

The Origin of the Nemesis

I fell in love with the Nemesis in the summer of 1978. That was Tokyo. A town not impartial to romance. Any city will do when you're in love—St. Louis, Paris, New York—all you need is a park, a few lonely lanes and a cafe or two. Everywhere you have the night. Idle a while under a streetlight and you charge that spot with a moment of memory. Enough of these moments and you will ping emotionally everywhere you go, uptown, downtown, at crosswalks and monuments, waterfronts and alleys, under glowing clocks and signposts. Time goes by. Then the town belongs to the one you loved.

Before and after me is a history of schoolboys, college students and salary-men, all having passed the blue hour with Yuki Kara, alias the Nemesis. The nickname was a consequence of her war with my great friend, Oe. I had warned him about her powerful effect on men. Most either loved or despised her, depending on how high they allowed their hopes to rise. Practical Oe never expected love, but he wanted respect. The Nemesis, for the most part, expected to be left alone. I hoped they would get along, but upon first sight of one another they were enemies.

We were all three employed by Hakuodo Inc., the prestigious and second-largest advertising agency in Japan. Miss Kara was part of the MacDonalds Japan team. Next door to her was the Kirin-Seagram room where I worked. Oe was officially assigned to the Creative Division, but he frequently visited our floor to confer with the account executives.

Oe had heard rumors of an American assigned to the Kirin account, and he walked the halls until he heard either my excellent English or my renegade Japanese. He introduced himself and offered to treat me to the finest *ra-men* shop in Tokyo. From then on

we often had lunch together. Sometimes, after work, he would take me to one of his many drinking spots in the Yurakucho area. Usually it was just the two of us. Oe had few friends among his male co-workers. It was as much his language abilities as his irregular profile which set him apart. He ridiculed hostess bars and *karaoke*, and he dismissed Japanese male camaraderie as “crypto-misogynist.”

Oe was thirty and single. He had about him the nervous air of a boy-virgin which affected maternal and sexually-inhibited women like drugged chocolate. I knew something of his kind of girl. Unloved and unlovely, they widened their tiny eyes with eyeliner and cast a chemical blush over their naturally buttery, smooth complexions. They washed regularly, shaved their upper lips and never mismatched a skirt with the wrong shoes. Oe’s plain women fretted over him but never despaired. Living at home and flush with disposable income, they showered an indifferent Oe with gifts. One tall, executive secretary presented him with an expensive electric typewriter for Valentine’s Day. He lugged it into the Seagram room where he ostentatiously offered to touchtype a page of the sales report. It is a rare Japanese male at ease behind a keyboard, and more so one who’d brag of his secretarial skills. Oe sensed he could air his conceits before me without censure, and before long I was confided his greatest deeds and feats, the highlights of his life. One of these, “The Oe Mirror,” he both designed and patented. According to Oe, it reflected an unreversed image of the viewer off a concave steel surface. Oe boasted how he had mastered all of the intricate legal terminology and drafted the patent application himself, saving “a veritable fortune” in legal fees.

I was honestly impressed. I had encountered Japanese know-it-alls before, but none with his nervy style. His pedantry fueled his creativity which was real and unexpected. Once Oe met me for lunch at Maxim’s in the basement of the Sony Building wearing an ill-fitting pair of calico slacks which it was soon disclosed, he had cut and stitched together by hand.

“I am unafraid to dabble my talents in the emasculate arts,” he said.

The cornerstone of his act, the plumb line of his eccentricity, was his magnificent English. This he showed off arbitrarily, often at

the expense of his linguistically less-gifted peers. It was one good show. He convincingly integrated the right mannerisms, accents, and airs with his spoken English. Unlike most Japanese, he could properly draw out the vowels in “okay.” He could cock a skeptical Western eyebrow. He knew how to use his hands and how to throw back his head in exasperation and exclaim, “Oh come on!”

