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Case #1: Leadership

Chris made his way through the crowded corridors to TKD's cafeteria, not entirely happy as he anticipated his daily lunch of miso soup, shredded cabbage, rice and broiled chicken. After a month at the company he was not yet accustomed to this regimen of Japanese food and he still craved the meaty Texan ribs he'd grown up on. Even as an MIT student he'd been able to get the "real thing" in a smattering of "home cooking" restaurants in Somerville and Cambridge. But Japan was another matter. Familiar church socials, the black community of Dallas and close presence of family was all far away from TKD's Kanazawa HI Tech laboratory.

"Chris, come and join us," yelled Chen, one of the group of PRC trainees that TKD routinely brought from its China subsidiary in Shanghai for six month technology training courses. Chen was originally from Nanking and dreamed of returning there to marry and bring up his children.

Chris nodded vaguely and pointed to the long line. Remembering his training at MIT, he didn't dare join Chen and his Chinese cohort two days in a row. Although he enjoyed their lively conversations and complaints about Japanese food, he realized that rapidly becoming part of his Japanese work group was critical to success. Each day it was more and more apparent to him that acceptance meant getting good projects and respect. More than anything that is what he wanted.

Remembering the favorite adage of his Karate teacher, Okuma-Sensei, "The nail that sticks out must be hammered down," Chris smiled. Okuma's Karate class in the local YMCA was where it all began. He'd been just eight years old and Okuma-san spent the entire first lesson teaching him to bow correctly. As a consequence, he hadn't wanted to go back. His mother, however, insisted and by the third lesson he was thoroughly hooked on Okuma-san and on Japan. Through long hours of practice he'd learned respect and discipline. Later when he went on to a brown-belt course, Okuma-Sensei had remained a friend and a mentor had eventually advised him to focus on his math ability and to apply for a scholarship to MIT.

Approaching the table of young Japanese engineers, he wished that Okuma-san were here to advise him. Ishi-san and the others in his group seemed distant and competitive. Obuchi-san, the middle-aged engineer who had been assigned his mentor was equally aloof. He was under a great deal of pressure from METI to complete his key superconductor project on time and talked about nothing else. Obuchi told him the government

considered the project critical to Japan's success in the emerging world market for superconducting materials. They'd poured a great deal of money into superconductors and KD must now complete the project on time to secure patents and to honor METI's investment and faith in their high-speed wire product. Chris tried to look concerned, but he didn't really feel included in Obushi's worries or the workgroup's politics. He felt that his work was progressing well, but no one seemed to notice. They made him feel that he was an outsider, even a possible industrial spy. He wondered whether this was because he was black. Japanese seemed to have stereotypes about blacks and last week he'd been asked if he liked watermelon. Thinking of disappointments only made him more determined to get what he wanted out of Japan and he joined the Japanese table.

"Ah, Chris-san," Obuchi greeted him unusually warmly. "It's good to see you. I know I've been very busy this week. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Chris answered softly, squeezing between his bench mate Ishi-san and Mori-san, a young new hire from Waseda University with a gentle voice and thoughtful look whom he liked.

"We are all working hard," Obuchi-san continued. "Ishi-kun was here till past twelve last night."

Good for Ishi-kun, Chris thought bitterly, eyeing Ishi's thin earnest face. Chris had been told by his new friend Mori that Ishi was a University of Tokyo graduate and in time would rise through the ranks to Kacho and then Bucho. When Chris asked why Mori thought this was the case, for although Ishi was earnest, he had not published and did not do creative work, Mori shrugged as if were obvious.

"We are speaking of our Prime Minister Koizumi," Obuchi-san said. "Koizumi has changed Japan. Soon we will have an army and Japan will be a normal nation. Koizumi has gone a long way to exposing bureaucrats. He even is challenging the education system. The privatization of national universities will make the universities efficient and in the end Japan's education system will be globally competitive."

This last announcement was greeted by Ishi's muttered agreement and the other Japanese gave nod's of approval. Chris wanted to be positive and he felt that they were waiting for his input, but he felt too ill-informed to contribute.

