

the highest number of votes, although the four corporate councilmen represented little more than 10 percent of the legislature.

In every city where a large company maintained a factory or a large corporate office, they funded and promoted a candidate for city council. And with the kind of support that the companies were able to offer, the company candidates almost always won.

THE PRESIDENT SPEAKS

By February, Nizumi had a surplus of ten thousand products waiting to be sold. That's an inventory of about \$60 million. We gasped when Uno told us about this at the next department meeting. Then he announced that all paid overtime work would be cut. (As usual, there was no mention at all of service overtime.) He read aloud from the company newsletter an article with the headline: "The Tightest Condition since the Establishment of the Company, Now Is the Time for the Trial!" This summarized the president's speech at the annual management meeting, the purpose of which was to talk about the current crisis. The president said both labor and management must gain "a common recognition of the surrounding conditions, economic situation, and the present status and future of Nizumi to establish confidence between labor and management."

It was not a comforting speech. Domestic and export sales had plummeted. Demand for product by Toyota was way down. Government-funded construction had been greatly reduced, which meant Nizumi's profits would also fall. Projections for the coming year were also grim. The president ended his

Let's work hard!



speech on a dismal note: "Even if we implement every possible countermeasure, we must prepare for the worst situation we have ever seen." The union newsletter printed the president's speech along with these illustrations.

COMPETITION BETWEEN DIVISIONS

Meanwhile, I became eager to spread some of the technology I had developed to other departments in the company. The method I had devised to automate CAD part creation dramatically sped up the design process, and I thought it would be of use to the Design Division. Erberto's boss, Oda, was a lively fellow who showed tremendous enthusiasm for his work. According to Erberto, when technical problems arose, he always encouraged his engineers to find ways to adopt new technology. On top of that, he was also a smart engineer who had won an industry award for his patent on part of the drivetrain. If I could convince Oda to work with me on a project perhaps my ideas might spread throughout the company.

My only connection to Oda was through Erberto, so I decided to pay him a visit. I walked to the entrance of his section and bent down to untie my shoes. I could never slip them on and off as the Japanese did. They had a technique by which they could take off their shoes without untying them, but I always had to kneel down and fiddle with my shoe laces.

While I was fumbling with my shoes, Takagi passed and gave me a smile.

Takagi had an interesting story. She had been an office lady, but one day her boss (Nishida, Erberto's first boss) noticed that she was good with numbers. Since he was short of staff, he decided to train Takagi as an engineer. She learned quickly. She became so skilled that many of the college-educated engineers would approach her with their problems. Once during a company trip, I asked a young engineer from whom he had learned his computer skills. "Ms. Takagi," he said, "We all go to her for computer help." Occasionally I had asked her questions myself, and she had always known the right answers. Once Takagi had solved a tough engineering problem that had stumped several professional high-level engineers, and Nishida had showered her with accolades. She was simply outstanding. Now she sat behind the computer using finite element analysis to determine the strength of materials for advanced product design.

Working as an engineer set Takagi apart from the rest of the office ladies. She stayed at the company until late at night while the other office ladies left

for home at five. She worked on engineering problems while the others carried out menial tasks. She spoke in a deeper voice than the others: directly, without giggling. Her new job, however, still retained elements of her old one. She was dressed as an office lady, in a skirt and vest rather than dressing casually like the other women engineers.

I asked Erberto to see if Oda was interested in working on a project with me. Erberto was happy to do so, since by using my technology, everyone could save time. He felt hopeful that Oda would want to work with me, since it was generally felt that Oda dealt with people too directly and was too critical of their work. "So he really likes foreigners," said Erberto. "They have the same mind-set." Japanese managers were often more passive and indirect in their relationships, so although Oda was known to be an excellent engineer, he didn't get along with many of the managers at the company.

While I waited to hear from Erberto, I approached my own boss, Higuchi. He was relaxing in his chair, looking out of the window, with his hands folded on his stomach. It was a clear, sunny day and Higuchi was staring through the window at the mountain. The heavy winds blew a stream of snow from the top of the mountain, and this plume was white against the bright blue sky.

Without turning to me, Higuchi said, "Did you know it's very dangerous to fly near that mountain? Once a jet flew too close to the top, and it was caught in the wind surrounding the mountain and crashed."

I expressed my sympathies for the deceased. There was an awkward silence while I tried to think of a natural way to turn to the topic of interest to me, but I couldn't find it. So I just blurted out: "I'd like to work with Oda and show him the new technology."

Higuchi looked worried. "Those design engineers never listen to my advice. Whenever I have anything new to tell them, they've always been too busy to listen." I told him if the technology was successful that I wouldn't mind starting our own CAD group within the section. Higuchi seemed even more upset with this suggestion. "The problem is if you work on one of their projects, they will ask you to work on another, and another, and then you will be too busy to do our work." I promised him that wouldn't happen, but he continued to resist. I was eventually able to convince him to let me give a simple demonstration of the technology to the Design Section.

Although Higuchi allowed me to meet with Oda, he continued to be negative about working with Oda's group. I wondered why there was all this fuss

about what seemed to be a harmless project. I turned to the ever-ready Shiina for answers. He said that the managers in the Design and Research Division did not get along. "Once I worked on a project with the Design Department and Uno found out and got very angry with me," he said. "In a meeting with my group, he pointed his finger at me and yelled, 'Don't you ever work with the Design Department again!' Since then, if it's necessary to work with them, I just do it secretly."

According to Shiina, the conflict started in the mid 1980s when the *gikan* decided that the company needed a separate research department. Previously, research and design existed as one department. When many top engineers were recruited from the design sections, funding became a serious issue, and the research team established itself as an "elite" group. As a result, the two groups spent much time and energy vying for power instead of spending time improving the technology. Communication between the sections practically ceased.

The *gikan* was an extremely powerful manager who provided the company with a technical "vision." The technology he developed had made him a nationally known engineer and industrial leader. His accomplishments were so significant that he received a Blue Ribbon medal from the Japanese government at the Imperial Palace. At Nizumi, he ruled with total authority, making all the major decisions and ordering his subordinates to carry them out without question. The *gikan* was instrumental in Nizumi's success, but when he had retired, it had created a power vacuum, and the design and research directors had intensified their competition for power.

Shiina warned me, "Don't try to build bridges between the two groups." He seemed to think I was casting myself into the role of the troublemaker again, but I was convinced that things would run smoothly. I arranged a meeting with Oda, Erberto, and other engineers from the section. I demonstrated the technology to them, and Oda said, "That's really wonderful, Mehri san." Oda became so excited he immediately conferred with Kurata. The plan was for me to write a program that could be used to design the part. When it was complete, I would have another meeting with Oda and his engineers, and then we would talk about the next step.

It took a couple of weeks to develop the technology, and when I made the presentation, Oda again showed incredible interest. He said, "That's great!" and "You are so smart, Mehri san."

After the demonstration, Chen, who was one of Oda's favorites, said that

Oda wanted me to join his group. I was flattered, but told him that I wasn't interested, for I had come to like working with Higuchi. Later on, when I talked with Oda about the project again, his plans were vague. I didn't hear from him for several days, and every time I approached him to hold a design meeting, Oda evaded the subject. Finally, I realized that Shiina had been right, after all: you had to choose a division, you could not be in both.

THE CLEVER THIEF

It was the afternoon break, and I was taking my usual stroll with Erberto and Chen on company grounds. I had rolled down my sleeves and folded my arms on my chest in an attempt to fend off the cold. I'd been working with Oda that week, and I felt increasingly uneasy, so I asked Chen about his boss. Chen was not shy about sharing his own frustrations with Oda and his group. For one thing, he was fed up with the barriers to shared information within his work group.

Chen said, "Anytime my colleagues want information, they never come directly to me, they always go to Oda first—even if it's someone in my own group."

The hierarchy required employees to consult with the superior in charge when obtaining technical information or while working on joint projects. In my case, any time an engineer from another section or division needed me to provide them with technical expertise, they always had to talk with Higuchi first. What was odd was that even members of Chen's own group had to contact Oda before talking to Chen.

Chen's field, tribology, was multidisciplinary, so he often had to interact with many engineers from different sections rather than just working with his group. Consequently, Chen often felt isolated. If Shiina had not made his disastrous mistake on returning from America (asking his old boss and not his new one about publishing a technical paper) and if there had not been a power struggle between upper management, Shiina and a few other engineers would all have been working with Chen, which would have made everyone happier. As it was, Chen was constantly frustrated in his attempt to get necessary information from other groups.

I asked, "Why do you think they're so secretive?"

Chen said, "Perhaps it has something to do with Japanese society as a

whole. It's all about groups, and if they give information to an outsider, they're afraid it will somehow damage their group."

Erberto and I exchanged wry smiles. We had been similarly frustrated, and we'd thought it was because as Westerners we'd been used to an environment with a much freer flow of information. Since Chen was Chinese, we'd thought he'd been having an easier time at Nizumi, but now he seemed just as frustrated as we were.

Chen went on with his grievances—chief among them, Oda.

"He's such a bully!" interjected Erberto. "When we don't have the right answers to technical questions, he just yells at us, saying we're stupid."

"So why do you always laugh during meetings?" I asked. "It seems like your group is having such fun."

Chen smiled, his pudgy face bulging at the sides. "It's because we're afraid," he said. "When Oda tells a joke, we all feel we must laugh along with him."

After this, I made a point to observe them more closely, and it was true: their laughter was both forced and flat.

"At least Oda's smart," I said now, as we rounded the corner of our building. Oda was known to be innovative and inventive, and he had just won an award from the Japan Society of Automotive Engineers for his contribution to the industry. "Isn't his name on a patent for a drivetrain?"

Chen shook his head in disgust. According to Chen, Oda had actually obtained the idea for the drivetrain while in conversation with an engineer at a conference in Europe. The company that had come up with the idea had patented it in the 1950s but had ignored it ever since. Oda learned that the patent had expired, so he went to the patent office to obtain a copy. He brought it back to the company, developed it further, then obtained a Japanese patent.

"How did you discover this?" I asked Chen.

"At a meeting. The company that had originally patented the technology came to Nizumi to ask if they could license the patent. They didn't know that they themselves had developed the technology many years ago, so Oda told them. You should have seen their faces! They were in shock."

I had to smile imagining that moment. Then we all went back to work.

That afternoon, Yasui, one of Oda's subordinates, appeared at my computer with a problem. He showed me his work, and I was absolutely amazed at how much he had progressed since our last meeting. Yasui had remembered and applied every step I had told him.

I remembered what Erberto had once told me, "The Japanese are data col-

lectors with an incredible memories—but they don't think. They're like computers: you just input the data and they spit it back out at you."

Yasui asked for further information, but I was evasive and said I was busy with another project. After what I had just heard, I didn't want Oda to get hold of everything I was working on. But Yasui was persistent. He approached me the following day to show me a very specific problem with his program. Then he brought mine up and began comparing the two.

I was surprised, since I hadn't given him a copy of my program. Nor had he asked for it. He had just gone into my directory and copied my files without my permission. Abruptly, I got up and found Higuchi. I said I was very unhappy at how Oda was handling the project—sending Yasui over to steal and copy my work.

Higuchi was confused. "Why is that a problem? It's a good way for Yasui to learn."

Now I was confused. I returned to my desk and asked the ever-accommodating Shiina for an explanation. Shiina said, "One thing you have to understand is that in Asia there is very little understanding of confidentiality or of individual rights as related to original ideas. Most ideas are associated with a group, and if you do not claim them as your own, then they belong to the group."

I shook my head, bewildered.

Shiina continued. "But you're right to watch out for Oda. He's notorious for stealing other people's ideas. A lot of people think he's a great engineer, and there's no doubt that he is highly skilled, but he's not world class because he has moved up in the company mostly by stealing technology."

"From who?"

"Mostly from parts manufacturers but also from other Nizumi engineers. I think he may even steal at night when there's no one around." He waved his hand across our section.

I was appalled. "If he steals from engineers at the company—what do they do?"

"Usually nothing—because it wouldn't make any difference. Oda's most useful trait is he's able to produce results very quickly for the top managers, so they like him and don't care what he does."

"But how about the parts suppliers?" I asked in dismay. "Won't they refuse to sell to the company if he keeps stealing from them?"

"They don't trust him, but if he guarantees that they can sell parts to the company, then they don't really mind. He's good for their sales reports."

After my discussion with Shiina, I thought about my interaction with Oda over the weeks and realized I had been conned from the very beginning. Oda had tried to get me to join his group, but when I rejected this idea, he had told Yasui to learn the technology so Oda could claim it as his own. In the meantime, Oda had made sure that I remained compliant and happy by flattering me in front of management.

The technology could not have been patented, and I understood that any of my innovations at the company would be shared. What bothered me was the deception.

Shiina suggested that in order for others to know that I had developed the technology, I should write a report about my work and circulate it around the office. This struck me as a good idea, so I wrote the report for my own protection.

BRAINSTORMING AND MINING FOR NEW IDEAS

Soon after I finished working with Oda's group, Abe asked to "borrow" me for one of his projects. Uno wasn't happy about it, but he had no choice. Abe outranked him.

I was assigned to work with a young engineer named Suzuki. He had no experience in this field, so he was very grateful to have me join his group. When we first met, he bowed deeply and said, "Onegai shimasu." This translates literally as, "Please do me a favor," but it really means "Thank you very much."

We engaged in friendly conversation, and I learned about his background. His father had worked at a Japanese trading company in Tanzania, and as a child, Suzuki had lived in Africa for three years. To this day, he missed Africa—the beautiful countryside, the kindness of the Tanzanians, the easy-going life. He asked if I liked my life in Japan. I said I did. He was incredulous. "Really? Life here isn't so great. The city is crowded, the air is polluted, and the cost of living is so high."

By now I felt much the same way, but I always said I liked living in Japan—it was the *tatemaie* reply.

I was excited to be working on this new project with Suzuki. It involved designing a device to reduce the aerodynamic drag of the vehicle. The aerodynamic drag is the amount of force pushing against a vehicle in the opposite direction to which the car is moving. Reducing the drag results in better

gas mileage. Although drag reducers existed in the industry, Nizumi had never designed one, so we would have to start from scratch (or so I thought).

For inspiration, I consulted my fluid mechanics textbook. I thought about the basic physics of the design problem and worked out some equations. After a few days, I approached Higuchi with my ideas. (Although this was Abe's project, since Higuchi was my boss, I had to go to him.) Higuchi looked at me askance and demanded, "How do you know this? We've never designed a drag-reducer before."

Now I was confused. Hadn't he expected me to use my engineering education and experience to develop a creative design? No, he had not. The next day I discovered the approach he preferred. Suzuki walked into the office with a large cardboard poster showing pictures of all of the drag-reducing products currently used in the industry. He'd gotten these pictures from industry magazines. Higuchi got very excited and studied each one, while Suzuki looked on proudly. It was an excellent display; the color photographs revealed every detail of the products. We discussed the merits of some specific designs, then Higuchi told us to create CAD models and analyze them using computational fluid dynamics (CFD) software on all of them so we could compare them and see which was best.

Many companies were using CFD as a way to simulate the physics of fluid flow on products to improve efficiency before building prototypes. For example, if you were to design the outer shell of an automobile, you would analyze the shape to ensure that the drag was low. A car that is boxy has a higher drag than a car that has many smooth curves. In the past, engineers had to rely entirely on wind tunnels to measure the drag. This process was very costly because it required building many prototypes. With the increase of computer power, the model could be tested using CAD models to investigate its shape before building a prototype for the wind tunnel. This process dramatically reduced costs and an added benefit was that we could see the airflow around the model using 3D graphical displays to pinpoint exactly where problems occurred.

The process of comparing designs is commonly referred to as benchmarking. Benchmarking was the topic of the next department meeting. Uno announced we would benchmark a European competitor's product, which was rumored to incorporate the most advanced technology in the industry. Erberto was thrilled at the prospect. After the meeting, he insisted I accompany him on a walk while he talked about various design possibilities. He often asked me to escort him at times like this, when he paced and thought aloud and illustrated his ideas with his hands. On these occasions, I learned

much about automobile design, for Erberto's passion for car engineering far surpassed my own, and he would discuss every detail with utter fascination. As a child, I had been intrigued by how things were put together, but as an adult I was more excited by computer technology.

When we entered the chop shop later that day, my mouth dropped. Enormous effort had been expended in displaying how the European design compared with the Nizumi's and other competitor's similar products. Large, excruciatingly detailed charts filled the walls, comparing efficiency, gas mileage, and other indicators. All the relevant parts had been cut up and placed on a table for us to examine. Each part was compared with the corresponding parts of the competition's products. The benchmark was so thorough that there was even a comparison of the number of bolts used to put the products together. All parts on display were documented and filed on the intranet so that any engineer in the company could have access to the information at any time. Erberto and I were amazed.

