

Ashtray

Yu Mogami

It was the year of change for Japan, in 1989, when an old era just closed and a new one was about to begin. A worker named Satake just finished his lunch and was entering the dark warehouse from the outdoors. Due to the strong summer sunlight, his eyes couldn't focus right away. When he got accustomed to the darkness, he noticed a white ceramic ashtray. He had been busy with some production control jobs and came to look for some computer parts before beginning the afternoon work. The ashtray seemed hazy.

It was quiet on the warehouse floor during lunch break. Time seems to stand still like the deep bottom of a lake. The pure whiteness of the ashtray was dispersing into the air around it.

The desk with the ashtray on it was clean and empty. The part-time women usually were talkative and noisy, but they were quiet for some reason today. Elderly men folded their arms and kept silent, too. Finally, Satake realized that the desk on which the ashtray was placed belonged to Mr. Yama. Satake asked one of the part-time women in a muted voice, "What happened to Yama-san?"

The woman who was asked replied in a loud voice, "Mr. Yama passed away last night! Although he looked fine when we were working together until a month ago. A manager came earlier to inform us about it. He said the cause of Mr. Yama's death was cancer. I should have gone to see him before while he was still healthy and active. Mr. Yama didn't say anything before taking the day off yesterday. He mentioned that he was just going for some minor errand. But it was the next world that he went to for his errand."

Mr. Toku who was smoking a cigarette, interrupted, "Although I'd like to display a flower, I don't have one. Instead, I washed the ashtray used by Mr. Yama and returned it on the desk instead of displaying a flower for him. I think that our manager should show respect by offering flowers." A female worker nodded in agreement with Mr. Toku.

Mr. Toku remembered in a sad voice, "Together with Mr. Yama, we often went to a quiet corner instead of going to the smoking area. And there we smoked some cigarettes using that ashtray. How short-lived we human

beings could be!" His remark pushed everyone into deep thought.

Satake wasn't familiar with Mr. Yama, but he somehow felt close to him. Satake and his fellow workers called on union members to democratically strengthen their union by handing out flyers in front of the factory main gate.

It happened 2 years ago when the winter bonus was delivered. Satake and his fellow workers were carrying out their annual fundraising campaign. Unfortunately, they couldn't collect enough donations because of the rains. Everyone tried to escape donating their hard-earned money and hid under their umbrellas to avoid Satake and his donation box. Getting soaked under the rain without umbrellas, Satake continued to cry out for donation together with the other members.

At that moment, one of the black umbrellas strayed from the stream of people and came towards Satake. Suddenly, a hand reached out from under the umbrella and put a 1,000-yen note into the donation box. Grateful for the support, Satake could only say, "Thank you."

The donor, hidden under an umbrella, didn't want to show his face. Nevertheless, Satake bowed to him to show his gratitude.

"Do your best," whispered the man to Satake before he disappeared into the flow of umbrellas.

When Satake wiped the drops from his hair and looked up, there was only a long line of people. They are walking and looking at their feet in front of them. Satake bowed his head several times to the procession, thinking about the donor of the 1000-yen note. It was a voice he had heard somewhere before.

Satake's job was to trace the process of customer-specific orders for large-scale computers, checking schedule delays at the site and picking up missing parts. Recently, the number of orders that he oversaw had increased, and he had been so busy that he forgot about the 1,000-yen anonymous donor who hid under an umbrella.

One day, Satake was looking for parts in the warehouse to replace a missing item when he heard a familiar voice from behind. "Take-san, we have all the parts for that order." That voice pierced through Satake's

thoughts. It was the voice he recalled of the man who gave the 1,000-yen note to their campaign a couple of weeks before.

When Satake turned around, he met the gentle smile of the white-haired Mr. Yama. He bowed to Mr. Yama and said, "Yama-san, thank you so much for your donation!"

Mr. Yama was startled for a moment but smiled again and replied, "Well, it's just a small amount. Anyway, I would have spent it on horse racing." After saying this, he hastily left.

Mr. Yama's support and words were a ray of light in the darkness for Satake who felt discriminated by the company for many years now. He and his group have not received any wage increase or promotion for a long time.

After a month of hesitation, Satake asked Mr. Yama to subscribe to the newspaper that was the official journal of the Japanese progressive political party. However, Mr. Yama averted his gaze with a stiff expression like a different person and said coldly, "No, you guys are indeed saying good ideas. But you don't have power. The company is strong. I owe them a debt of gratitude for giving me this job despite my old age. And I have nowhere to go if I'm kicked out of here."

It was something that Satake had experienced many times. He had expected too much. He had been hoping for more support from Mr. Yama in the way of a subscription in their journal. All of a sudden, he couldn't stand up firmly on the ground, he felt he was losing his balance, and his heart sank.

In parting, Mr. Yama said, "I would like you to do your best. But I can't help more than the donation."

Considering the precarious position of Mr. Yama, it was understandable. It was not Mr. Yama's fault. Satake had already known that too. But he was heartbroken. After that, Satake found it hard to speak to Mr. Yama again.

It was in the Autumn of 1988. Satake saw Mr. Yama again in town.

Satake was entering the train station on his way home from shopping. Mr. Yama was among the group of factory workers who spilled out of the horse racetrack. He was holding a rolled-up horse racing newspaper in his hand and laughing with the man next to him.

In front of the train station, some men were signing a petition against the consumption tax that was recently introduced in the Diet. Mr. Yama signed it himself and recommended it to the man who was with him. The man was reluctant, but in the end, he obliged by signing.

Satake thought of calling out to Mr. Yama, but he changed his mind and got on the train. He thought that when he would meet Mr. Yama next time, Satake would be able to talk with him further regarding various issues.

But time was suddenly cut off for Mr. Yama. Satake bit his lip and bowed his head to the ashtray. There were no windows in the walls of the warehouse. A weak fluorescent light was the only light. Under the dim light, the ashtray was shining like the gentle smile of Mr. Yama.