Suddenly Ishi-san said, "Koizumi is right about going *Yasukuni* shrine on August 15th, the day Japan surrendered. He is making a statement. He is right! Japan has nothing to be ashamed of. War is war. We have our war dead just like any other nation! Japan must be a normal nation, as normal as any other in the world! So what if Yasukuni Shrine honors 14 War Criminals tried in the Occupation Tribunal and many others. That was

not a Japanese court. Their souls have now merged with the 2.5 million honored at Yasukuni Shrine who have died for Japan. Now they are all one and that is the Shinto way.” Ishi’s face flushed with excitement and the others murmured their support. “Koizumi-sama is right about Article Nine, the revision of the constitution, and not revising the textbooks,” Ishi continued. “It doesn’t matter that Korea and China are upset. We don’t tell them what to put in their textbooks. Since the war Japan has taken enough orders.” Then turning to Chris, Ishi asked, “Don’t American Presidents pay official visits to your war memorials? Don’t they?”

Everyone at the table stared at Chris. Chen and the other Chinese trainees sitting at the next table also turned. Chris flushed. His parents had been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington and looked for Chris’ cousin’s name on the black granite surface. Was it different? He wondered, remembering the sight of his parent’s heads lowered in prayer.

For the last weeks, the lab had buzzed with news of Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine, however, when he’d brought up the issue of official visits to Yasukuni Shrine with Chen, Chen always became silent. Then one night they went for a drink and after several beers, Chen began to talk. His family had lived in Nanking for many generations. Luckily most of them had fled the city before the Japanese troops arrived but his grandmother had been ill and stayed behind with her young brother and his best friend-cousin. In the first week his grandmother had been forced to watch her brother and young cousin beheaded as sword practice before their bodies were thrown into a pit. The Japanese then dragged her to a locked building where she and other young girls were gang-raped. Most were killed or died of abuse, but one night as the Japanese guards lay in a drunken stupor she escaped with a friend through a broken window. They hid in a well for two days before finding a farm cart, in the dead of night, that carried them to a safe zone in the city set up by a German businessman. His grandmother never spoke of Nanking and the massacre, but if she heard the Japanese language she’d leave the room. Chen’s voice lowered as he told this part of the story. “It’s not the apology that’s important,” he said passionately. “It’s the acknowledgement that something terrible happened, something inhuman that mustn’t be repeated, something that the world must recognize.”

Chris listened carefully, thinking of his own family and of America’s lack of apology for slavery. His own case was enough: as a teenager he had a terrible headache for months. The white doctor in charge of the case dismissed Chris’ complaints, claiming that such headaches were due to the stress of being a striving ambitious

young black. “Relax, work less, don’t try so hard,” he counseled until Chris’ parents demanded a MRI. It showed that the real problem was a benign brain tumor that was operable and Chris recovered quickly from the surgery.

When he reached MIT, the situation didn’t improve. Professors routinely overlooked his questions and dismissed his ideas. Feeling insulted and ignored, he was ready to quit when, in a Sophomore English class, he got to know Rick, his young black House Master. Rick spoke to him well into the night about success, mentoring him slowly with determination. At the end of the semester he had taken a black studies course, read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and understood now with Rick’s urging that he must be visible in the face of all odds. He understood that he must be acknowledged. He understood his destiny. Armed with this new determination he took on the hardest courses and earned A’s in all of them. By the end of his time at MIT he had a graduate honors thesis, a Master’s degree in material science, and two published papers.

His Japanese colleagues were still staring as Chris smiled. “Yes, American Presidents do visit our war memorials,” he said generously. “They go to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and to the Vietnam War Memorial.”

The Japanese grew very silent. “America should not have been in Vietnam,” Mori said softly. “Asia’s future must be decided by Asians.”

Chris nodded and picked at his food. There was nothing being said that he disagreed with. Yet he was also aware that he didn’t know enough. Every sentence seemed loaded with meaning as if his Japanese colleagues were speaking in code. What were they really saying? Was it about the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere? He had read about Japan’s attitude towards Asia during the war. Surely, he thought, World War II was not part of this conversation. He ate quickly. The chicken was mostly fatty and he used the shredded cabbage and rice to cover the taste. He noticed that his Japanese lab-mates were doing the same. They were still staring straight ahead—waiting for his comment. At a loss, he finished lunch quickly and excused himself.