At Nizumi, benchmarking was a crucial part of the design process. During design meetings, each engineer was required to show the main design parameters for the optimal design of the product. For example, if product efficiency was the main criterion, the chart would be a spreadsheet consisting of the design parameters in the columns and the manufacturer's design of that parameter in the rows, with each cell containing the numerical efficiency. Each design parameter was graded according to efficiency, cost, and ease of manufacture. From this information, a preliminary prototype was produced, and after further investigation, the final prototype made. Then the engineers would improve the design in the technical lab or on the computer by tweaking various design parameters and adding new technology when needed. After further testing, the part was then manufactured.

Benchmarking was used at all levels of product development: in research and development, in product design, and in market analysis. It was not necessarily used to copy other products but was thought to speed up the design process. Analysis of and experiment on an existing product was the basic approach to designing a new one. There were several technicians at the company, such as Hiram, whose only job was to take apart the competitor's products, test them, and write up the results for engineers.

Abe was planning a brainstorming meeting for the new drag reducer Nizumi would produce. I spent many days thinking of the basic physics of the product and engaging in analysis. When the day came, Abe called on each of us to present our new product designs. I was surprised when all the other

engineers brought in designs of products that had already been developed or manufactured by other companies. Suzuki and another engineer showed a design that came from a company's brochure. When my turn came, I presented some novel ideas based on my analysis alone. My proposals were not as clever as some of the others, but they were certainly more original.

After my recent experience when I had designed something from scratch, thereby shocking Higuchi, I should not have been surprised when the other engineers took me to task for doing it now. Their approach to problem solving was completely different from mine. They had been educated to engage in an inductive process, while as an American-educated engineer, I had been trained to use deduction. Deductive reasoning and abstract ideas were crucial to who I was as a Westerner. Engineers at Nizumi, however, had to rely on previously documented engineering results when they set about creating a new design.

It occurred to me that the inductive process, along with the authoritarian hierarchy and a disinclination to engage in debate, was one reason why Nizumi was rarely innovative. When it came to the details of a design, the Japanese were brilliant, but when it came to creativity, they were disappointing. Several Japanese engineers themselves agreed that they were "good at manufacturing products but terrible at innovation."

Although genuinely new ideas were rare at the company, management policies theoretically rewarded innovation, and we were often pressured to produce patent submissions. Uno talked about the heat he was receiving from Abe, who was pressing for more submissions from our section. He intended to use these to evaluate us as workers. A bitter look came to Higuchi's face, and the excitable Takanashi jumped up and started arguing with Uno. Takanashi was unique in that he did not fear speaking his mind. On and on he went, cheeks flushing as he jabbered one confusing remark after the next. But I understood his drift. His work was to develop computer code, so he would never be submitting a patent, and he didn't want this to hurt his evaluation.

Suzuki asked me one day if I had submitted any patents. I told him I had been too busy working on my computer programs, but he told me it didn't have to take much time. He reached into a folder and showed me one of his patent submissions. He said he had plucked the idea for it off the internet.

As we buddied up and talked more about company matters he asked me how I got along with Higuchi.

"He's a nice guy," I said. This was true. I genuinely liked Higuchi, although he wasn't ambitious or adventurous. He just wanted to do his job, get paid, and go home.

"My boss and I don't get along," Suzuki said. "Watanabe is truly a good person but he is not very patient." I had sensed there was something amiss with Suzuki. There were times when he did not show up to work on time or was absent. Once while preparing data for a meeting, he came to me and said, "I must leave the company early, I am feeling sick." This happened quite often, and since I didn't understand the severity of his problems, I complained to Higuchi because I had been left to prepare for the meetings on my own. Another time when Suzuki was getting ready to go abroad with his boss, I asked Higuchi why Suzuki seemed so anxious. "It's the first time that Suzuki has ever gone abroad," Higuchi said. I knew this was not the true reason for Suzuki's anxiety. His problems began when he'd been transferred from the electronics to the mechanical engineering department. He worked at a job in which he had received little training and, under the new company policies of judging employees according to their performance, he was not doing well.

The next day, I discussed the issue of patents with Higuchi. He said that the company required each engineer to submit three patents a year, but most of the submissions weren't any good. "You, Mehri san, don't have to submit anything," he told me, "but if you do submit a patent, just make sure it is viable. Hiramama once submitted a patent for a vehicle that had two dimensions. It was long while it was being driven, but it could become smaller when it was time to park." He laughed loudly, tilting back in his chair so his stomach rubbed against the edge of his desk. "That was really stupid," he gasped between bursts of laughter. His hilarity was infectious, and soon we were all laughing with him, even those who hadn't heard what he had said.

One thing which surprised and pleased me at Nizumi was everybody's eagerness to embrace new technology. Management always urged us to incorporate the latest technology in the drivetrain product. Although Abe was a high-level manager, he actively researched the new technologies. His primary sources of information were Western consulting firms, American and European universities, and technical conferences. Western consulting firms helped Abe decide which technologies to develop, and he handed this information to his subordinates, who determined whether the technology was viable for the manufacturing process. It was as if learning new technology was the duty of every Nizumi engineer, and the organization supported this attitude for fear that the competition would gain market share. This forward-looking policy, however, did not apply to all departments—as witness the notorious casting plant.

"FLOWERS IN THE SHOP"

One day, Erberto came to my desk and told me that Takagi was quitting the company. We were not surprised. Although she had worked as an engineer for nine years, since she had started work as an office lady and had no university training, it was unlikely that she was properly compensated. Perhaps that was why she still dressed like an office lady. Company gossip was that she wanted to move back to the small village where she had been raised to take care of her aging parents. In Japan, children have an obligation to look after their elderly parents, so this may have been the case. But no one really knew the truth. Takagi may have just been leaving an unrewarding situation.

I had always been fascinated by Takagi's unique position at the company, so I asked Higuchi what he thought of her. "She's a hard worker," he said. "I heard that although she always had to work late, she qualified for technical diplomas in a variety of fields. She must be very smart."

Takagi came by to say good-bye to those she had worked with. Her office lady colleagues bought her a bouquet of roses, and a group picture was taken in which they surrounded Takagi and her flowers. Later that day, Oda took her and the engineering group out to a farewell drinking party where her teammates gave nostalgic speeches about working with Takagi.²³

Company literature at Nizumi revealed interesting gender distinctions. The newsletter included a regular section titled "Becoming a Working Person." This was a short question and answer write-up of both women and men of the company. In one newsletter, the three women questioned responded to the mandate "Introduce Yourself" by saying "I look shy but I am really courageous," "I look like a man, but I am really a woman," and "I am cheerful and merry." The two men queried responded with "I am a sportsman" and "I am striving to be a responsible person." They were all asked: What would you like to experience as a member of society? In response, one woman discussed her love for the piano and said she wanted to "touch many people's hearts through music." Another woman responded that she in-

²³ Current research has revealed how Japanese companies effectively coerce women to leave their positions. The policy exists as an unwritten rule. An office lady is expected to quit the company at about age of twenty-five to marry a company man. "One example was the custom for a clerical-track woman to leave the company upon marrying a fellow banker," writes Yuko Ogasawara in her study of the office ladies at Tozai Bank. When she asked the office ladies whether it was a company rule to marry young and quit work, they responded that it was "expected" behavior. See Yuko Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 33.

tended to show gratitude to her parents who had taken care of her until she was an adult. The responses of the men were quite different. One man said, "I have learned from my *senpai* that my purpose in life is to be a wonderful and responsible person." The other man said, "I would like to receive various certificates for business and challenge myself to do many things at the company." The male answers were significantly more goal-oriented and concerned with their long-term position at the company. These responses are not surprising since most women were not expected to stay long at the company and hence were more inclined to seek personal fulfillment elsewhere, often as a good wife, mother, and daughter.²⁴

I had observed the role of women at the office ever since starting work at Nizumi, and I had noticed that some women with engineering degrees were not assigned jobs commensurate with their credentials. What about the women who worked in the factory? Were they working up to their potential?

The safety newsletter featured a kimono-clad factory-worker in a temple with her hands in prayer position. It read "Welcome all freshman, at the beginning of the year we are all praying for no accidents."



²⁴ Mary Brinton provides quantitative data to show the severity of sex segregation at large Japanese companies such as Nizumi. See Mary Brinton, *Women and the Economic Miracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 156.

Women in the line, of course, neither wore kimonos to work nor spent their days praying in temple. What was their life really like?

Suzuki and I took a trip to the factory. On the way, I saw a petite young woman driving a large truck. She had a ponytail that hung down from under a baseball cap onto a soiled one-piece company overall. Suzuki said that female factory workers were increasing in numbers because "women in Japan are becoming stronger." I thought the more likely reason was the high cost of living in Japan. As in America, one breadwinner per family was no longer enough. We arrived at the factory, and we looked at a few parts. I saw a couple of women working on the line, and they seemed to be doing much the same kind of work as the men.

The newsletters reveal that these women have a double mandate. They are supposed to do the job as well as men (except in a few jobs requiring great physical strength), and they are also supposed to display their femininity. An

The Women's Group

Material Handling Division
Sachiko Sawa



I want to be a cool woman with a special skill.
Although the work is for men, I am a strong-minded woman and I am very proud of my work. ♥

A message from her boss:
Ms. Sawa is like a flower in the shop and works very hard everyday to resolve quality problems.

example is the article from the Women's Group that appeared in the safety magazine.

In another newsletter story, a female factory worker is described as "a very good worker because she uses her sensitivity to solve work-related problems." The newsletter often praises women workers—and patronizes them—by concentrating on their innate feminine characteristics rather than on their work skills.

Women in the factory have to overcome the stigma of working in a traditionally male environment. In one article, a new recruit writes, "When I first started working here, although I did not know, I was called 'monkey,' but I now have learned how to deal with it." At first she had trouble with the physical work and often used the transceiver to call for help. "Now I am able to carry a pipe wrench, which is two-thirds of my height." She says she still gets dirty on the factory line, but "those who think I am no longer a woman are very wrong. In fact, I take care of my skin with cream."

The monthly company newsletter always included an article about an employee who worked on the line. Among all the issues I received, only a few featured a woman worker. One was about a woman who worked in the materials department. She had trouble with some of the physical demands. "Regardless of having the knowledge about my job, sometimes there are situations where I do not have the power to lift heavy material," she said. Luckily, "everyone works in a very friendly atmosphere. For example, if there is a heavy part that I cannot lift, a male employee will carry it for me." Many women factory workers need occasional assistance because they do not possess a man's body, a recurrent theme in the newsletter. To me, the emphasis of this problem in the newsletter implies management belief in the inherent weakness of women. The stories are designed to make one wonder whether or not women should be working on the line at all.

All the stories about female factory workers reveal the same pattern: low self-esteem, problems with heavy work, and difficulties in engaging in the "process" of work. Being teased or called "monkey," and being "scolded by my boss" are elements of on-the-job-training that indicate the difficulty of working in a basically male environment. Some women factory workers feel the need to apologize for being female. They try to be "cool" women (attractive and popular) as opposed to "strong" women (brash and aggressive). In contrast, in the same series of articles, male employees talk about their work with confidence and assume that they will be productive long-term Nizumi employees. They do not worry about being cool.

I wondered about the impact of the women workers on the male employees and whether the women were treated with respect. I asked Suzuki about it. Suzuki seemed more sensitive and less overtly manly than the other men. He was tall and lanky with a skinny face, and he did not speak in a deep voice the way so many Japanese men did.

Suzuki said, "Sexual harassment is a big problem at Japanese companies. Recently, our own Human Resources Department opened a hotline where women can discuss sexual harassment issues in confidence. If a man sexually harasses a woman, he is given a warning. If he does it again, he is fired."

When I first started working at Nizumi, the Mitsubishi sex scandal in Normal, Illinois, was making headlines in America. In 1996 a group of women working on the line at the Mitsubishi plant filed a lawsuit against the company for lack of regard to protect their rights against sexual harassment. My friends from back home had to tell me all about it, because Japanese media initially did not consider it to be important. Shiina said that in Japan, human rights are not thought to be of major importance.

Still, the union at Nizumi was interested in learning about the extent of the problem, and it distributed a questionnaire to all union members, publishing the results in the union newsletter. An act of harassment in the office was defined as a male employee staring at or touching a woman, or hanging up nude pictures in the office. The results showed that 75 percent of the women and 62 percent of the men surveyed said they knew of someone who had experienced sexual harassment. In response to the question "Have you experienced sexual harassment?" 52 percent of the women and 17 percent of the men said yes. While most of the harassment incidents involved rude jokes and sexually oriented questions, a quarter involved being touched, and 4 percent of the women said they had been forced to have sex with a superior.

The questionnaire asked, "After experiencing sexual harassment, with whom did you consult?" Virtually none of the workers consulted with the union; most replied that they spoke about harassment only to their close friends. The union exhorted victims of sexual harassment to contact the union and stressed the importance of saying "no" when sexual harassment occurs. The article maintained that men in a high position engage in sexual harassment because of their "need to use power. Many women can't protest because their harasser may be highly placed at the company." The responses to the questionnaire reveal that occasionally a woman cannot get a raise or a promotion unless she has sex with her boss.

ON THE EDGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

As we worked on the drag reducer together, I got to know Suzuki and gain his trust. Soon the young engineer was telling me his problems. Before he spoke, he always said, "Please do not tell others." I assured him he could talk to me in confidence. He said he was receiving help from the Mental Health Clinic because he was having troubles with his boss, Watanabe, who showed little interest in developing Suzuki's engineering skills. Suzuki had been trained as an electronics engineer, so he knew little about mechanical engineering. He had tremendous difficulty getting up to speed with the basics because of his failing relationship with Watanabe, who should have functioned as his mentor. (Indeed, I had to do most of the work Suzuki should have done.) Frustrated and depressed, Suzuki claimed his boss spent too much time criticizing him and not enough time teaching him.

The plan proposed by the doctors was that Suzuki would continue to see them and, if necessary, have counseling with Watanabe to discuss their problems together. "Watanabe's boss thinks this is a good idea," Suzuki continued. "They will not move me to another group unless my condition worsens or I indicate that I want to kill myself." I was naturally taken aback by this mention of suicide, which seemed rather extreme as a response to office politics.

Maintaining mental health among the employees was an important management issue at Nizumi. The Department of Health and Safety distributed a brochure to all workers titled "Relax Go Go." It said that the theme of the month was to "relax." There were many ways to relax, it said. "Watching videos and seeing the seven weeds of autumn will allow your mind to heal." The brochure said that the best videos were those that showed scenes of ocean life, for "the movement of the waves makes humans feel comfortable, and the blue ocean has a calming effect on our minds." The "seven weeds of autumn" were defined as "objects of appreciation" that could be found in the temples, gardens, and flower parks in the ancient cities of Japan. The brochure ended with an exhortation—"Let's forget our busy life and relax our mind to find the seven weeds of autumn."

I don't know whether Suzuki found the seven weeds of autumn, but his situation continued to deteriorate. They moved his desk to our section so he could experience a change in environment. Some of the men introduced themselves to him, and he felt fairly comfortable. Shortly afterward, however,

he moved back to his earlier section because he thought he might get along better with Watanabe, now that Abe and Human Resources personnel had spoken to him. But Suzuki was wrong, and he kept on being bullied. One day, he pulled me out to the hall and told me, as he had several times before, that he was going to take the rest of the day off to rest. By now, Suzuki had lost a lot of weight and had developed a terrible twitch in his left eye.

As in all design projects at Nizumi, designing the drag reducer involved analyzing many different existing options. Once we obtained the benchmark results, we used the information to create a set of new designs, which we narrowed down to a few possibilities. At this point, Suzuki contacted Abe, and we all sat down for a discussion. One good thing about working at Nizumi was that an engineer could always talk with a superior right away about engineering results. Abe asked Suzuki for the CAD pictures of the designs and the aerodynamic simulation results using the CFD software. He placed them on the table in the order of best to worst.

Looking at each design in detail, Abe sighed. He turned at me and said, "It's too bad that the winner is our chief competitor." I was amazed at his frankness. Abe said to me, "Take this data and think of a better design. Don't talk to Higuchi about it—do it on your own."

Naturally, I was thrilled to be given this task. He wanted to tap into my creative ability, which my American training had fostered, and I was ready for the challenge.

Alas, Suzuki had not made as good an impression with Abe as I had. Abe had expected Suzuki to be conducting most of the analyses, but he hadn't been educated to do so, and Watanabe had never offered to train him.

Suzuki's problem highlighted a number of important issues at Nizumi. When engineers entered the company, they were relatively ignorant. I once befriended a young engineer while we worked on a project. He felt embarrassed because he was fumbling with the technology. He explained that the reason he lacked good engineering skills was that he had not studied in college. I was surprised because all engineering students in America have to work hard to get through their programs. I asked my young friend what he had done during his four years in college instead of studying. "I played tennis and mahjong," he said. He claimed it was typical of college students to live a relaxed and pleasant life. What surprised me further was that he was a graduate of Keio University, one of Japan's top universities.

I turned to Erberto and Shiina, who had each experienced university systems in both Japan and the West. They both said that Japanese universities

offered terrible training for engineers. Shiina said, "In Japan there is little discussion and no debate at all. A student is supposed to learn by memorization alone. You don't ask questions, and you are supposed to applaud and be grateful to your superiors."