Backstage, metaphorically speaking, were hours on hours of meticulous rehearsal. Almost five thousand, admitted Oe. He had perfected his “er”s and “el”s by taping American movies, radio and television broadcasts, and then going over each dialog repeatedly, phrase by phrase. He amassed his monstrous vocabulary by systematically categorizing and committing to memory every new word or phrase encountered. He monitored his spoken Japanese with zeal, scanning for meanings he was unable to communicate in English. Anything that stumped him set him off. In a measured frenzy he would scribble the unholy letters on one of the little cards he kept in his wallet. Later he would process the day’s catch with the help of the twelve-odd dictionaries on his desk.

Once when he was drunk, Oe allowed me to see his vocabulary book. Here between covers was page after page of his tiny handwriting. In each left margin were listed unfamiliar English words and expressions. (One page at random from one of these notebooks reads down from the top left: “aver,” “avocado,” “AWOL,” “juniper,” “lather,” and “in the bag.”) Next to each entry was the definition in Japanese. Next to this was written the context in which the vocabulary occurred. Finally, in triple-tiny letters, were three examples of usage, and sometimes, in red ink, an example of incorrect usage. A number of check marks in green ink decorated the blank space between entries. Each check, he explained, represented one time he’d either used or reviewed that particular word or phrase. Five or more checks and he x’d the entry in red. When all of the twenty or so entries on a page were x’d out, he stamped his name with a *hanko* in the top right corner of the page. Eventually there was not a page without its own round “Oe,” in Chinese characters, hanging like an orange sun over the semantic plane. This completed one volume of work. It was numbered, dated, bound in rubber bands and filed away. Somewhere in Tokyo, Oe had stashed two sake barrels loaded with

fifty of these notebooks, along with a few hundred dialogs recorded from English-language television. He was unable to destroy the evidence, but would hint at its existence when he was drunk or in a certain introspective mood.

I liked to test the limits of his abilities. Normally, he could hold his own against, out-spell, and out-articulate the average freshman from say, the University of Miami. If you knew how, it was possible to expose his soft spots. I would accelerate my speech, blurring all the consonants, then blast him with off-speed idioms and jargon. The speed didn't faze him, nor did the recondite vocabulary. The trick was to find an artless word which wouldn't commonly occur to news-writers or writers of language texts. I couldn't trip him with "per-spicious," but I might with something like "parboil." Thus it was with perverse alacrity that Oe frequented me, one of the few in the city who could so bedevil him. I was only a symptom of his relentless pursuit, his seige of the maddening, ever-dwindling state of imperfection, which taunted him, like a calculus curve, ever approaching, infinitesimally, yet never reaching, the status of a native speaker of English.

The origin of the Nemesis turns in part about Oe's pride and his linguistic obsession. I recall one night, down along the tracks of the *Shinkansen* near Yūrakuchō where there was, and still may be, a small bar where this night, Oe and I relaxed, eating marinated chicken on skewers and drinking *shōchū*. *Shōchū* is a cheap, raw-tasting spirit, distilled from sweet potatoes. Normally it is clear as water and is known for its latent kick and its consequences the morning after.

The bar girl set down a small bottle brimming with a pink-tinged liquid. Oe poured me a glass and let me return the favor.

"Drink," he commanded. We clinked glasses and drank. There was, mingling with the familiar taste, a fruity tingle, faintly sweet.

"Pomegranate *shōchū*," said Oe. "Brewed by the master himself. He'll only dispatch a bottle to his favored clientele."

"I like it," I said.

"You won't find it in any liquor store across Japan," said Oe. He refilled our glasses and the bottle was empty. Over his shoulder I could see the master talking with two businessmen at the counter. They turned away when I looked up.

"Ignore them," said Oe, following my gaze. "It's most discombobulating for them to hear a Japanese converse in other than broken English."

"*Jya, Nihongo de hanashimashō*," I said ("Let's speak in Japanese").