During the week tension in the laboratory mounted. The Japanese were looking forward to O-Bon and visits to their ancestral homes. Ishi was going to Niigata and Mori to Matsue. The Chinese, however, talked of nothing but Koizumi’s proposed visit to the *Yasukuni* shrine to make an official visit to honor Japan’s war dead. Chen declared, “The names of war criminal like Tojo are in that shrine. Even the Imperial House has released information that Emperor Hirohito was against honoring war criminals at Yasukuni and Hirohito was the Showa Emperor that reigned during the war. After the war, Hirohito never made an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine.

What does Koizumi think he's doing? He sells himself to the Japanese public as an agent for change. He is going to cure Japan's economic problems. How? By insulting his Asian neighbors with this visit? This is his last term in office. He could make a real gesture towards China instead of creating more tension."

Confused, Chris focused on his work. His project had really taken off and Obuchi-san seemed very pleased with his progress. Chris understood that Obuchi had to make a presentation to METI in September. Obuchi was over fifty and it was well known that this project would determine his future. Rumor had it that Obuchi-san's son had childhood diabetes and his salary was critical for his plan to take his son to America for a medical consultation. There were also rumors that the project had stumbled in the past and that the previous director has been discreetly banished to Hokkaido as a low salaried *tanshuin*.

On the bright side, Chris had slowly started to make friends with his lab mates. Mori taught Chris the elements of the Japanese game Go, and after work, Chris spent hours playing the game with Mori. Mori introduced him to the Go Club at the company and Chris bought a book on Go and studied the moves. He was proud of his ability to create strategies in the game and Mori was impressed. After the game, Chris often vented his anger to Mori about Ishi's support of Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine and his comments about China. Mori listened carefully but one evening they went drinking and Mori was outspoken, "You have to understand Ishi and the others," Mori explained softly and ordered another round of beers. "They are afraid of China and Chinese influence over Japan. They want an independent Japan. Prime Minister Koizumi is sticking up for Japan's right to choose and says he will visit Yasukuni even if America objects. Young Japanese feel that China will influence the US and will take over Asia economically and politically and all Japan's hard work will be wasted. It makes them crazy. They also realize that as Chinese increasingly rebel against their central administration, the Chinese government spreads more bad stories about Japan in efforts to unify the nation. This Chinese strategy is very dangerous. China is Japan's mother," Mori continued in his soft voice. "The closer we are, the more different we are. Let Japan makes its own decisions."

Chris listened carefully. He knew that Mori was trying to let him in on the way Japanese were thinking about the problem. He had been delighted to read in a recent Asahi Shinbun article that 60% of Japanese were against Koizumi's official visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Curious and tired of being the odd-man-out in conversations, he Googled Yasukuni Shrine on the internet and found it was established in 1869 as Tokyo Shoki Yasukuni Shrine by Emperor Meiji for the victims of the Boshin Civil War. The translation of Yasu meant peace and kuni meant

country. The Shrine was funded until 1945 by the Japanese government and the souls are enshrined in the form of written records. The names of the dead include more than 1,000 war criminals convicted during the Allied tribunals during and after the war and were added to the shrine in 1978.

Chris was surprised at Google's account of the number of Japanese protests against Koizumi's official visits to Yasukuni Shrine. In the 1991 "Iwate Yasukuni Suit" the Sendai high court confirmed a judgment that the official visits by the Prime Minister were unconstitutional. In April 1997, the full bench of the supreme court delivered a ruling of unconstitutionality in the Ehime Tamagushiryō suit stating that Yasukuni Shrine and various related Gotoku Shrines were religious bodies under the constitution and the state was forbidden to have any special relationship with prescribed religious bodies, even when the matter was one of "consoling the spirits" of those killed in war. Sensitive to these rulings and pressure from abroad, in December 2002, a government advisory panel was created to suggest ways of resolving the Yasukuni issue. They recommended that the governor build a secular war memorial that would coexist with the shrine. The new facility would be free of religious affiliation and should be dedicated to mourning the war dead rather than consoling their spirits. Thus, anyone could worship at the new shrine. The recommendation was dropped due to protest from the Japanese Association for the Bereaved Families of the War Dead and LDP law makers. Chris also noted that the current Emperor Akihito, Hirohito's son, had never visited Yasukuni in an official capacity and that Hirohito ceased visiting the Shrine after 14 Class A war criminals were enshrined.