I asked, "If you don't ask questions, how can you learn?"

Shiina laughed. "You are supposed to learn by absorption through your skin."

Nonetheless, college life was so congenial that "most students don't want to graduate early or even on time. They want to stay in school as long as possible. It's not unusual for a student to take six years to graduate. I once had a classmate who wanted to stay in school another year. He decided to flunk all his courses, so he went into his exams, signed his name and turned the exams into the professors without writing a thing—but they passed him."

"What? They passed him?"

"Yeah. The school doesn't want students to stay around too long. They needed to get rid of him." I was flabbergasted. Shiina had also graduated from a high-level university, one of the best in Japan. I thought his example was probably extreme, but it showed that you could get your degree without being qualified in your field. Therefore, it was especially important to have a healthy relationship with your mentor at your company, the person who could actually teach you how to do your job.

It was obvious why Japanese college students wanted to stay in school as long as they could. What kind of life did they have when they left and got a job? Twelve-hour workdays with an hour commute in the morning and an hour commute at night—and little chance of a break for the rest of their lives. Life was hard at a Japanese company.

THE PURPOSE OF TECHNICAL MEETINGS

One day, Watanabe called a group of us together to discuss the drag reducer. He brought in the analysis information that Suzuki and I had worked on. A design manager contributed extremely detailed drawings showing exactly how the product should be designed. An engineer from the industrial design group brought in his own set of drawings.

It was Watanabe's project, so he directed the meeting and spoke first, presenting the analysis information. Then the design manager took the floor and we discussed his drawings. A technician remarked that a design would

be difficult to include because of noise problems. Other engineers wanted a feature that would benefit the customer, while the design guys wanted to make the vehicle more efficient. The meeting went on and on as we discussed in minute detail every aspect of the product—while continually making comparisons to competitor products.

Watanabe took out a chart showing the number of vehicles that would include the drag reducer and the number that would not. He held up another detailed chart, comparing the drag reducer with all the other products Nizumi made. Both charts were incredibly beautiful, with neatly drawn, detailed illustrations of the drag reducer.

Finally, Watanabe pointed to pictures on the chart and said, "O.K., let's try this one, that one, and this one." I was glad we were finally getting somewhere.

Toward the end of the meeting, a design engineer asked me to do a calculation to decide an optimal radius for the product. He showed me a 2D drawing and said, "We're thinking of changing the radius 0.5 mm." He pointed to a picture of a competitor drag reducer product and said, "We think maybe this radius is best, but we're not sure."

In fact, changing the radius of our project a mere 0.5 mm would have little affect on the aerodynamic drag. I thought he was nuts, but I was working with Japanese engineers, and I was no longer surprised when they got bogged down in minutiae while overlooking basic physics. Instead of trying to demonstrate why the calculation was not worth pursuing, I decided to take the middle ground. I said, "Look, I'll check out this 0.5 mm change, but modeling it in 3D is going to take too much time. What if we do it in 2D?" He agreed. My many months of working with Higuchi had taught me not to argue with superiors, especially if our basic methodology diverged.



Uno's technical meetings were as tedious as ever. All members of the section were required to attend, and I hated having to drag my body to a two-hour meeting that was almost entirely useless. Week after week, our meetings followed the same pattern—a young engineer would make a presentation, then Uno and his close subordinates (Scarface, Shiga, and Jimbo) would mock his mistakes in the hopes of shaming him to become a better engineer. It was very Japanese to use embarrassment as a management tool. What should have been an amiable conversation about technical issues always became a personal assault.

I sometimes wondered why I myself was never bullied at one of Uno's meetings. Was it due to my excellent job performance? I finally learned that it was related to the hierarchy and to Uno's insecurity about being younger than most of the managers one level below him. Most of them had once been his superiors, so to exert his present authority, now he mocked their underlings. But my boss, Higuchi, was younger than Uno and therefore posed no threat, so I was not harassed.

Hiraga, however, did pose a threat to Uno. Once when he had just returned from a conference in America, he reported on what he had seen of the latest technology. During his presentation, he seemed a bit confused about which technique had enhanced which vehicle. Uno interrupted Hiraga's presentation to point this out, and they argued back and forth. Hiraga stood his ground and rebutted whatever Uno said. Back and forth it went without cease. I was amazed at how long the argument lasted—I timed it at exactly one hour. It surprised me to see a junior manager arguing heatedly with his boss, and I wondered whether it would aid or hurt Hiraga's position at Nizumi.

When I returned to my computer to get back to work, I noticed that Hiram was now sitting all alone at his section. The other unproductive employee had been moved away from Hiram. I asked Kume what he thought about Hiram and he said, "I feel sorry for him." I sat down at my computer but I could not keep Hiram off my mind. That day, a young technician from an outside group came to me for advice about computer simulation. I told him what had happened to Hiram and pointed him out, all alone in a sea of desks. The young technician got up, walked over, and had a good look at Hiram. Upon his return, he just smiled and said, "It's the Japanese way."

HOW MANAGERS ARE CHOSEN

The day for the end-of-year promotions and rotations was announced, and I asked Higuchi what would happen.

"There will be some shifting around in the company but not much in our section," he said. Managers were sometimes shifted around when their skills were needed in another department.

I asked, "How is one selected to become a manager?"

"The selection process is decided from above, and at Nizumi, like at all

Japanese companies, it is done behind closed doors. These meetings are not like engineering meetings which are open to everyone responsible."

"Who chooses the section managers?"

"The company directors. And after they are chosen, the section managers are given almost complete freedom to run their sections. If they do good work they will continue to move up in the company."

Higuchi was becoming impatient with my questioning, but I was able to squeeze in one more question about how employees are notified that they will be promoted to a managerial position.

Higuchi said, "After the decision has been made, the employee will usually be told a few months in advance so he can prepare." If he is being shifted to another group or section, he has to finish his project and write a final report, and if he is sent to another city, he has to find an apartment as well. Higuchi continued, "But he is told not to tell anyone else in the company so as not to create confusion and jealousy among his co-workers."

"By the way," he said, "a new engineer from Germany will be entering our section. He's a graduate of the Tokyo Institute of Technology."

I was pleased to hear this, as diversity always made life at work more interesting.

Higuchi's prediction proved correct—only one engineer was shifted to another position. Baba was being sent to Toyota, to work on engineering projects that were important for both firms. In addition, a few engineers were promoted. After the meeting, we all returned to our desks, and I asked Shiina about his own position. After he returned from America, Shiina's work at Nizumi had suffered, which was not surprising since he was basically working on his own in a company (and a country) where working in groups was the norm. Shiina was disappointed that a number of people of his age were being promoted while he remained static. He knew it was because he wasn't part of a group.

END-OF-YEAR DRINKING PARTIES

Naturally, a good-bye party was held for Baba, who was being sent to a Toyota research lab in another part of Japan. He would probably be gone from Nizumi two or three years and he would be working two hundred miles away. If an employee had to relocate, his family typically remained behind, so Baba

would have to live far from his home during the week. This living arrangement is called *tanshin funin*. Baba might be able to visit his family on weekends, but this was by no means guaranteed.

Baba had worked on a project in Hiraga's group for more than two years. He'd had no formal training for this kind of work, and as a result his progress had been nil. I had often seen him at the computer, scratching his head in frustration, and he had sometimes come to me for advice on the most basic concepts. Fortunately, he'd been reassigned to a project for which he was prepared, but at the cost of exile from his home.

During the party, each of us made a good-bye speech. When it was Hiraga's turn, he recalled meeting Baba and working with him. He ended by saying (rather cruelly, I thought), "If you stay away from your daughter too long, she will forget you." Mochida, who was sitting near me, turned to a few of us and said, "His wife will forget him, too." He gave a cynical laugh. "One day, he will travel all that distance to be with his wife, and he will find her making love to another guy!" The men laughed, but soon became somber. They knew that one day they too could be sent away, far from their wives and children.

Abe suddenly entered the party, holding a big silver bowl full of sake. It was so large that he carried it carefully with both hands to make sure it wouldn't spill. He made a good luck speech, took a swig from the bowl, and passed it on. Each of us took a swig and passed it to the next person, but suddenly, Sawa, a manager from another section in our division, grabbed the bowl and upended it. In one breath, he drank all the remaining sake. His face flushed red, and he mumbled unintelligibly. Then he sat beside Uno, who was not at all friendly to him. Although Sawa had behaved like a boor, I was surprised to see Uno being so rude. I asked Kurasawa about it. Apparently Uno and Sawa were rivals, and it was very likely that in the future they would battle each other to head the division.



Shortly after the good-bye party, Hans, the German, arrived on the scene. He started work on April Fool's day, two years to the day after my own arrival. Hans was mild mannered and obedient—certainly in comparison to a "trouble-maker" like me! He had been working at a university in Japan and had been introduced to the company by his boss, a famous professor who had a

close connection to the company. Hans was assigned to Hiraga's group, and Hiraga organized a welcoming party, which occurred in a more timely manner than mine had. I was curious as to what kind of relationship they would have. Hans seemed to be a very serious engineer, and the match up with casual Old Droopy Eyes, as Hiraga was sometimes called, might not work out well.

When I arrived at the party, Dr. Zombie told me I was late. "But by only five minutes," I replied. Things were a bit awkward, because it turned out that Hans did not drink—not a drop. They thought it was strange that he abstained, and some thought he must be allergic to alcohol, as some Japanese are. Others thought he might be a former drinker and be judgmental about what we drank. Nevertheless, the party soon became lively.

We all took turns introducing ourselves in a jocular manner. Laughter erupted from one part of the room or another, as the men interrupted the speakers to tease them. Then the party organizer popped a video into the karaoke machine. I took the opportunity to tease Dr. Zombie about his liking the song called "Diana." I warbled words from the song—"I'm so young and you're so old." He gave one of his wonderful, robust laughs. It filled the room with festivity. I had come to realize that Dr. Zombie could sometimes be very convivial. Then it was my turn to speak. I said a few words, and then Dr. Zombie began asking me about my love life (of course).

"Tell us about your girlfriend," he said

"Ask one of my colleagues," I responded, "They know more about it than I do."

"Tell us what you like about living in Japan."

"Kaiten sushi," I responded. Laughter filled the room. The boys found my liking for *kaiten sushi* to be hilarious, for these are budget restaurants.

"What about your private life, what have you been doing?"

"Climbing mountains," I said. "In fact I saw you on top of Mount Yakone a few months ago." It was true. Dr. Zombie and Hiraga attended an English language school, and they had gone on a group excursion with the class. Dr. Zombie and Hiraga were apparently good friends and liked studying English together.

Hiraga burst into song, imitating Tony Bennett's version of "I left my heart in San Francisco."

An unknown man from the party next door suddenly shouted "Ahhh oooooh." This was immediately followed by the thud of a falling body. More

screams from the party next door, which had reached a sort of festive rage, clapping and singing. Our group was not the only rowdy one that night.

When Hiraga finished his song, he remarked that the company was *katai* (tough). Perhaps there had been some repercussions from that hour-long argument he had had with Uno.

After a little while, Hiraga asked if anyone wanted to go to a "snack bar." "I know a place filled with pretty Filipino women," he said, blowing smoke out from his nostrils, as he sometimes did. Until now, I had rejected such offers, but I thought it might be interesting, so this time I went with a handful of others.

The "snack bar" was located on a quaint side street. As we approached, Dr. Zombie reminisced about frequenting it as a young man. His wiry hair swung in the strong breeze, so it looked as if Bozo the Clown had walked into a hurricane. Then we walked in. The manager was an older woman wearing a flamboyant, purplish robe and sparkles on her face. Christmas tree lights and tinsel hung on the upper corners of the walls. The place reminded me of some of the old blues joints I frequented while living in New York City. I looked around for the pretty women, but they weren't there—not that night, at least.

Soon, Dr. Zombie was singing his favorite song. One of the men bought a bottle of *shōchū*, a potato-based liquor with such a strong punch that it is undrinkable unless mixed with tea or juice. We talked and laughed and drank for hours more.

I walked home through the winding streets, intoxicated and exhausted. Passing trucks coated my sweaty body with soot from their exhaust. It was late April, and the cherry trees would soon blossom.

THIRD YEAR

CHALLENGE LEAVE

When I arrived at work the next day, Suzuki and I had to go to the technical center to look at the prototype that was being built for the experiments for the drag reducer project. As we walked into the courtyard, Suzuki outlined a new cost-saving plan announced by the company. It was called "challenge leave." As a result of the economic downturn, the company was trying to re-trench, so they offered any interested employee over the age of thirty the chance to leave the company and receive 60 percent of his or her pay for one year (not including the annual bonus) toward education for a new job. If enough employees did not take the "challenge leave" (and "enough" was never defined), management said that a 60 percent pay cut would be applied to all employees at the company.

Suzuki said that, if not for his wife and two children, he would take the challenge leave and go to America to learn English; now he felt stuck at Nizumi. He said that it was likely that many of the younger employees would take the challenge leave and get jobs at other companies. However, the older employees (above age of thirty-five) would probably stay, as they would have trouble finding new jobs.

"But why?" I protested. "If these people are skilled they would certainly be valuable to another company."

"It isn't like that," said Suzuki. "Many of them do not have high-level skills that will land them good jobs at other companies. The average salaryman does not focus on one job, but works on many projects throughout his career. This allows him to obtain a broad experience—but nothing he can

transfer to another company." The situation was especially grim because Japanese companies don't hire anyone from a competitor. So even if you are a specialist, designing, say, drag reducers, there are only a handful of other companies that make a similar product, and they are all competitors. Your only real option is to work at a small parts company within the *keiretsu* but that almost always means getting a pay cut and receiving fewer benefits.

Another consideration when changing jobs in Japan is that your bonus is based upon your seniority. If you find a job at a new company, your many years of work at your previous job are not taken into consideration, nor the time you have taken to build up your skills. This was another reason workers dreaded restructuring, which was usually just another word for "downsizing."

"Anyway," said Suzuki, "in this depression, who's hiring? I wish I knew."

When we returned to the office he asked me, as he often did, not to tell others about our conversation.

That afternoon, I asked Higuchi about the company's problems. He said that management had overestimated the profits for April and May and so had no choice but to reduce costs by 35 percent more than planned. The board of directors started to meet every month to find ways to cut costs. The Toyota directors decided to inspect the technology in each Nizumi division to evaluate current production capabilities. How many jobs they would cut was inversely related to how much they liked the technology.

Higuchi asked if I would make a display of my work to show the directors when they came to our company. I was happy to oblige. One project I could show them was my automatic CAD programs.

The day of the visit, Oda behaved like a schoolboy attending his first sports game—and like the coach, as well. Kurata personally approached me about showing my work, and Oda was very impressed. For the rest of the morning, he joked with me, and he placed my presentation beside his. I took out a sandwich and unwrapped it. As I bit into it, Oda said, "jokingly," "You don't want to get caught eating a sandwich when the Toyota directors come around to see our work."

"Just give me some warning," I said, "and I'll swallow the mouthful and hide all the evidence."

"Ha, ha, ha." Then he said, in alarm, "Look, they're coming now!" I hid the sandwich in a drawer, and Oda told his subordinates, "Hurry up, get into position."

Oda greeted the Toyota delegation with extreme deference. He really knew

how to flatter those in power, which was one reason he maintained his position. I bowed deeply to the group of old men and showed them my work. They watched with serious looks on their faces, said nothing, and moved on to the next presentation. I waited until they were out of sight before finishing my sandwich.

To reduce costs immediately, management required all employees to work Saturdays and Sundays to save on electrical expenses, so the weekend holiday was switched to Monday and Tuesday. This was a great hardship for families, but we heard not one squeak of resistance from the union. Higuchi had to quit being a soccer coach because he could not attend weekend practices.

RESPECT FOR ELDERS

The drag reduction project finally bore fruit, and a prototype was built to our specifications. Now the product would be tested in a wind tunnel. Higuchi told me that Abe wanted me to travel out to the lab to view the experiment. Since the wind tunnel was very expensive, the company had rented the lab equipment from a national institute many miles away.

Watanabe picked me and Suzuki up at the bus station, and drove us to the lab. He told us that there had been an accident that had damaged the prototype. This had caused some delays, but the equipment had been repaired and the experiment was now expected to run smoothly. While the men were busy preparing the prototype for the experiment, Watanabe talked to me about the upcoming experiment and drew some detailed illustrations on a blackboard in the center of the room. "A large vortex may form off the back," he said. A vortex is a swirl of air, and when formed behind a drag reducer, it can reduce efficiency and increase instability. He seemed to like chatting with me, and I enjoyed his company, too, as he seemed like a nice guy who knew a lot about his field. Of course, he had treated Suzuki deplorably, but perhaps he was angry that Suzuki had so little expertise.