"Your cadence betrays you," said Oe. He repeated the phrase for me with the properly-clipped rhythm. The businessmen made guttural sounds of amusement.

"Dees ee za pen!" I said loudly, mimicking the first English learned by all Japanese in school.

Oe giggled nervously. I held up a napkin.

"Dees ee za na-pu-kin!"

"Cut it out, already," said Oe.

"Dees is a boo-ku! Come on, Oe, fall in. How zu you sink obbu Jah-pan?"

"Not interested," said Oe, unable to maintain his smile.

I laughed. It was easy to imagine a younger, humbler, Japanesier Oe, practicing, distending his tongue and lips in front of a mirror.

"Devolve, Oe, to an earlier time, when you yourself spoke a halting, crude, virtually incomprehensible grade of English..."

"Sort of like your Japanese," he countered. He knew how to throw the heat back at the source. I decided to acquaint him with the rhetorical feint which he had little experience with.

"Yes," I conceded carelessly, "my utterly, embarrassingly flawed Japanese. A self-conscious, synthetic, fraudulent improvisation, I am the first to admit. Now about your English..." Oe rolled his eyes the way I had once shown him. But he was waiting to hear what I had to say.

"The problem with your English, Oe, if you are at all interested..."

Oe was drinking his *shōchū* with great relish.

"...the problem with your English, is its disturbing lack of *integrity*."

"How so?" asked Oe, mesmerized apparently, by something at the bottom of his glass.

"I refer, if you really want to know, and you *do*, to its rather sycophantic quality. Cringing, almost." Oe was silent. I continued: "It lacks character, in my opinion. I mean, if I really listen to your

perfect English, I can *hear* you practicing. I can *see* you thinking about it, wringing out everything possibly Japanese about your delivery. This gives me the creeps.”

Oe’s face was calm, but there was sweat on his lip and forehead. I wish now I had stopped there, but I didn’t.

“I don’t think you should sacrifice your native character to speak a foreign language. Like, in prep school, I remember this girl in my French class. Her family had once lived in Europe and she had been to France many times. When she spoke *Français* she’d go into this phony impersonation of a *Grand Dame*—bug out her eyes, wave her fingers and go ‘Oo-la-la!’ Then there was this guy from Lawrence, Massachusetts. And he spoke French with this resolutely unyielding Boston accent. You could barely understand him, but you could hear the Boston in him and he was game, and he persevered. And you know, if *I* were a Frenchman, I think I’d much rather speak with him over her. As an American, I think I’d rather hear the honest English of, say, Yuki Kara—”

“*Shōchū mō ippon kudasai!*” thundered Oe to the bar girl. I had unwittingly breached a limit. He had often ridiculed Miss Kara’s “barely functional” level of English. His giddy pleasure on those occasions now converted to rage. I tried to distract him. Behind the counter, I saw the girl scurrying to fill Oe’s order.

“I like her bangs,” I said.

Oe became alert. Something I said had flagged his attention. I saw his hand go for his back pocket, but he checked the motion and brought both arms to the table.

“Yes, they’re not bad,” he said, looking toward the girl.

“What’re not bad?” I asked casually.

“The bangs.”

“Bangs? What are you talking about, Oe?”

“You heard me.”

“I’m not sure we’re talking about the same thing. Personally, I’ve always liked the look. But there are bangs, and there are bangs.”

Oe would not reply.

“Perhaps you yourself, once sported them as a child?”

“Sported what?” said Oe, stalling.

“Bangs.”

Oe stared at me with tired, red eyes.

“What are bangs?” he said with a sigh.

I drew the blade of my hand across my forehead. Oe didn’t understand. Then the girl arrived with the *shōchū*, and I repeated the motion lightly across her forehead. She gave a “Kyaa!” of surprise. Oe nodded and reached for the vocabulary card in his wallet.

