic.

The police had found some very nasty letters in the Akutagawas’ mailbox from a loan company backed by the Yamaguchi-gumi, Japan’s largest *yakuza*, or crime syndicate. Debt collectors had shown up at his workplace. He was apparently being threatened and harassed at regular intervals. Still, the suicide couldn’t really be blamed on the loan sharks, the detective told me, at least not in a criminal justice sense.

I asked when and where the funeral would be held, but the police said no one had claimed the bodies. They were *muenbotoke*, literally “buddhas without connections.” There was no one to mourn for them. There was no one who would miss them, pine for them. At least not in Tokyo. There would be an ad put in the paper, and if no one came forward, the cremated ashes would be taken to a temple on the outskirts of the megalopolis.

The detective asked whether I could write something in the paper, but I didn’t have enough for a story. I told him as much. He nodded.

I asked him where the temple was and he told me. I checked back with him two weeks later. The ashes had been moved there. I took a cab to the temple, and the priest showed me where they housed the ashes. There were about three stories of urns in the pagoda dedicated to the *muenbotoke*. On one floor there were the ashes of children and infants—who’d had loved ones. Someone had stuck a photo of one child onto his urn. A cute kid, little round face with big lips, fuzzy eyebrows, and wearing a navy blue Hanshin Tigers baseball cap.

The priest took me to where the ashes of Mr. and Mrs. Akutagawa were stored. I lit a stick of incense, put my hands together, mumbled the only Buddhist prayer I could remember and left.

By now, the ashes of the Akutagawas have probably been evicted or displaced by the ashes of other *muenbotoke*. This happens. When family members don’t pay the upkeep fees on gravestones and burial plots in Japan, the remains are moved and new tenants are sought. Even the dead can only rent in Tokyo.

I think I’ll still visit the temple this summer anyway and pay my respects to the Akutagawas before even the memory of their memory is gone. It seems like the least I can do. Everybody needs someone to mourn them. I hope that when my time comes, there’s someone who will do the same for me. I can’t tell you why that’s even important to me, but it is. ♦