Three managers were assigned by Abe to run the experiment: Watanabe from the Technical Research Center, an engineer from the Design Division, and an older man who was a technician. Many other people were there as well. We ran a few experiments, then broke to rearrange the apparatus for the next round. Suddenly, a fight broke out between Watanabe and the engineer from the Design Division. Each one wanted to experiment on a certain part

of the prototype that was beneficial only to his department. They argued loudly about this for several minutes. The other men did not interfere—most just left the room. Suzuki turned to me and muttered, "This is what happens when you get three managers together to work on a project." He, too, made a quick exit.

The older technician tried to soothe the other two, saying, "Okay now, both of you guys take it easy, bring it down." He waved his hands gently up and down in an effort to calm the situation—to no avail. The others continued to fight like a couple of alley cats and didn't give a damn what the old man said. Finally, someone suggested they call Abe to resolve the situation. Abe made a decision, and the experiment finally continued.

It was distressing. Precious time and thousands of dollars had been wasted in a battle about which manager would succeed in promoting the interests of his group. As for the much-vaunted Japanese respect for age, I saw that since the old technician had no power over the younger managers, his peace-making efforts had been completely ignored.

A few weeks later, Watanabe invited me to the design division mock-up presentation of the product. Abe attended, along with many engineers who had been assigned to the project from design and research. It was a major presentation, with many speeches by many managers. They all used charts to explain the product design. Engineers from production were also at the meeting, discussing issues related to manufacturing cost. They documented these on a sheet that was attached to a bulletin board for all of us to see. There was also a display of diagrams to illustrate various problems that had been solved. The detailed drawings showed exactly what parts of the design had been discussed, and how the technical issues had been resolved. These were now crossed out with a red pen. The entire meeting was very interesting and a sharp contrast to the closed-door nature of the Advanced Design group.

RESTRUCTURING ON THE LINE

One day in the company courtyard, I ran into Sanan, the former canoe maker from Thailand. I asked how things were going on the assembly line since the Asian crash. He said that orders had plummeted but that back-ordered vehicles were still being produced. Management was trying to reduce costs while keeping daily production numbers high, so naturally the workers bore

the burden. In Sanan's group, two workers of an original four were fired. Since the group was still required to produce 132 drivetrain components a day, the remaining two workers had to work twice as hard. Unpaid overtime was also increased by two hours a day.

Seeing many of his colleagues get the ax, Sanan thought his own job might soon expire, but to his surprise, the company extended his contract another six months. Then he learned why. Nizumi was shipping in cheap labor from Thailand, and management wanted Sanan to stay on as a go-between for the new recruits. During the month of April, twenty Thai workers came to one division and another twenty were scheduled to arrive in May. Sanan said the company announced the new trainees were receiving the typical salary of 14,000-yen a day (\$115), but "the company is lying. After taxes, these guys from Thailand are only getting 3,500 yen (\$30) a day, and they are forced to work overtime without pay," he said. A typical day for these workers lasted about twelve hours. They received a six- to twelve-month contract for what the company called a "training program," and they were provided with a room in the dorm and transportation to and from Thailand.

Sanan said that the Thai workers had to do the most tedious and dangerous jobs on the line, jobs made especially onerous now that one or two workers had to produce what three or four had done earlier. I wondered about their future after their contracts came to an end. According to Sanan, some would work for Nizumi in Thailand but others would just be let go.

I hadn't seen Kofi in a while, so I decided to give him a call. Life had not been kind to the African. A few months earlier, his daughter had died during an asthma attack, and Kofi blamed his wife. Instead of taking the little girl to a specialist, she had brought her to a family friend who was a doctor. After the child died, the divorce proceedings had turned bitter.

Kofi and I met at our favorite *izakaya*, the one where the chubby owner cooked fabulous fish. Kofi's daughter was still on his mind. "That doctor wasn't an asthma specialist," Kofi said again and again. He thought that the doctor had accidentally given the child a drug overdose, but his wife's family didn't want to pursue the matter further. Kofi didn't understand why they wanted to drop the case without bringing the doctor to justice. "They don't even want to investigate it," he said angrily. Finally, he shook his head despairingly and said, "Oh, the Japanese!"

At that moment, a couple of salarymen stumbled into the *izakaya* and asked if we would have a drink with them. Kofi was in no mood to chat with

Japanese strangers, so he looked them in the eye and said in perfect Japanese, "Yes, but I'm a cannibal."

Our potential hosts responded in confusion. "Uhhh?"

"I like humans," said Kofi. "I want to eat you, I'm a cannibal!" And he bared his teeth.

They hurried away, embarrassed and confused. I couldn't help chuckling at the sight of these Japanese businessmen, in their blue suits and ties, scurrying away when a very dark black man played into their preconceptions by acting the role of the wild African.

I had a certain sympathy for them, for they had tried to be friendly, but they had no idea how frustrating it was to be a foreigner in Japan. My experience in Japan had shown me that the average Japanese salaryman was not interested in developing a friendship with a foreigner but just wanted to practice his English and reinforce his own notions of the peculiar ways of other nationalities. Your price for a drink was a series of questions (especially about your love life) that made you feel alienated and disparaged.

Kofi and I started eating our fish, and he told me how restructuring had changed things in his factory. "All contract workers are being fired," he said. "The company is becoming a graveyard." I was curious about what happened to the foreigners who'd been let go. Kofi said that some of the men from South America had found work at a Toyota plant that had the highest manufacturing speed in the world. He said he would never work at that plant. "Workers going crazy with speed," Kofi said.

Then he relayed a surprising development. The company had started filming workers on the line. "They were filming me last week, I am telling you, the camera—I saw it!" Without prior consultation, they had filmed his every move. Since he was not told about the purpose of the filming, Kofi could only conjecture—was it because he was not a good worker? Was it because he was African? No, the company was just implementing a new improvement plan. Shortly after filming him, the company said that they liked his work and that they would extend his contract an extra six months.

JOINING THE UNION

In mid-August I stopped receiving union and company information. No more newsletters, pamphlets, or safety sheets descended onto my desk. On

our way back to the dorm one day, I spoke about this to Kurasawa, who was the union leader in our section. I told him I had been receiving the information since the day I entered the company. He responded that since I was not in the union I did not need the information—"and besides, the information is not very interesting so it is not worth reading."

I turned to my colleagues to discuss the possibility of joining the union. They just laughed at me. Why would I want to pay monthly dues to an organization that did nothing to protect workers' rights?¹ I said that joining the union was my right. I told Higuchi that I insisted on joining the union, and he was baffled. "The primary role of the union is to agree with policy promoted by the management." I persisted in my demand, so he passed my request up through the proper chain of command.

Ultimately, I received my response. If I wanted to become a union member, I would have to change my status from a *keiyaku shain* to a regular *seishain* because contract workers were not allowed to join the union.

Later, I discovered that according to the Japanese constitution, all workers are allowed to organize and be part of a labor union. Most companies simply ignore the law because the government does little to enforce it.

The next time I walked home with Kurasawa I asked what exactly he was doing as a union leader. "Nothing but passing out information" he said. "The unions in Japan are different from those in the rest of the world. They are very weak, and the reason is that the people who are chosen to be high-level company managers must first become union leaders. Naturally, they do not oppose management policies. It's not like America, where unions are radical, like the UAW, going on strike like they did just a few months ago. Japanese don't like radical organizations."

I had visited Korea for vacation and had witnessed a violent labor rally, so I said, "Maybe you should learn from the Koreans. Those guys are radical."

"Yeah," he said, his eyes wide, "but Japanese culture is very different. In Korea, they have a history of exchange with other people, and their country has gone through many upheavals. Japan is much steadier. It's related to the group orientation of our society. Everyone has to do what others are doing or they will be ostracized, so there is much more stability here and not many radicals."

I joked, "Well, if you want to change things, maybe you should be a radical."

¹ When regular employees began working for the company, they immediately became members of the union and were forced to open an account in the *keiretsu*-affiliated bank. The company automatically deducted the monthly union fee from their paychecks.

He jolted his head backward in shock and said, "No, I don't want to do that."

Even if Kurasawa had wanted to change things, he couldn't risk being punished by the company. Being in his late thirties with a wife and two kids, what could he do? He wouldn't get another job easily.

I sympathized with his situation, so I just asked him to distribute union literature to me as before. When he remained silent, I threatened to complain to Higuchi. The threat worked, and the very next day, I began getting union newsletters and pamphlets again.

REFRESH LEAVE

Cost cutting continued at Nizumi. Older men were encouraged to take early retirement. Management made budget cuts in every division and category. They even lowered the beverage allowance for company parties. When I arrived at Nizumi, we used to drink Chivas Regal, but now we were drinking Nikka, a cheap Japanese whisky. Only eighty employees out of seven thousand had taken challenge leave—mainly employees from small towns who wanted to return to a simpler life. The union newsletter announced which employees took challenge leave and printed the following illustration:



Despite the company's efforts, further reductions were needed. On September 1, Uno called a meeting to announce a new plan. This plan was called *rifureshu* (refresh) leave, and it offered an employee the chance to leave the

company temporarily for a full year, at 60 percent pay. The company promised to preserve the vacated position until the employee returned. As Uno spoke, the men sat looking downward, not making a sound. Uno told us that upper management had decided that one person in our section had to take *rifureshu* leave, and he asked, then pleaded, for a volunteer. No one said a word. Finally Uno begged us to think about it and said there would be another meeting the following week.

After the meeting, Higuchi told me he would consider refresh leave if he didn't have to make large mortgage payments on his new house. "But maybe next year I can go," he said. "Do you know the best way to obtain good computer skills? Maybe I should join a small cutting-edge American company. I could learn the most advanced techniques—you can't get that at a university." He was thinking aloud, and he wondered how someone of his age, forty-five, would be received. What sort of job could he really get during his *rifureshu* year? He concluded that he would either end up in a software sweatshop, where he would be put down by whiz-kid programmers with American Ph.D.s—or forced into sales. Within seconds, the *rifureshu* dream was gone.

Nonetheless, I didn't see why the younger men would refuse to take what seemed like a great opportunity. Why not take a year off, go back to school, and return to Nizumi well rested and better qualified? My colleagues saw it differently.

As always, Takanashi was the most outspoken because he was the least "refined," so he didn't hesitate to express his opinions about company motives. "People don't want to volunteer for refresh leave because they feel that the company is lying," he said. He swiveled in his chair and moved his head in jerky motions while he spoke, "What they really want to do is restructure, and the employees who go away for a year may never get their jobs back again. When they return, they will find their desks moved to some other department or their responsibility reduced. Nizumi may need to cut more jobs next year, and the year after that—who knows? So being away for a year is too risky. Maybe it would be good for a month or two, but for one entire year—no way."

I thought about what Takanashi had said and reflected on how jobs were defined at the company. No permanent employee at the company had a contract, and an employee's job was not defined according to a specific position or job description. Upper-level managers exercised authoritarian power, and

agreements were verbal, not written. It was a system in which jobs could be manipulated and changed at will,² so an employee had to constantly protect his position. Takanashi was right: being away might well expose an employee to harsh penalties.

Furthermore, since connections were all-important to success at Nizumi, being away for a year could weaken whatever important associations you had made. When you are physically out of the office for an extended period of time, you can lose your personal contacts. Workers also feared that taking refresh leave would damage their personnel records. At some future time, they might not get promoted if a manager thought they'd been lazy and had taken time off for their own pleasure.

Day after day, the company announced further restructuring plans, and the union did nothing about it. Nobody I interviewed had anything positive to say about the union. Everybody felt weak and disenfranchised.

At the next department meeting, Uno showed a chart of each section and the money they were saving through challenge leave. He read off the names of five people in our division who had taken challenge leave, and the meeting buzzed with surprise and speculation. Then Uno said he was still looking for someone in our section to take refresh leave.

We all looked around, but no one came forward.

LEARNING ABOUT LOCAL POLITICS

It was mid-September, and the first item on the agenda at the weekly department meeting was a discussion about sponsoring a corporate candidate for another local city council election. The candidate would run in a nearby town where Nizumi had a factory. Uno distributed a list of employees who lived in that town and who were expected to cast their vote for the company candidate. Erberto told me that the list was being used in his section to coerce employees to vote for the candidate. Employees were also being requested to ask their family and friends to vote for the company man. It was clear that the second election I observed was going to be a repeat of the first.

It was time for the mid-year transfer, and I waited to hear what would hap-

² None of the employees at the company has a written contract and when a person enters the company it is Human Resources in consultation with upper-level management that decides the section and division to which they belong.

pen to the much-abused Suzuki, whose condition was still deteriorating. Finally I learned that Suzuki was going to be transferred to the Nizumi High School, where he would become a teacher of electronics. I asked Higuchi why Suzuki had been transferred. Higuchi said, "His performance is low and he does not get along with Watanabe. Watanabe is aggressive, like an American. Suzuki is more kind, so I think he is afraid of Watanabe."

I asked, "Do you think he will be happy there?"

"I don't think he will enjoy his work at the Nizumi School, but he has no choice." Much later, just before I left the company, I saw Suzuki on the street. He gave me a big smile and told me he liked his new job a lot. He seemed healthy again—he had gained weight, and his twitch had disappeared. I was pleased to see that my sensitive colleague had found a position more suitable to his personality than the one he had held at Nizumi.

I wanted to further investigate Nizumi's political involvement, but to learn more I needed to have a connection. At a dinner party at Erberto's, I was able to make the contact I needed. Adrian was from Switzerland. He was studying at a local university and living with his professor and his family. His professor was active in local politics. Adrian and I talked about the election while sipping beer and eating a bowl of *feijoada*—black beans and pork stew prepared by Erberto's Brazilian wife. As the evening ended, Adrian said he would soon leave the country—and did I want his scooter? I took him up on the offer, and he said that when I came to pick it up, I could chat with his professor about the election.

The professor's house was located in the suburbs of the town, near a famous Buddhist temple. Japanese suburbs are much more densely packed than those of Western countries and are typically accessible by narrow, winding roads. With map in hand, I approached his house and made my way through the front gate. Like most houses in Japan, and in much of Asia, it was surrounded entirely by a wall, so only the upper floor and roof could be seen from the road. The professor's wife welcomed me into her home. I untied my shoes at the door, put on a pair of slippers, and entered the kitchen area. She prepared a pot of green tea and placed a few cakes on the table. We began talking about my life in the city, and soon I was telling her about the company campaign. She sat silently and listened to every word I said.

In a little while, her husband came home from the university and joined us at the table. He was a tall, older gentleman who seemed at ease talking openly about politics. Soon, he was questioning me about American military

policy. He told me he was upset with the American involvement in Kosovo and criticized Japanese companies for supplying parts for the American military machine. We talked for a few more minutes, then his wife turned to him and said, "You have to hear about what Nizumi did in the last election."

So I told him, too.

The professor was not surprised. "A lot of groups, including those that exist in the city and village, work the same way. Members of the group are practically forced to vote for a particular candidate. It's a hard thing to fight. There is very little information on the candidates, and no one knows who to vote for—so many people just follow the group's 'recommendation.' A few years ago, the city government used to sponsor open discussions and debates, but not anymore."

He suddenly walked to the other side of the room and grabbed a pamphlet on the table. He held the document up to me. I saw an old World War II black-and-white picture of a Japanese soldier with his comrades standing, arms outstretched, celebrating a bonzai victory in a battle in Manchuria. He pointed to a set of flags at the bottom and said, "Look—these are the flags of the fascist countries that fought in World War II. This is the German flag that has changed from the Nazi flag to the German union flag. The Italian flag has also changed—but look at the Japanese flag." Each of the prewar flags was in one column on the left, and the postwar flags were in a column on the right. I looked down at the Japanese flag. The right column contained an empty, dashed rectangular outline where the new flag should have been. "Nothing has changed," lamented the professor. At the time, I was puzzled as to why he thought that this was so significant.

The professor's wife said that members of a local independent political organization called the Open Society would be interested in learning about my experience at the company. The professor and his wife introduced me to Araki Toyama, a social activist and professor of law at a local university.

Toyama said, "We used to have a progressive mayor in the city named Sasaki, but now we have a conservative mayor from the Liberal Democratic party." The progressive coalition lost city power when Mayor Sasaki decided not to run for another term. The electorate became divided due to infighting when they were choosing who would replace the mayor.

We continued to talk about local politics, occasionally bringing the small, cylindrical cups to our lips for a sip of green tea. The company elections were on my mind. I asked how Nizumi was able to get its employees to vote be-

fore election day. He told me that the absentee ballot rules had recently changed. "Voter turnout was becoming so low in Japan that it was decided that anyone could vote ahead of time without needing to provide any explanations about why they could not vote on election day." The hope was that this would increase citizen participation, but it gave Nizumi a new opportunity to exploit. The company was able to arrange massive absentee ballots for its employees without giving any reason at all.

At the end of our conversation, Toyama invited me to a Open Society meeting and told me that he could introduce me to a number of people who lived in town.