The next morning I was halfway through a long translation of whiskey terminology when Oe dropped by. He could see I was busy, but he wouldn’t leave. Perhaps he thought he could erase all memory of the previous evening by swamping my succeeding hours with fresh doses of the Oe experience. He pestered me all morning and insisted I lunch with him on a fantastic array of sushi he had delivered in black lacquer boxes. He was with me at three when I went next door for tea with the ladies of the MacDonalds account. Oe pulled up at the front of the room to chat with Misses Imagawa and Kikuchi. I slipped over to the window where Yuki Kara sat at her desk, peeling a pear. She cut me a half and we discussed, in Japanese, the differences between the round, appley thing we were eating, and a proper Western pear. Then she showed me some PR fliers, inky and aromatic, which had just returned from the printer. She asked me what I thought of the design.

Before I could reply, Oe was there, peering over my shoulder.

“The logo, I noticed, is a little off center,” he said, “and that subtitle looks a trifle isolated. I would put it all on a grid, myself. And don’t you think the color is a little subtle for a POP [Point of Purchase] display? It’s what I would call—”

“*Watashi no shigoto ni, kuchi o dasanai de!*” sounded Miss Kara. (“Keep your snout out of my work!”) Harsh words in Japan, from woman to man.

“*Nan da...*” wobbled Oe. He straightened up indignantly and flexed his shoulders.

“I was only trying to help,” he said, and stepped away.

“Oe, wait,” I called, but he was gone.

Over by the door, Imagawa and Kikuchi hunched their backs at us expressively. Yuki Kara dropped her head to one side and looked serenely out the window.

Thus they became enemies. Officially now, for in Japan, har-

mony is often a function of cloaked enmity. I tried not to ally myself with either against the other. This was mostly an Oe war, actually. Miss Kara was content to ignore him much as she always had. But Oe found her manner increasingly unbearable. He detected something in her movements, her tone of voice, the tilt of her shoulders, all calculated to belittle him.

"If you were Japanese, you would see," said Oe. "She *hates* me." I withheld my sympathy. Oe leaned close.

"She's a punk," he confided. "She sleeps around."

He turned his ear toward the light partition separating the K. S. and MacDonalds rooms. On the far side I heard Miss Kara clear her throat.

"Lay off," I said, choosing my words carefully, "for your nemesis has not the strongest of constitutions today, suffering as she is from a certain upper respiratory oxtipation."

"Oxtipation?" Oe reached for his vocabulary card.

"Congestion," I explained. He scribbled something down. Clever Oe. I should have recognized "oxtipation" as exactly the kind of useless word he would have packed away long ago.

A few days later we were having drinks at a tiny bar in Shinjuku where Oe kept on the shelf his personal bottle of Suntory Old. Whiskey, Suntory or otherwise, affected Oe as could no amount of *shōchū*. Beaming, red, he brought his face barely an inch from mine and snickered.

"I saw the Nemesis come out of a love hotel with a *man*," he whispered.

"That's her business," I said, "Who was he?"

"I don't know."

"By the way," I said, "'nemesis' is always used with a possessive. E.g., Superman's nemesis is kryptonite. Ahab's nemesis is Moby Dick. Elmer Fudd's nemesis is..."

"Bugs Bunny!" said Oe, catching on.

"And Oe's nemesis is...?"

He balked. Much as he hated all forms of incorrect English, he was equally loathe to adopt the necessary possessive in conjunction with his enemy.

Finally though, he preferred the defective euphemism over hav-

ing to suffer his lips the intimacy of “my nemesis.” It became a regular part of his repertoire from the following afternoon.

“Give my regards to the Nemesis,” he said to me with a wink.

I, too, came to be taken with the name, using it with as much affection as did Oe with disdain. The Nemesis never noticed the intrigue. Much later—it was in the spring—I told her the story, beneath the cherry blossoms, under the night sky over Inokashira Park. She didn’t say so, but I think she was secretly pleased, being as she is a woman truly able to appreciate a *nom de guerre* forged in the fire between souls.