RUNNING THE CITY LIKE A CORPORATION

A few weeks later, I hopped onto the scooter that Adrian had given me and drove down from the company dormitory to the meeting place. I weaved through hundreds of pubs, mom-and-pop shops, and fast-food restaurants. When I entered the room, Toyama introduced me to Shirai, the city councilman from the Open Society party. Shirai was an affable man in his late forties. He wore glasses and smoked incessantly. The group quickly got down to business and began discussing policy. The city was experiencing many changes imposed by the new conservative government. Due to the lack in tax revenue because of the economic slowdown, the administration claimed that they needed to cut back on social services. Now they were trying to privatize school lunches. Under the old mayor, the schools had hired their own nutritionists and had used homegrown vegetables from local farmers. The new plan involved outsourcing meal production to a corporation and cutting back on the number of school nutritionists. The Open Society denounced the new plan. A second item on the agenda was the draft of a letter to be sent to the education board protesting a principal who had openly used racist comments about Koreans in the school.

After the meeting, Shirai invited me to a restaurant pub where the members of the group converged for drinks. The pub, called the Red Samurai, was located on a relatively isolated street a few blocks from the meeting place. A large billboard with Shirai's name and slogan ("power to the citizens") stood on the sidewalk beside the entrance. Trucks at high speed drove on a highway bridge a few hundred meters above the pub. It was a traditional pub, and the

owner, Koizumi, stood in the center and cooked. Patrons sat at low stools at a counter that wrapped around the small cooking space. To the side, a group of men sat cross-legged on tatami mats vigorously eating, drinking, and laughing. Smoke from a grill cooking yakitori wafted into the air while 1950s bebop American jazz filled the room. I sat with Shirai at the end of the counter.

Koizumi asked us what we wanted, and Shirai responded "Shōchū and an order of yakitori." Shirai was famous for enjoying rice wine. Koizumi grabbed Shirai's shōchū bottle and brought it to the table. Shirai introduced me to Koizumi and gave him some background information about me. "So you work for Nizumi," he said, "Do you know Nakaya?"

"Yes," I said nervously. Nakaya was a senior executive.

"He comes here a lot. He's the one who looks like a member of the Japanese mafia."

I had to laugh. With his expensive suits and slicked back hair, Nakaya did look like a prosperous criminal. But I was also dismayed. If Nakaya came in and learned about my involvement with the Open Society, management would not be happy at all. Koizumi threw some yakitori on the small coal grill, and Shirai walked over to small electric heater located at the entrance and filled our small glasses with hot water. He poured some shōchū in our glasses, lit a cigarette, and we began drinking and talking.

"Education is a big problem in Japan," Shirai said. "The schools are allowed to pack up to forty students in each classroom. And we have a real problem with bullying."

The media had recently covered several suicides that were blamed on *ijime*. Shirai said, "Large classes contribute to bullying."

A carpenter sitting in a seat beside us chimed in with his view. "I disagree—the bullying is the parents' fault. If they don't raise kids properly, then they are going to be bullied, and that's that!" Shirai tried to explain his point, but the carpenter wouldn't let him speak. "If the kid goes to school and other kids think he is strange, whose fault is that? It's not the school's fault, it's the parents!"

He continued in this vein for several minutes. I thought it was odd that he kept blaming the bullied child and his parents and never blamed the bullies. Finally, Shirai interrupted.

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"Are you sure?"

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"Can I speak," he said, "Is it okay now?"

"Yeah, go ahead," said the carpenter.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, go ahead, speak all you want, go on!"

"First of all, fathers in Japan can't spend that much time with their kids because of overwork, right?" said Shirai.

"Okay, go on."

"Okay, even if they could spend time with kids how can a single teacher possibly control forty children in a class? Groups form in the classroom and pick on kids who don't fit in. If they reduce class size, there's a chance that teachers can prevent bullying. Instead, all the schools do is impose more and more rules, and it doesn't do a damn thing to help the problem."

The carpenter grumbled a bit, and the two men kept talking. I was thrilled by the open way members of the Open Society expressed themselves. It was such a change from the stifling atmosphere at Nizumi! The Open Society included a variety of social activists who worked to improve the conditions for city residents. They engaged in combative argument, but their spirits were high, and there was a happy ambience. They welcomed me warmly into the group.

Shirai and I settled into conversation as more people arrived and squeezed themselves into a small spot for drinks and conversation. Koizumi was an excellent cook, so I kept nibbling away at the tasty Japanese food.

I asked Shirai what policies the corporations and their candidates promoted in the city council.

"They really have no policy," he said.

"What do you mean?" I said. "There must be a reason for all this political activity."

"The primary reason corporations have a councilman is so they can sell their products to the city," Shirai replied.

I asked him to explain the procurement process.

"The city council is supposed to open bids to all companies, but it is rigged," he said. "The entire system in Japan is based on bid-rigging (*dango*) and the whole *keiretsu* system is involved. The big companies supply the smaller *keiretsu* companies with contracts, and it goes down from there."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Oh, there are plenty of them," he said. "We were putting up a new hospital, and we put the project up for bid. A construction company was chosen, and that construction company chose its own subsidiary to supply the electrical system. But the electrical supplier had been decided already—it was one of the four corporations who have factories in city."

Similarly, Toshiba has a factory in the city, and as it happens, they have supplied the elevators in every public building for the past twenty years. Shirai listed off many more examples. I was curious about whether people in the community knew about *dango*. "The city government does not disclose that information, so no one really knows," he said. "Every year the mayor prepares the budget and then presents it to the city council, and the council either accepts or rejects it. The project suppliers are not listed."

We drank and talked late into the evening. He invited me to a karaoke bar next door, and we sang, drank, and ate for another hour. Shirai said, "If you really want to know about corporate policy in the city council, you can refer to the City Council Notes. And you may want to talk to a few other city council representatives."

Shirai was right. The City Council Notes showed that the corporate councilmen were promoting restructuring in the city government. In one discussion, Ishida even proposed running the government like a Japanese corporation.

I interviewed half a dozen members of the city council, and they all confirmed what Shirai had said about *dango* and corporate interests. I asked a councilwoman about Ishida's policies in the city government, and she said, "Ishida suggested that the city plant flowers in the places where the old garbage boxes used to be. We all thought that was a good idea, but somehow nothing was done about it."

Nizumi's campaign on Ishida's behalf had paid off handsomely. Toyota got a large contract for the company, and Ishida did what he could to cut city jobs, support big business—and suggest that the city plant a few flowers. Ishida's New Year Message appeared in the company newsletter. He extended his deep appreciation from "the bottom of my heart for your continuing warm encouragement and cooperation." He said he was trying to understand the problems facing the city, especially the bad economic situation. "Under these circumstances I would like to continue to create a green city with lots of smiles." It was the usual meaningless sloganeering.

If he had been honest, Ishida's message would have read:

Happy New Year. Thank you very much for your support in electing me to the city legislature. Through group control and coercion, we were able to ensure that many employees of the company who lived in the city voted for me. Since we knew that many of you were not at all

interested in the election, in order to ensure your cooperation, we bussed you to the city hall to fill out special absentee ballots, which we obtained through our connections to the administration. Those of you who did not participate in this enforced voting were punished.

On behalf of Nizumi, I have been happily involved in the dismantling of the welfare system through privatization. No matter the impact on the environment or the community, my role in the city council is to sell company products and to support big business on all issues. One of my recent successes involved obtaining a large company contract through bid-rigging. I was able to obtain this deal through Nizumi's special relationship with the mayor. In return for this favor, you, employees of Nizumi, are expected to vote for the mayor in the next election. Recently, the city has been facing financial trouble, so I have proposed a business plan to improve efficiency, which involves running the government like a private corporation and insisting on financial restructuring. As at Nizumi, this plan involves firing many employees and piling more work on those who remain.

Remember, your role as an employee is to obey company policy. In the next election, you will vote for me or suffer the consequences. I wish everyone a healthy and happy year.

DEATH BY OVERWORK

After the Open Society meetings, we would often go to the Red Samurai to unwind. Professor Nagano often came with us. He was a handsome, distinguished-looking professor with gray hair who sometimes came to meetings wearing a beret. I always enjoyed talking to him. He had been involved in city politics for more than thirty years and had spent a couple of his sabbaticals studying politics in America. We sipped our *shōchū*. "Those who have power in Japan are funny," he said. "They sit on their ass, look around the room, and bow their head—but you have no idea what they're thinking. But in Japan, when you drink, you can learn what people are really thinking. So when a politician asks me out for a drink, I make sure to keep my mouth shut. I let him do the talking."

One reason I went to Red Samurai and engaged in vigorous discussion with Open Society members was to get away from the rules. The ambiance

at Red Samurai was free and the talk was lively. I was excited about my new discovery, and I wanted to share it with my foreign friends, so I invited Erberto to Red Samurai. We made ourselves comfortable and started talking about local politics—when a man sitting next to us interrupted our conversation.

"So where are you from?" he asked Erberto.

"I'm from Italy," Erberto responded.

"Oh, I thought you were English!" He laughed, his face cringing to show gums bare except for one remaining tooth in his lower jaw. He poured some of his beer into our glasses and asked me my name. "Oh, that is the name of a dog, ha ha, that's so funny!" he cried out.

In Japan it is common for pets to have American names such as "Mary" or "John." Did he think my name was Mary? He was clearly intoxicated.

Then Mrs. Hara walked in and sat down with us. She had just returned from visiting her husband who was on life support since collapsing on the job many years ago. Now he is little more than a vegetable. Seeing Mrs. Hara, the one-toothed drunk began making negative comments about a woman being in an *izakaya*.

The owner, Mr. Koizumi, put down his cutting knife and interjected. "Stop it! This lady's husband is in the hospital because his company worked him into a coma!"

"What are you talking about!" said the drunk. He continued to argue with Koizumi. I picked myself up from the bar seat and headed toward the bathroom to allow the boisterous argument to cool down.

When I returned, I asked Mrs. Hara how she was doing. I felt sorry for her: her life had become lonely and painful since her husband's collapse. She attended the Open Society meetings, often with her son, and she frequented Red Samurai for community support. Since she saw I was interested in work-related issues, she invited me to visit her husband in the hospital. I was happy to accept her invitation, for her husband had worked for Toyota Motors, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to learn more about the company.

Inside the hospital room that Mrs. Hara called her home, dried roses hung on the walls along with pictures of her once-healthy family. Holding back tears, she stood over her still husband, positioning him more comfortably on the bed. She said, "When my husband worked long hours at the company, he used to send me roses. Now I have hung them on the wall as a reminder of our relationship together."

As a sales manager for Toyota Motors, Mr. Hara had been forced to work for twelve hours a day, often seven days a week. The constant stress contributed to gout attacks. For years, he suffered painful attacks. At first, his attacks would occur once in a while, but as the years passed, they came more often until they occurred every month. Mrs. Hara pleaded with him to go to the hospital for a checkup, but since his work schedule was so busy, he couldn't find the time to go. Toward the end, his pain was so extreme, he had to use a cane to walk.

Hara's responsibilities required him to put in long hours almost every day of the year. Mrs. Hara explained, "The branch was new, and the managers wanted to be on top of the sales charts so everyone was worked very hard, especially at the beginning and the end of the month. It was typical for the company to force him to work thirty-five days in a row without one day off to spend some time with his family." Hara would spend so many days absent from his home that at times his wife and son would spend Sunday at work with him.

After thirty-five days of work, the company would give him a day off, but the very next day he was required to return to work for another long two- or three-week shift. The only time he had more than one day at a time off from work was when the company was closed during the national holidays. "We would often spend our holidays in the countryside, but the holidays were always too short."

Then came his collapse. In the fall of 1991, during an ordinary workday, he suddenly fell ill with meningitis and was rushed to the hospital. He never regained consciousness.

After the incident, Mrs. Hara was impoverished for many years, not knowing how to receive compensation for her husband's lost salary. At the time, she didn't know that her husband could receive workman's compensation for his injuries. The company union did nothing to help her with her claim. Not a single person in the union even contacted her about the issue. Luckily, a friend introduced her to the Open Society and they made contacts with the local Zenroren federation of unions. They helped her find a lawyer and apply for workmen's compensation. It took four years before her claim was accepted.

When she finally received her husband's workman's compensation, it was not enough to cover basic medical expenses so she was forced to sue. Her motives were not entirely monetary. "I wanted to show the rest of the world how badly Toyota treated my husband."

One of the first obstacles in her pursuit of justice was proving that her husband had been overworked, "I couldn't prove that my husband had to work so many hours because managers in Japan do not fill out time cards." The only way to prove her case was to ask her husband's colleagues to testify on his behalf, but they all refused to speak. "I was deeply hurt by their refusal," she said. "I had known some of them for years, we were close, they knew the intimate details of my husband's work. All they said was 'please understand'—that was it."

She suspected that her husband's superiors had ordered everyone to refuse to testify. The union was equally disengaged. "The union at Toyota is worthless, it doesn't do anything to improve worker's rights or working conditions. Most company unions in Japan are like that. After all the requests I sent for help, I didn't hear from them, not one word, until one day I received a letter from them. I held the envelope in my hands, elated that they finally had come around to help me—but when I opened the envelope, I saw a flyer asking me to support a Toyota Motors candidate in the national election! It had nothing to do with my husband's case."

Remembering the moment, she fought to hold back tears. "I just ripped up the letter and threw it into the garbage."

Mrs. Hara received national attention with her fight against Toyota, but she knew that to pursue her case she had to seek grassroots support. The Zenroren local, the Open Society, and other activist unions worked with her in battling Toyota. "They made me feel that I was not alone in my struggle. Members of the various unions and groups would come to court with me, to sit with me and show Toyota that many people were watching." Her supporters also helped her get many signatures to petition Toyota to end the case quickly.

In court, managers from Toyota defended their position. Without proof of his hours, what could Mrs. Hara do? Then she discovered that some company employees used a security card to enter and leave the office. If she could receive information from the security company, she could prove that workers were being forced to stay at the company late into the night. She tried to find her husband's card, looking frantically through his clothes. But she could not find it, so her lawyers asked the judge to obtain the information. When the court finally received the security records, they provided striking evidence of how long employees at Hara's branch were forced to work—on an average of twelve to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week.

The government commission investigating her case concluded that Hara had indeed suffered from overwork. The judge forced Toyota to settle the case, and they agreed to pay compensation. During the deliberations, however, Japan's number-one company tried to get out of paying for trivial items such as mattresses for the hospital bed and Mrs. Hara's commuting costs. Her lawyers rejected their request and demanded that Toyota pay for all expenses. After several long years, Mrs. Hara finally received full compensations for her husband's tragic fate. Yet she is still angry with Toyota. "The company refused to admit they did anything wrong." Fortunately, she continues to receive emotional support from the Open Society and has made several friends who are helping her raise her son.

The one-toothed drunk stumbled out of the bar, and moments later Shirai strode in. We all sat at the table on the tatami mat. *Shochu* flowed into glasses and beer caps hissed open. We huddled around the table, laughing, joking, and talking about the community. Erberto was in his element. Shirai turned to the owner and asked him to play us a tune. Koizumi picked up his guitar and began playing and singing with surprising passion. Others joined in, and soon we were all singing Japanese folk songs.

RULES THAT UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY

Bit by bit, I began to understand how Nizumi was undermining the democratic process. Ehime, a local lawyer and activist I met through the Open Society, was especially helpful in this regard. He invited me to his new office to talk about Japanese political campaigns. We sat together at one end of a long table, and he began to talk. "In the 1920s, campaigning door to door was outlawed in Japan, and voting rights were limited to men over twenty. The government wanted to control the voting base, and they didn't want grassroots movements to undermine their policies." After the war, the political system was restructured, and voting rights were extended to women, but the law banning door-to-door campaigning remained in effect to this day.

Ehime picked up a large textbook on Japanese law, and we began to discuss the factors that undermined Japanese democracy. "The government does not officially announce the candidates until one week prior to the day of the election," he said. "This dramatically limits all public debate. Campaign organizations distribute most of their information in the week before elections." During

election week, a set of laws restricts the distribution of political tracts. The candidate cannot personally distribute information, the political organization cannot distribute information with photos, and only two versions of the campaign material can be distributed. Furthermore, all distributed material must receive an official stamp from the city campaign office.³ Another law limits the candidate to using only two vehicles during the campaign.

According to Ehime, "These laws restrict citizen participation in political elections and suppress grassroots organizations." However, there are ways to get around the laws. "The political organization can publish special issues about the candidate in their newsletter or newspaper for distribution during the week of the election. For example, the Japanese Communist party can distribute information through their national newspaper, the *Akahata*, since they have a wide readership. The problem is most small grassroots organizations don't have a well-known newspaper. They suffer most from these backward laws." Ehime continued, "Another way to get around the laws is to distribute information about political policies without mentioning the candidate's name, but this also has a limited affect."

According to Ehime these laws were passed in the early 1970s when the Japanese Communist party carried out an effective campaign strategy called the "paper bomb." This saturated local communities with information on their candidates and it began to undermine the political power of the Liberal Democratic party.

The overall effect of these laws is to undermine the entire democratic process and make a charade of political campaigning. Political candidates have little choice but to ride around town speaking of their policies through loud bullhorns on the roofs of their vans. During election week, whether you are walking on an isolated street, exiting the subway station after a long day of work, or napping on a Saturday afternoon, you cannot escape the blaring sounds of dozens of candidates campaigning. Election week is highly unpleasant, and it contributes to the present cynicism about the political process.

No wonder employees at the company felt so disenfranchised. Not only did they not have the power to make changes at the company, they had very little power to make political changes, either.

³ An official stamp is required by the city campaign office before the political party is allowed to distribute the campaign material. These stamps must be put on all campaign materials and the number of stamps a candidate receives depends on the number of voters in the district and the political organization to which he or she belongs.

FEAR OF OSTRACISM

One December morning when I arrived at the office, I saw that Hiram had been moved to a desk in front of Kurata's section. Now all the employees on the floor could see Hiram, sitting there all alone near the director.

I asked Kurasawa why management was being so harsh, and he explained, "Hiram does not have a place anymore at the company." In a society that placed a high value on being a group member, Hiram was being publicly humiliated as a man without a group. It was an extreme form of harassment, designed to force him to follow the hidden rule of early retirement. After forty years at Nizumi, this was how he would remember his final days: sitting by himself under the scornful and pitying eyes of his fellow workers.

Kurasawa said that those who are isolated are called *mado giwa zoku* (members of the window watching gang), as if they are indolent and lazy. I asked him if Hiram was a *mado giwa zoku*, and he just laughed. We both knew that for all of his cigarette smoking and ostentatious boredom, old Droopy Eyes was extremely knowledgeable about the product and often made important technical contributions at meetings. Hiram was, after all, a graduate of Tokyo University, so although it sometimes seemed like he was on Planet Mars, he was still a valued engineer.

The conversation with Kurasawa reminded me of a time when I met with Suzuki and Higuchi to talk about the drag reducer project. We met in a new office that was not quite ready to be occupied, so there was much open space. I had become accustomed to living and working in cramped, congested quarters, so it was quite a treat to relax in the large, open space. During a short break I leaned back in my chair, turned to Higuchi and said, "Wouldn't it be great to have a desk over there in the corner by the window?"

He laughed as if I had made a good joke.

Suzuki, however, looked puzzled. He said, "Why would you want to sit there?"

I said, "It's got great light. And it's nice and private here."

Higuchi explained to Suzuki that Americans like to be isolated and away from other people. "They even have their own offices," he said in mild surprise. Suzuki pointed to the window space I had been coveting. He said, "That is not a desirable place to sit at Nizumi. That's where the company puts employees when they want them to leave."⁴

⁴ Ostracism has historically played an important role in work in Japan. According to John

This in turn reminded me of another discussion I'd had with Higuchi about where the company puts lazy employees. We had just left a conference with a number of foreigners, one of whom remarked that Japanese never leave work at five o'clock like Westerners. Higuchi said, "That's not true. I know of a guy who leaves at 5 o'clock. He goes home to coach soccer for his kids." Thinking of what I still endured on the days I left at five-thirty, I wondered how his colleagues reacted to this early departure. Higuchi said, "They don't care, because he works in a section for those who don't like to work. The section is the copying section and all they do all day is make copies of drawings for employees."

"That's all they do?" I asked. "Make photocopies?"

"Yes, that's it, nothing but make copies," Higuchi said. "The company will shift lazy or incompetent employees from one section to another, hoping they will finally start improving. If they don't—they end up at the copying section."

"Get out of here!"

"It's true. And they're completely inept! Go ask for ten copies of a document. You might get two back—or twenty."

BECOMING THE DOGS OF TOYOTA

That week Uno announced the latest restructuring plan. The Design Division had been told to cut twenty people from the computer-aided engineering section. Ten would be let go, and ten would be transferred to another department—perhaps to work in sales. But engineers don't have a knack for selling products, and many would choose to retire early instead. It was Oda's feeling that the company was deliberately pushing engineers into early retirement by these transfers to sales—which were always considered a demotion.

The next week, Uno announced that Toyota Management was discussing the possibility of transferring Nizumi technology to the parent company. Toyota's technical development policy is that basic research is conducted at

Owen Haley, in order for agrarian communities to maintain smooth relations with the Tokugawa shogunate in producing the proper rice yield "the community itself had to develop mechanisms of control. The most prominent included the psychological sanction of collective community displeasure as well as more severe forms of community coercion, such as ostracism and expulsion." See John Owen Haley, *Authority without Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61.

their company and then handed over to the group company, typically a parts manufacturer, for further development. For example, if a Toyota parts manufacturer makes a pump for Toyota vehicles, the basic research will be conducted at Toyota, and when the research goals have been reached, the parts manufacturer will continue to develop the technology into design and production. This allows a small number of Toyota managers to control the technology.

When the men in my section heard of this technology transfer to Toyota, they worried that their jobs would be eliminated or that the entire section would be cut. But Uno reassured them, saying that since Toyota knew little about Nizumi technology, they would need to rely on Nizumi engineers. When Uno finished talking, Dr. Zombie reeled off a large number of research programs that would be cut back. None of the programs would be entirely cut, but all would suffer significant budget reductions. He also listed a number of new strategies to save money in the technical lab.

After the meeting, I approached Kurasawa and Mochida to ask them what they thought about Toyota controlling Nizumi. Kurasawa responded, "We will be the dog of Toyota."

"Worse!" said Mochida, standing up from his seat and continuing the animal imagery. "We will be like mice, afraid of what to say, and Toyota will be the lion, giving orders."

I was surprised with their response but later learned that Toyota is notorious for externalizing their costs to lower level group companies in the form of longer hours, less pay, and strict control of management and technology. Members of Erberto's group were uneasy about being consumed by Toyota because a hidden rule postulates that no employees in the Toyota industrial group can make more money than employees who work for Toyota Motors.

QUITTING THE COMPANY

Later in the week, an engineer named Iwata in our section announced that he planned to quit the company. "It is good that he is leaving," said Kurasawa. "The salary at Nizumi is so low, I am happy for him." Iwata was almost thirty, so he felt it was his last chance to change jobs. In the classified sections of all the major newspapers, companies often stipulated that applicants should be

under age thirty-five, and it was generally understood that you had your best chance at getting a new job if you were still in your twenties. All the men were wondering where Iwata would be working, but he would not say.

His boss was apparently very angry because Nizumi did not plan to hire anyone to take Iwata's place. "We will be at a loss," he said. He would need to cut back on design projects, and without these, his own future prospects at Nizumi might be reduced. I observed the relationship between Iwata and his boss after Iwata announced that he was leaving. On the surface, the relationship between the young engineer and his boss remained as cordial as if nothing had happened. On both sides, mannerisms and expressions remained the same. The *tatemaie* functioned as a lubricant to keep the relationship running smoothly in its final days. If the company had been American, I probably would have noticed at least a marginal shift in their relationship, or some displeasure from the boss. But I couldn't sense a thing.

Uno organized a good-bye party for the departing engineer. We stuffed ourselves into a small tatami room in a local *izakaya*. This *izakaya* was not the typical mom and pop joint but a part of a chain. The food was not nearly as good as at the local restaurants, and we ordered from a generic menu, but the men liked the place because it was cheap. The food quickly came to our tables along with the usual beer bottles. We all grabbed bits of the squid, tofu, and fried chicken that had been neatly placed in little dishes on the table and engaged in the usual good-bye party rituals. Uno gave a speech, and we all took turns talking about working with the departing engineer.

As the party came to close, the mystery remained: where would Iwata be working next? Finally, one of the boys popped the question. Iwata tried to avoid it, but at this point, he could not. He sat on his knees, looked downward, and confessed, "Honda." The silence lasted only a few seconds, but it was one of those times that seem to last forever.

When the men began to speak again, they seemed hurt. They asked him lots of questions about his job. They were particularly interested in his salary. At the time, although the Japanese auto market was not doing well, Honda was doing very well in the American market. Its annual bonus had become the highest in the industry, while Nizumi's was one of the lowest.

I could tell that everyone was jealous of Iwata and his job. Loyalty to Nizumi existed only in the world of *tatemaie*. In reality, paycheck and benefits were what really mattered.

ENDURING WITH CLENCHED TEETH

Later that week, after Japanese language class, I bumped into Romone. As we walked down the dimly lit main street, we talked about work while the train rumbled in the background. Romone's outlook about Nizumi had soured, even though he was one of the few contract workers who was not let go but was offered a new contract. However, he was not a happy camper. "Since restructuring began," he said, "I am doing a job that three men used to do. The line speed is very fast, and the work is much more dangerous. Now there are no Peruvians on my line—they fired all of them except me. So it's lonely. I used to have a cousin and two close friends on the line, but now I'm by myself."

He told me that he intended to leave Nizumi to look for a job north of Tokyo. With the aid of a friend, he hoped to start a new life there—but he also dreamed about America. "I hate Japan," he said. "I really hate this country. I want to go to America. I heard life is good there."

Later in the year, economic conditions at the company grew even more dire, and more contract workers were asked to leave. Human Resources broke Romone's contract by forcing him to leave before his term was up. He was not alone. According to Romone, the entire group of temporary workers who had received extended contracts were forced to leave before their contracts had expired.

Since so many people were being downsized, I was naturally concerned about my own position at Nizumi. Higuchi was not encouraging.

"I don't know yet," he said, "but there is a chance that we will have to let you go. Abe told me unofficially today that the company must cut 30 percent of its remaining employees."

I was shocked, for the planned cuts meant that nine guys from our section of thirty would have to go. I pressed the issue, "What about me?"

Higuchi parried, "When did you learn about your contract last year?"

"The last week of March, just a few days before my contract expired. If they want me to leave, I'd like to know as soon as possible." My spirits were sinking. I remarked, "Japanese companies are known to fire foreigners before they consider putting out their own."

Higuchi agreed. "It is assumed that the job of a Japanese is more important than that of a foreigner."

I wasn't angry with Higuchi, for he was simply being honest. What bothered me was that I had no way to protect my job or my income. The company prohibited me from being part of a union, and as a contract worker, I

did not have the option of taking a leave of absence, much less a *rifureshu* leave. Nor would I receive unemployment benefits.

I felt as though I had entered a four-sided rice paper box. I certainly wasn't going to move up. Nor would I move laterally. I would either get a pay cut or sink through the paper floor and be gone from the company forever. All foreigners—and about half the Japanese workers—were on contract and in the same position.

Later in the month, when Kurasawa was making a union announcement, I confronted him about the proposed fate of foreign contract workers. He seemed to be taken aback by my direct inquiry. Virtually none of the Japanese workers were as bold, for if they spoke up, they know very well their chances of promotion would be diminished. I suppose I felt I had nothing to lose.

Word of my confrontation went up the chain of command, and the very next day I heard about my future at the company. Uno, who in all of my time at Nizumi hadn't spoken more than a few sentences to me, came to my desk and said, "You need not worry about your job. Nizumi has never cut a foreign engineer."

Later on, Higuchi told me that Abe had intervened for me. Abe had heard that Human Resources was interested in firing the foreign engineers, and he had written a very strong letter in my support. Apparently, he had asserted that if my contract was not renewed, the entire drag reducer project would come to a halt. I was saved.

As long as I could provide Nizumi with a skill that no Japanese worker had, they'd keep me on—and get a bargain. For as Higuchi later told me, one reason Nizumi wasn't firing foreign engineers was because they were young and not especially well paid.

Foreigners were also cheaper on the line. At around this time, I noticed a large group of Thai workers being marched around company grounds in an orderly fashion. Two Japanese employees led at the front while another remained in the back, perhaps to guard workers from going astray. These were the latest recruits, for even amid the downsizing, Nizumi was still hiring foreigners at bargain rates, about \$2.50 an hour.



It was February when the union negotiated with management about benefits. Kurasawa gave a brief speech to inform us that the company was doing even worse than had been predicted, so bonus pay would be further reduced

and two divisions would be combined, to permit more job cuts. We turned to each other in alarm. The union leader continued. Managers would also get pay cuts, and the number of directors would be reduced from fifty to fifteen. But the technicians, office ladies, and temporary workers, many of them women, were the hardest hit. Those that were not being fired were receiving drastically reduced bonuses and no paid overtime work. On the average, a technician would now receive 160,000 yen (\$1,400) a month, barely enough to pay the bills.

Later in the month, the union published an account of the initial union-management negotiation. The union confirmed that trouble lay ahead for the Japanese economy. They saw no improvement in sight and discussed the present hardships, such as cuts in overtime pay, cuts in the bonus, and extended service overtime. The union asked for an increase in wages and a reduction in working hours but wanted to "compromise while thoroughly negotiating" these issues.

Management responded by completely dismissing the union requests, "There is a recognition gap between the position of the management and the labor union, and we cannot make any concessions." As for bonus and overtime, management said, "We have no choice but to say that paying bonuses for working overtime is impossible." A discussion about the depressed condition of the Japanese market led into a list of initiatives to "get the company out of the deficit to survive in the twenty-first century." The "negotiation" ended with management saying that they would do their best to avoid further dismissal of workers—but they weren't making any promises.

I asked Shiina why the union and the workers were so passive about accepting management policies.

"What about this restructuring?" I prodded. "Why don't the workers try to fight it?"

"Because we will not win, and it will take too much energy," he said. "It is best to spend our energy finding a new job. Right now the economy is down, but when it goes back up, many will quit to find a job at another company."

I approached Higuchi to ask him about restructuring. He was very angry with both management policy and with how it had been disseminated. "What they are doing is dirty," he said. "They are leaking information to the press about company policy before they tell the employees!" These leaks had happened again and again.

At around this time, the union published the results of a survey they had

taken. The response rate had been a high 88 percent: 7,247 union members had filled out the questionnaire and returned it. Almost all agreed that "life has become harder due to falling wages." To the question, "How much does your life depend on overtime pay?"⁵ 70 percent of those surveyed said they could not make a living wage without overtime pay. An additional 20 percent could not save money for such things as housing and education without overtime.

Overtime was a crucial component of an employee's income, and it could be withheld at will by the section manager, who had absolute authority about which workers got overtime. This enforced worker obedience. If a worker broke company rules (even the hidden ones) or disrupted the power structure within the group or section, his or her wages could immediately be cut by approximately 30 percent.

It is often said that the Japanese worker is very loyal to his company—to the point of not using the paid vacations to which he or she is entitled. But according to the survey this is due to other factors. When asked "Did you use up your vacation days last year?" 52 percent of the respondents claimed they could not take all the days they were allotted. When asked why, 65 percent claimed that the "work environment and the workplace system made it difficult to use up holidays." For instance, Oda had a rule that no one in his section could take more than three consecutive days off. This angered Chen, since he wanted to take a week off to visit relatives in China.

The survey was intended to strengthen the position of the union during negotiations. However, it did not do much good—as proved by the results of the second round of negotiations. Although the union leaders presented a number of grievances, such as the need for wage increases and secure employment, they capitulated on all fronts. Management declared, "We have to endure with clenched teeth in order to save the company."

I asked Kurasawa at lunchtime one day about the labor-management negotiations. He always stretched out on his desk during lunch hour. "It's *tatemaie*," he said, half asleep. "It doesn't have any meaning." Negotiations were a sham; management always got its way.

When I returned to my desk, I asked Shiina to elaborate upon Kurasawa's remark. "You must be careful here to understand the difference between the *honme* and the *tatemaie*. It is very tricky. At times, it is even difficult for the

⁵ The multiple choice responses included, among others, "I cannot make a living without overtime income" and "I can barely get by without overtime."

Japanese to understand." He held up a union newspaper and continued, "What is written here does not represent me at all. In Japan, the unions are enterprise unions, so they are weak and are not effective. Management-union negotiations are nothing but *tatemae*."

Shiina paused, then said, "People used to care about their work and the company. For example, when something happened that they did not like, say, the development of new technology, we used to engage in *nemawashi*."

"*Nemawashi*? What's that?"

Nemawashi was a collective action among employees who decided that a company decision or policy needed correction. The group, after many hours of discussion, would form a corrective policy and submit it to a high-level manager. If the manager agreed the new policy was a good idea, he would pass it up through the chain of command, and the new policy might well be implemented. *Nemawashi* typically occurred when subordinates felt a high-level manager was implementing an ineffective or destructive policy. "But not any more," Shiina said. "People just do not care."

A few days later, management announced a work-sharing policy as a way to soften the impact of the proposed layoffs. Unlike American work-sharing, however, the workers did not share jobs with each other; rather, companies in the *keiretsu* shared workers. So Nizumi would be sending redundant employees to group-related companies. The official policy was that it protected jobs and that it was a way for members of the conglomerate to support each other when the economy was down, but in reality this practice was a way for large Toyota companies to unload redundant workers onto lower companies.

I asked Kurasawa about the work-sharing plans. He said that the smaller group companies were already saddled with redundant employees from Toyota and other large group companies, so they had agreed only to accept a small number of workers from Nizumi—far short of what was expected.

WORKER UNREST AND LABOR-MANAGEMENT RULES

In mid January, Kurasawa sat at the center of the meeting table at the section, and a group of employees sat beside him as he announced the latest management proposal. When management proposed a new policy to the union for so-called negotiations, it was immediately considered company policy since the union never put up any resistance. Kurasawa announced that Nizumi needed to fire an additional four hundred employees and implement a severe pay cut.

An assistant manager sitting beside Kurasawa blurted out, "We can't even say anything!"

Shiga yelled, "I heard a couple of guys at the meeting saying there is going to be a strike!"

Mochida asked angrily, "Are the directors getting fired as well? Why can't we be part of the decision making?"

It was my first taste of labor unrest at Nizumi, but it soon subsided, and Kurasawa continued reading off the list of company proposals.

When the meeting was over, I spoke with a number of my colleagues, most of whom were angry that the union hadn't stood up for workers' rights. Shiina said, "We're on our way into hell."

That week, the union published the last labor-management negotiation of the fiscal year. An engineer who represented labor complained about working on a Toyota project. Several dozen had to work day and night to finish the project and had to sleep in the company dorms because they were working after midnight, when the trains stopped running.

Factory workers were also required to put in long hours, and many worked two consecutive shifts, from 8:30 A.M. until midnight. However, they were not offered a dorm room in which to crash. When the union objected to these long hours, management responded by saying that Toyota had increased competition in the group, and to compete, Nizumi's workers had to work harder and longer. Management ended by saying, "We must protect our company, so we don't want to fight against labor. We must share our pain together. Please trust us to protect your jobs."

An illustration of the "happy family" was published with the newsletter.



As restructuring continued, Toyota announced a plan to buy more of Nizumi. Toyota, however, remained silent about the details of their takeover plan. Many employees thought they would clean out redundant employees and managers, while others thought whole departments would be eliminated. From behind my computer, I saw Takanashi, in his bright fluorescent pants, sitting in his strange bird position. I asked him about how restructuring would affect the company. He said, "I think Toyota may buy all of Nizumi. Toyota is also cutting jobs, so they will send them here to work, putting out Nizumi employees. Only the very best guys will remain, and the higher-level positions will be replaced with Toyota managers."

I asked, "Does the union negotiate with management about jobs?"

"Not at all," Takanashi said, his face turning pink with anger. "When union leaders attend a meeting, they just sit and nod their heads to anything management says. If they speak out, they risk losing their own jobs."

To an outsider, the labor-management relationship in Japan seems based on consensus and harmony; policy is decided in a system in which each group negotiates until an equilibrium is achieved that satisfies the whole. Management always maintains a façade of cooperation, and the union always maintains a façade of independence. But in truth, the union is just a management arm.

The annual Spring Offensive was a telling illustration of how ineffectual the union had become. In the past, the Spring Offensive had consisted of protests and strikes to persuade management to increase benefits. But now it had devolved into people merely waving red banners and yelling "ganbaroo" in the street. Sometimes union members would demonstrate at the company entrance and hand out flyers to the employees, who showed no interest. At the end of the day, the trash would be filled to the brim with union flyers. At the end of the week, large garbage trucks would haul the entire heap (along with the company literature that was also continually distributed and trashed) to the dump.⁶

At first, I thought my reluctance to accept authoritarian rule at Nizumi stemmed from my being an American, with a different set of values from the Japanese, but then I realized it came from a simple sense of injustice. Why

⁶ The employees were allowed to take company newsletters home with them. One newsletter had written at the top "for your family."

were so many employees so terribly unhappy? Why was it so hard to stand up to management? Why was there so much cynicism?

One day I opened the company manual that Shiina had mentioned many months earlier. This manual contained several hundred pages of company rules. The cover read, "The Labor Union Secretariat, who represents all workers at the company, has created the rules together with management." These rules applied to all workers, on the line or in the office, and included such subjects as working hours, holidays, overtime work, working breaks, family support, housing, business trip insurance, pay structure changes, rules that must be obeyed as a member of the labor union, rules for when an employee is sent to a subsidiary or abroad, and rules governing the acquisition of companies or the firing of employees.

An important set of rules governed the relationship between the company and the union. "Union activities must be held outside working hours," and "When a union activity is held after 7:00 P.M., the union must receive approval from Human Resources." Furthermore, "during a dispute, members of the union can only protest in designated areas as decided by the company."

The management enforced even more restrictive rules for union elections. "All workers running for an elected position in the union must obtain three to ten written recommendations from management, depending on the position." Another rule stated that if the number of candidates did not exceed the number of positions, no elections needed to be held.

As for union meetings, the rules stipulated that only union members could attend and that the chairman always had strict control of the meeting. Without the chairman's permission, union members couldn't voice their opinions, couldn't publicize union events, couldn't display posters to express their dissent—and couldn't even leave a meeting to show their displeasure. To show their "respect," members had to remain present until after the chairman had left.

It was common at Nizumi (and all Toyota companies) for the management and the union to choose candidates for union office in closed-door meetings. At Nizumi, since the number of employees running never exceeded the number of positions available, the election involved merely handing out ballots with the employees chosen for each union position, and the workers sending back the ballots after checking "yes" or "no." No one could remember the last time the slate had been rejected. As all aspiring managers

had to first serve as union leaders, an "elected" candidate occupied a fused position—as union leader and potential company manager.⁷

As a result of these rules, there was a complete disconnect between the workers and the union, which was supposed to be there to support them. Every last person I interviewed, including the union leader Kurasawa, said that the union was weak and in no way represented the voice of the workers. It was universally acknowledged that the primary role of the union was to rubber-stamp management decisions.

Even if the employees had a stronger union, most workers thought that a strike would be self-defeating. Kume summarized the general feeling. "I think most employees at Nizumi want to strike, but what effect will this have? We will not get support from the general public. If the union of Japan Railway goes on strike, the whole country comes to a stop because the country depends on the railway. But if we go on strike, management will just get angry and cut our jobs and paychecks, and no one in the country will care."

RECEIVING A PROMOTION

One afternoon in mid March, I was told to go to Human Resources. Since I was a contract employee, my review came up before that of the regular employees. I knew my work had been assessed by Higuchi, Uno, and Abe. As I walked down the stairs, I wondered if I would be demoted or fired, despite Abe's efforts. Instead, I was asked to sign a new contract—which gave me a

⁷ According to Shozo Sasaki of the Aichi Labor Institute, company policies are supported from the lowest levels because "the trade union collaborates and makes one body with the management." He further claims that at Toyota an employee seeking a union office must obtain up to fifty recommendations. If an employee received a recommendation from a person outside of the company-union collaboration, he or she would be subject to organized harassment from the company and union. Elections are a charade in which the "ballots are not kept secret. The workers vote by workshop, writing down the names of candidates on a table without partition, under the eyes of managers." See Shozo Sasaki, *Struggles against Toyotism, from Worker's Rights, Human Rights, and the Democratic Control of Multinationals*, Asia Pacific Trade Union Symposium (Tokyo: Zenroren Press, 1994), 130.

In her study of the Japanese steel industry, Toshiko Kamata discusses the reasons for the pacification of workers within the context of the authoritarian hierarchy of the organization: "One's criticism of the Company or the union is reported immediately to one's superiors. Wary of informers, the workers cease to talk." The reason, she writes, is that the union officers are recommended by both management and labor and hence are "under the dual control of the company and union." See Toshiko Kamata, "Japanese Management and the Loaning of Labor," in *Global Japanization*, edited by Tony Elger and Chris Smith (New York: Routledge, 1994), 107.

promotion to assistant manager as well as a pay increase. At a time of drastic cutbacks, this was quite a surprise.

When I returned from Human Resources, Higuchi pulled me away from my desk to discuss my contract. Higuchi was unaware that I had just gotten a raise, so he began talking about the company's current compensation plans. "This year everyone is getting a pay cut," he said. "The company has been cutting back the yearly bonus. At its best, the yearly bonus used to equal six months' salary. Now it will be only three or four."⁸

In the previous system, employees' pay was based exclusively on their level. Everyone at the same level got the same pay. Under the present system, workers who performed better got a higher base paycheck. Higuchi said, "If someone at the same level as me gets the same promotion, my salary may be different than his, but I will not know how different—there is no information."

Higuchi said the reason he was speaking to me in detail about company policy (some of which I already knew) was that a Chinese engineer in the vehicle design section had been very upset when he'd received a pay cut, and Higuchi had been worried that I would also be angry. Higuchi wanted me to fully understand conditions at the company.

"But I didn't get a pay cut," I told him. "I got a raise."

He was shocked. "You're getting a pay raise—what? Everyone else is getting a pay cut!" He sat looking at me, dumbfounded. Finally, he said, "Well, then you're happy, I don't need to talk to you about this."

When Erberto heard about my pay raise, he, too, became very upset. He had received a large pay cut, and he felt his work was equal to mine. He spoke angrily, "I want to get back at them, I want unionization! Why are some workers getting more than others? Why are some getting raises while others are getting pay cuts? Why are some people being let go while others remain?"

I was starting to feel guilty. Had my raise been the result of favoritism? Or had I really made significant contributions to my section? I had produced excellent results on Abe's pet project—but Uno had been adamantly opposed

⁸ Foreigners on contract typically do not receive a yearly bonus but were instead compensated by receiving an equivalent sum as part of their monthly paycheck. The advantage of not being on a bonus system was that when the company was not as profitable, paychecks remained constant. The disadvantage was that if the company was doing well, and bonuses increased, yearly salaries could rise dramatically.

to my working on it at all. I would never learn why I'd been promoted. They never showed me their evaluations, no one reviewed my performance, and I never received comments from anyone. The decision was made behind closed doors.⁹

It was unfair to Erberto, for he'd worked just as hard as I had and had gotten similar results to mine. Erberto said, "I know what they're trying to do. They want to pacify you because you spoke out at the union meeting. They're giving you money so you won't speak up anymore."

"Don't be silly, Erberto—they won't co-opt me like that, and you know it."

His anger did not subside quickly. A few days later, he discovered a trick that Oda was pulling on him and other employees in his group to keep them from being promoted. "None of the simulation I do has my name on it, so during evaluation, Human Resources has nothing to look at. The problem is Oda doesn't support me," he said. "Even if I have superb results, it doesn't matter anyway. You only rise in this company if your team leader likes you."

So much for the policy of evaluation based on performance. Other members of Erberto's team had also been punished after falling out of favor. "Two engineers from our division must be sent to Toyota," he said, "and guess what? They just happen to be the two people Oda hates the most. God! This place is terrible! I can't wait to leave. Who will do the engineering simulation when I leave? No one can do it but me—and they will look like shit!"

This thought seemed to console him, and we were able to maintain our close friendship.

Shiina gave me some insider information that helped explain the draconian measures Nizumi was putting into place. He said that the reason for the severe downsizing and radical pay cuts was because Toyota had sent an ultimatum to the company. They would buy half of Nizumi's stock—but only if Nizumi would insure that it would be in the black the following year. If not, Nizumi would be expelled from the Toyota group.

⁹ In *Japan Works: Power and Paradox in Postwar Industrial Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), John Price reveals that Westerners misunderstand the Japanese seniority-based wage system. He claims that as early as 1949 employers in Japan played a large role in wage increases. Since management decided wage increases, the "Japanese system is best described as an incentive or performance based wage system. To be sure, workers do advance up a wage grid, but the rate of advancement is determined by management for the most part." I agree with Price's evaluation of the wage system. The opportunity for an employee to receive higher pay was determined by position and advancement, which was strongly determined by an employee's superior.

Soon, Nizumi announced the final result of the labor-management negotiations. They gave everyone a raise in base pay of 4,361 yen per month (about \$36) but they also cut back the yearly bonus from 4.5 to 2.5 month's wages. It was a clever plan because the official story was that all employees had received raises, whereas in fact, everyone had received a 20 percent to 30 percent pay cut.

We were fast approaching the end-of-year promotion meeting, and it was rumored that Kurata was to be promoted one level up, to a higher-level management position. We all wondered who would fill his shoes. Many were eager for a new leader, for Kurata had been disappointing in providing new product development. The Advanced Design Project debacle ("We can do anything"—all words, no action) was directly attributed to him. His actions had contributed to Nizumi's reduced market share and the resulting punishment from Toyota. But was Kurata being demoted? On the contrary,

There was a lot of gossip around the office about who—among the half dozen men primed for the position—would get the job. Erberto and Chen would occasionally inform me about what was happening, because their boss Oda was privy to high-level gossip and was not shy about discussing the power struggle that occurred behind the scenes. We were all anxious about the outcome.

When they finally announced the promotions and transfers, we were all shocked to hear that an incompetent and spineless subordinate named Mori, a close associate of Kurata's, would become the new department manager. Mori was so inept that the standard joke about him was that he retired from the company a long time ago. "Kurata doesn't want to give up power," said Shiina. "He wants to have his puppet in place so he can keep pulling the strings."

Kurata's desire to continue to control the Design Division had a history. A few years back, the Research and Design existed in a division called R&D. Nakaya was a high-level manager in the analysis section while Kurata was a high-level manager in the research section. At that time, Shizumi gikan retired and a power vacuum developed. Nakaya attempted to gain control in the division by promoting his subordinates. Kurata became furious since he lost power and influence in a number of high-level positions. Kurata's appointment was to ensure that he would not again lose control over important positions. According to Shiina it was also "payback" and a signal to discourage those who would attempt to usurp his power.

The promotion of Mori was a learning experience for me. I had read about the seniority-based promotional system at Japanese companies, but I was learning that in most cases, promotion was based on power and connections.

Once Kurata was elevated to his new position, he moved up to the sixth floor and immediately made changes in the physical structure of his work environment. He tore down the walls of the office that Sasaki, the previous manager, had built. This had been the only enclosed office in the entire building. He also broke up one of the large engineering groups and scattered the managers into different positions so he could place his close subordinates in key positions. Erberto worked on the sixth floor and said that in the morning they were starting to have military-style drills similar to what we had observed at Toyota.

GETTING CANNED

I first met Kawasaki during my job interview—he managed my visit at Nizumi. He spoke fluent English and seemed very well educated. He was a drivetrain specialist so I thought he might be the manager of my section, but when I started the job, I discovered that Kawasaki worked directly under Abe, managing another group unrelated to his specialty.

During the job rotation meeting, Abe announced that Kawasaki was to be moved to a government research laboratory. The lab was a collective of the largest companies in the industry where they worked on joint projects to develop Japanese technology.

When I spoke to Shiina, he said that Kawasaki was being moved because upper management didn't like him. Shiina told me why Kawasaki had fallen out of favor. The company had initially decided to hire Erberto for a position in our section, as he had requested, but as they were enthusiastically preparing to accept him, Abe suddenly rejected him. Apparently Kawasaki had first introduced Erberto to Abe's boss instead of coming directly to Abe, breaking one of Abe's cardinal rules: all subordinates must talk to him before talking to his superior. Abe became very upset about being slighted by his subordinate and told Kawasaki that Erberto would not be allowed to work in the department—and possibly not at the company at all. Kawasaki, in panic, asked Kurata, to whom he was connected, for a big favor. Could Erberto work in

Kurata's division? If Nizumi couldn't offer Erberto a job at this point, it would be terribly embarrassing to the company. Kurata agreed to take on Erberto. This further angered Abe because he and Kurata had been rivals for years.

Kawasaki had made a grave mistake for which he would pay dearly. Soon after the incident, he was transferred out of the drivetrain section and given a menial job. Now, he was being sent for three years to the government research laboratory. By this point, I had learned that it was customary for managers to rid themselves of undesirable employees by moving them into other positions. Kawasaki's punishment was particularly severe since his new place of employment was four hours from his home and he would only see his family on weekends.

As soon as my conversation with Shiina ended, I raced over to Erberto. I had the inside scoop on his job assignment and wanted to share it with him immediately. He just shook his head in disbelief. After all these years, we had finally learned why he'd been diverted to the Design Division: because of Kawasaki's breach of etiquette.

A few days later, management distributed the "Communication Rules." It began with the insipid message: "April is a nice season and the time of warmth so let's think about the importance and pleasure of communication during business." The document discussed the transmission of information and how sound and intonation and gesture help communicate a message. It then presented an interesting developmental history of communication. "The person we initially communicate with is our mother," it read. "The way of communication is not by words but through physical intimacy [skinship]." The discussion about *skinship* ended by saying that it strongly influenced the personality development of children and that recent research revealed that physical intimacy with animals can "relax your mind." The document then discussed the three important aspects of business communication: receiving orders, sharing job instructions, and reporting and transmitting other information. In communicating, the employee must have a clear purpose. He must listen carefully and try to understand what the other person wants. It was important to try to understand what the listener was thinking (*kangaekata*) and to choose the best way to express the core meaning of the topic being discussed.

"Some humor including joking is also important in creating a good atmosphere for communication," it read. "When you order someone to do some-

things, you should think of how to word it, and in many cases it is a good idea to use humor in your approach." Words, however, were not the only important aspect of communication. Feelings were also important. "You should understand the other person's feelings by closely observing their expressions, attitudes, and actions." The document claimed that the Japanese people do not typically express their feelings freely, so it was important to observe their body language. The document ended with a note, "If you can practice the above rules, communication will be easier and more enjoyable. Always remember—practicing and noticing feelings without words is very important."

Kawasaki's good-bye party was held in a Chinese restaurant in the neighboring town and was attended by a large contingent of the highest-level managers, including Nakaya. After the usual good-bye speeches, a moderator walked up to the podium and began a question-and-answer quiz about Kawasaki's life at the company. Kawasaki stood in the center of the room while the moderator posed a question to the audience. When an employee answered, the crowd laughed and Kawasaki interjected a few funny comments. Someone suddenly shouted a question about who was managing the section when the Irish engineer was at the company. Another responded, "Ask Mehri san, he must know!" I was hauled to the podium to a barrage of laughter. The moderator asked, "So, who was the *buchō* in charge when the company had to deal with the problem of the Irish engineer?"

A few years back, Sheila, the Irish engineer, had complained about overtime work to a diplomat at the Irish embassy.¹⁰ The diplomat was upset with what he had heard and wrote a letter to the company asking them to pull back on overtime work requirements. The company was embarrassed and did not handle its response well. The Human Resources manager who was responsible for foreign engineers was caught in the crossfire, and she was blamed for the incident. As it happened, she was the only female manager at Nizumi, so pinning the blame on her alone created quite a stir. (You might think that after this incident, the company became more careful about inflicting overtime on its foreign engineers, but Nizumi's response was to refuse to hire any more Irish engineers.)

Now at Kawasaki's good-bye party, everyone was waiting for me to answer

¹⁰ At the time Irish government had an agreement with Japanese companies to hire Irish engineers who were finding it difficult to obtain jobs in Ireland because of the high unemployment rate.

the question, but I hadn't a clue about who the *buchō* was at the time. I made a few incorrect guesses, to bursts of laughter in the room, especially from the higher-level managers. In comic desperation, I suggested Dr. Zombie. "Wrong," they yelled raucously.

The moderator finally had mercy on me and whispered, "It's Kurata."

"Oh, I know," I said, "It's the design director!"

Although this time I was right, they still screamed with laughter. The men were becoming very intoxicated.

Now the moderator was asking Kawasaki, "So who is your favorite office lady?"

Kawasaki named a few with whom he had worked, paused, then added, "And Miss Araki."

Someone shouted, "Oh, yeah, we know about her!" More laughter.

Then someone asked Kawasaki, "So now that you will be living so far away from home, will you visit your family on weekends?"

"Sometimes" he said "But not always."

"Ok, now, when you visit your family what do you plan to do: (1) Bring your laundry home, (2) Have your wife cook you some real food, or (3) Spend the weekend in Disney Land?"

The crowd was waiting for a jokey response. But Kawasaki just said quietly, "I think I'll spend time with my kids in the park." This had a sobering effect on us.

Then the moderator presented Kawasaki with an exquisitely wrapped present, saying, "It will be useful when you are lonely."

Kawasaki undid the wrapping, and out came a picture frame. The moderator said, "See? There are three places to put pictures, one for your wife and the others are for your two kids."

Then the moderator gave him another present—an iron. He would need one of his own, now that he would be living far away from his wife.

It was Kawasaki's turn to speak. He began by thanking those who had attended the party, and he gave a lofty talk about what technology would be important for the company in the future. Suddenly, he launched into a personal complaint about his new housing allowance. "I am only receiving 50,000 yen [about \$420] to pay for my apartment," he said. "That's not enough for a studio in the worst part of town. How can my children come and visit when I can't make them comfortable?"

The party ended soon after that but some of us went on to a second drinking party with Kawasaki. When we sat down for a few drinks, Kawasaki told me, "My wife is a pharmacist, she's a very nice wife."

"Too bad she and your kids can't go with you," I said.

There are a number of institutional factors in the Japanese education system that prevent the family from moving to follow the husband. The first is that to ensure that children enter the proper university, which optimizes their chances of getting a good job, it is important for them to attend a well-known secondary school. Students and parents invest huge amounts of time and money on tutorial schools to prepare for the entrance exam to the high school of their choice, but acceptance is not transferable to another school. Parents also feel that they will jeopardize their children's performance if they are suddenly switched to another school in which they do not have friends who can provide emotional support. A final obstacle is the location of the high-level schools, which are all in and around the major cities. But many of those transferred out of the company are relocated in the countryside, where the schools are not as good. In addition, it is difficult to transfer a mortgage from one house to another in a different town.¹¹

Three days after his farewell party, Kawasaki came to our section and said good-bye by patting us on the backs and placing a cookie on each desk.

The next week, Erberto said, "Hey, let's get together with Kawasaki for dinner." Erberto gave him a call and he arranged a meeting at one of Erberto's favorite Indian restaurants. It was a quiet, classy place, without the loud chatter found in most *izakayas*, so we could talk easily. Kawasaki said the organization of the government lab was fundamentally flawed. "All of the patents or new technology developed are to be shared among all the companies involved," he said. But since all the companies were competitors, and some were fierce rivals for even the most minute market share, the engineers almost never shared information with each other. Many spent their days busying themselves with useless paper work or trivial hobbies. "I once asked a young engineer who worked at one of these labs what he did all day, and he responded, 'I spend most of my days at the bookstore reading comics.'"

We asked Kawasaki why he had agreed to leave Nizumi. "I was hesitant to accept the position," he said, "because it meant that I would have to live away

from my family." His son and daughter were both young teenagers and were entering that critical stage in their lives when they had to study hard to enter well-known schools. Kawasaki's boss assured him that it would only be for three years, and his job would be secure when he returned. After much arm-twisting, he finally agreed and began preparing for his departure. Before leaving, however, he was told that his job was going to be extended to six years, with a strong possibility of another six years on top of that. If Kawasaki wanted to remain employed, he would have to accept the job, for he had little chance of obtaining an equivalent position at another company.¹² And so he had been tricked into going to exile for perhaps a dozen years.

ADMIRATION FOR THE UNITED AUTO WORKERS

Bridgestone was undergoing a restructuring similar to Nizumi's. One Bridgestone manager who lost his job took his life in a ritual suicide. Before he died, he distributed a chilling note to his colleagues. "[Bridgestone] is an excellent company that continues to expand its earnings every year, making a record 100 billion yen or more. This is made possible by sacking much of the workforce and by cutting wages for the rest, thus depriving us of the basic means of living. . . . We must stand up against executives who treat us like trash."¹³ Many workers at Nizumi could relate to him, and he became a symbol of the misery restructuring was causing. My friend Mochida remarked, "He made a terrible mistake—he should have killed his boss, not himself."

Although this ritual suicide made the news, other deaths did not. It was becoming common for humiliated employees to throw themselves in front of evening trains, thereby saving face and providing their families with a life-insurance payoff.

I asked Higuchi if it was common in Japan for salarymen to kill themselves by way of *seppuku*.¹⁴ "In the Edo period it was popular," he said. "People that do it today are usually on the extreme right. It's not the typical

¹² An engineer with a specific skill would only be hired at the same seniority level by another automobile company that manufactures the specific product, but large Japanese companies typically do not hire full-time white-collar employees from a competing company. His only other alternative would be to quit and work at a parts supplier with lesser benefits and lower "name" status.

¹³ Atsushi Yamada, "Death of a Salaryman," *Japan Quarterly* (July–September 1999): 40–46.

¹⁴ Often referred to as *hara-kiri* in American literature, ritual suicide involves stabbing oneself in the stomach.

¹¹ From an interview with Yamato Kobayashi of the Research Institute of Democracy and Education, January 20, 2000.

behavior of a Japanese businessman. I heard that in America when someone gets fired, the situation is quite different. The person who was fired will show up at work the next day and shoot his boss and the others responsible for his dismissal."

"It happens," I admitted. "But not often."

"What I find strange," said Higuchi, "is that they say in a few years the economy will be good again. But now that they are firing so many people, when the economy picks up we will have to train many new workers again."



In early April, those who had chosen to take refresh leave the previous year began returning to the company—but not for long. Most of them were fired, contrary to what Nizumi had promised. Shiina said, "I heard that when one person in the Design Division returned, he was forced to fill out a voluntary retirement form. They gave him a choice, either retire and accept an early retirement package, or be fired and receive no company benefits. He asked if he could be transferred to another section, but they said no and forced him to leave the company."

I thought about my former enthusiasm for refresh leave and marveled that I had been so naïve. My Japanese colleagues had known full well the consequences of taking refresh leave, which was why none of them had chosen to take it.

Later that month, Kurasawa called me to his desk. He said there would be a companywide union meeting open to all employees, and he wanted me to attend. I thought this was strange since in the past, as the union leader, he tried to hide union information from me. Union rules also forbade contract workers to attend meetings.

While I talked with Kurasawa, Mochida suddenly interjected, "The American will speak up!"

Kurasawa nodded and smiled.

Now I saw why they wanted me at the meeting. They valued my American antiauthoritarian stance. They needed a "trouble-maker" like me.

How ironic, I thought. Here I was in the supposed land of labor harmony, where employees and managers were supposed to solve disputes by consensus—yet the workers really long for a strong trade union like the UAW. I thought, "If only American workers could hear this!"

It was exciting. I intended to stir things up at the meeting, and this time, I had the men on my side. We entered the meeting room, where the tables and chairs had been arranged in a large square. Employees arrived, group by group, until the room was packed. The last to arrive were the union leaders. The senior leader sat in the center and his two subordinates flanked his side. They started talking about conditions at the company and why restructuring was necessary. They were taking the same line as management: if employees could persevere and be patient, they would be rewarded. The meeting was planned for one hour, and they spoke for a full fifty-five minutes without breaking for a moment. Finally, it was time for the workers to speak. One person asked a question about overtime pay and received a vague response. Another asked a question about bonuses and received a similar answer. A third asked about a leave of absence and was told to endure and he would be rewarded. Suddenly, the question period was over—before they had recognized me. Now I wouldn't get to speak. I was very disappointed, and I tried to get the question period extended—without success.

On my way back to my desk I bumped into Jimbo, who had also attended the meeting, and asked him why the question and answer session was so short. "The reason is that they do not want to hear anything that will surprise them," he said.

Later, I grumbled to Higuchi, "Why do they even bother having a meeting?"

"They have a meeting so they can say they had a discussion, but the reality is they only give a report on what they have decided. After they make a decision, there will be no change."

After the meeting, I went from person to person asking their opinions on the situation. Time and again, my colleagues spoke of the UAW as a good union that defended worker's rights, as opposed to the pacified Japanese enterprise unions. Kurasawa said, "In the U.S. the UAW is strong so they can strike—but Japanese unions are weak, we cannot strike, we are all robots."

I asked, "Why *don't* you just go on strike?"

Shiina shook his head, "Our situation is like that scene in a Western—you know the one—when the guns are drawn and the first person who moves gets shot. It's either move or die, but if we move we die, too."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"If we do nothing, more and more of us will be fired. But if we strike, we

will certainly be fired. If we want to put our ideals to good use, the only chance we have is to work for the community, like volunteer work for the handicapped or the homeless, that's all. We cannot strike, and everyone in the company knows this."

Technicians, who belong to a smaller, separate company called Nizumi Technical Staff, didn't even have an ineffectual union like ours. Kume said, "If we have a problem, we contact management, and they try to solve it, without much effect. The managers listen to us, but most of the time they do nothing to correct the problem." Although the Technical Staff did not have a union, the policy of the Nizumi Motors Union had a profound and deleterious effect on their benefits.

Kume said, "Everyone is angry about the union decisions. We all want to strike but it will not happen," he said. "We don't ever speak out. In Japan, many employees work for a lifetime at the same company, so speaking out results in a demotion later in one's career."

I asked, "Doesn't the union do *anything* to protect worker's rights?"

"Not really. If a union member speaks out against company policy, he will lose his job—it's that simple."

The facade of unionization meant you kept your eyes closed and your mouth shut.

All my friends who worked on the line had no job protection at all. They all lost their jobs. After Kofi left Nizumi, he worked at a few odd jobs but later got a good job at Nissan. Sanan went back to working as a waiter at a Thai restaurant. Nicholi quit factory life for good and found a job as a manager of a Mexican restaurant. Octavio was able to find a good job at a supplier company, while Jorge returned to Peru. The last I heard of Romone was that he had moved up north and got a job selling vegetables. Mehdi and Hossein continued to work at their company with only the remaining employees—the owner and his son.

GOOD-BYE, NIZUMI

On Christmas Eve, 1998, there was a fire in my parents' house in Connecticut. My mother was hospitalized, and my siblings begged me to come home and help rebuild the house. By then, I was feeling homesick, and I felt if I stayed in Japan any longer, I would lose touch with my family and friends

back home. Furthermore, as a foreigner at Nizumi, I felt permanently insecure. I suspected that I did not have much of a future there.

When I told Higuchi I was leaving, I spoke only about my parents' situation. He had been such a kind boss—I didn't want him to feel that anything at Nizumi had been unpleasant for me. A few days later, Higuchi told me that Uno said I could take a leave of absence for six months and then return to the company. I thanked him for the offer but refused. A couple of days later, he approached me again. This time he said that Uno would save my desk for me in the section for one entire year if I wanted to return. Obviously, Uno wanted me to stay. The hundreds of colorful simulations I had produced, whether they were accurate or not, had always added an extra "wow" to his presentations.

It was only a matter of days before the men organized a drinking party for me. We walked to an *izakaya* near the company, where a private tatami room had been reserved. I sat next to Higuchi, and the others sat around us. Kurasawa was talking about how he thought the American economy was a bubble that would burst. Dr. Zombie told me about the early years of one of the professors closely associated with the company. "During the first ten years of his graduate school studies, all he did was play softball. But now look how famous he is!" He laughed his madman's laugh.

Higuchi turned to me and said, "When you leave, I will have a problem. The drivetrain simulation will now be transferred to the Design Division." I didn't know if he was trying to make me feel guilty about leaving or if he was really troubled about handing responsibility over to our rival. Already, these territorial issues were becoming less important to me.

The beer soon came, and Abe started the festivities by toasting me and talking about his impressions of me when we first met. He said I was one of the best engineers in the section and added, "I hope that others will follow the steps of Mehri *san*."

I'd always liked Abe, and I appreciated his kind words, but they made me feel a little uncomfortable. Performance had become a critical issue for the men, and some, like Kurasawa, whom I now considered a friend, were not high performers—nor would they ever be.

Then each man stood up and spoke about his relationship with me. Scarface said when I arrived at the company, he thought I was too serious, but then he kept hearing laughter from the desks in my area, so he realized I must be a fun-loving person. Jimbo spoke about having "the American" in the sec-

tion who was shaking things up. He thought my example might lead to a more independent way of thinking. "But, alas, things didn't change at all. However, I am thankful I have gotten to know Mehri san." Shiga joked about our wrestling match and said he was looking forward to the next one. I said I was looking forward to the next round on the karaoke stage. Kurasawa and Mochida joked about the International Adventure Club and how I went to the mountains to meet women. Higuchi gave a more conventional speech about my work and said he appreciated the progress I had made. Kume thanked me profoundly for introducing him to Rie, who was now his wife.

In recent years, several books have been written about the Japanese workplace, and some, particularly those written about transplants in America and Europe, have finally reported accurately about the Toyota Production System. However, the book that gets it best about Japan is still Kamata Satoshi's *Japan in the Passing Lane*—written more than thirty years ago. Kamata worked at Toyota for six months as a temporary worker and covertly documented his work experience. One of the many accidents that he documented was that of a worker who suffered a severe concussion when his hand touched an electric cord that was frayed. "Luckily the current passed through the base of his finger. If it had gone to his heart, he would have been killed instantly."

Kamata talks about a newsletter he received that discussed lengthening the workday. The workers were despondent. "They take it for granted that it will be decided by the top and sent down. Then again, many of them are thinking that whatever happens, it won't make much difference."

What has changed at Toyota in the last three decades? Not much. I experienced the same unsafe work environment, the same oppressive mechanisms of worker control, and the same power manipulations as Kamata chronicled. I wonder what will happen in the next thirty years. The Japanese I met at Nizumi were justifiably cynical about politics. Because they are denied access to a fair, democratic process in either the corporate or the political arenas, change will not come easily, nor soon.

After each member of the section had said a few words about me, I was presented with two gifts: a Nizumi T-shirt and a plastic model of the vehicle I had worked on. When I stood up to leave, all the guys stood up, too. They looked at me without saying a word. Abe put out his hand for a shake. Uno did the same, and so did Higuchi. I shook their hands warmly.

Everyone waited for some final remarks from me, but I was exhausted and had nothing more to say. I just gave them a smile. All my observations and assessments were confined to the journal I'd been writing from my first day at Nizumi to my last, a journal that testifies to my growing understanding of the Japanese culture and the bitter realities of the Toyota Production System. From that journal has grown this book.