However, on the other side, Chris learned that in July 2000, the Japan Association of Bereaved Families kicked off their "All-Japan General Meeting of War-Bereaved Families Gathered to Express their Resolve" under the slogan of "We Can Wait No Longer-Let this Be the Year when the Prime Minister makes Official visits to Yasukuni." Then that August, 2000, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro made an official "shrine obeisance" visit in an official capacity. Koizumi had visited the Shrine every year since becoming Prime Minister. Currently, Shinzo Abe, who is a strong contender for the office of Prime Minister after Koizumi's retirement, visited Yasukuni shrine and declared that if elected he would continue to the tradition of making official visits to Yasukuni Shrine.

Japan was clearly not so simple.

That Saturday evening Chris went to Yasukuni to see the shrine for himself. He was impressed as he approached the large enormous steel Torii gate that defined the entrance to the shrine. As he stepped through the

gate felt awed by the spacious grounds and the large tile roofed shrine at the end of the walkway. The entrance to the shrine bordered by a low gate and was framed from above by a fabric with the imperial seal which hung in two panels creating an opening for worship. It was a hot summer evening and people dressed in *yukata* and western summer clothes bowed in front of the Shrine. He wondered if each were praying to a soul of a dead soldier. When he had told Mori that he was going to the shrine, Mori had smiled and said, “2 1/2 million *Kami* are in Yasukuni Shrine. Are you ready for that, Chris-san?” Now he didn’t know whether he was ready or not. He stood for a moment taking in the simplicity of the building with the perfectly polished wood and the low beams and curved roof decorated in gold. Shinto. All Japanese practiced Shinto ritual. He knew that much. Behind the shrine was the Yushukan museum commemorating Japan’s war dead. Chris decided to visit the museum first.

In the entrance to the museum he was confronted with a plane and anti-aircraft guns from the Second World War which loomed large and set an ominous tone for the rest of the exhibit. He was ushered to the second floor where the displays focused on the history of the Second World War. Chris was astonished. The museum claimed that Japan was forced into the war. What was Yasukuni doing? He tried to pay attention to the testimonials in the following rooms; letters to sons from mothers and vice versa, poems by young soldiers, profiles of Kamikaze pilots who had charged to their deaths, and even a marriage doll sent to the Shrine by a mother to accompany her son’s spirit. Each display celebrated the death of a valiant soldier and all this came to a head in the room of the “soldier’s spirit” where the display focused on the spiritual side of the young soldier, complete with warrior poems displayed in the four corners of the room. The last room described America’s dropping of the atomic bomb. Chris felt dazed and walked swiftly to the shrine, bowed and left the grounds. The museum had left out the attack on Pearl Harbor, the March of Bataan, the story of the comfort woman and much else. Clearly it did not present a true picture of historical events. Chris was dumbfounded and on the bus ride home felt squarely on Chen’s team.

The next day, at ten in the evening, Obuchi-san approached him. “Chris,” he said with a pleased voice. “You are working late again. Let me see,” he added looking over his shoulder at the chart. “Mmmm,” he mumbled his approval. “These results are very good. METI will be pleased.”

Chris was delighted by Obuchi’s warmth and smiled. His diligence was paying off. Lunches, the constant Go game with Mori and dinners with his group helped too. Silently he thanked MIT and Okuma-san. Yes, he thought to himself, he was sure to get some very good papers out of this, papers that would help with

a job when he returned to the States, papers that would mean recognition from the internationally competitive superconductor community. Yes, he would eventually be “visible” after all, but in Japan the roadmap to success was different.

“Chris-san,” Obuchi-san continued. “I would like to invite you to my house for dinner next week. I hope you will come. It is nearly O-bon and perhaps we can go to the neighborhood dance together. I am a very bad dancer,” he laughed. “But my daughter Emiko is good.”

Chris nodded gravely. “I’d love that,” he said quietly, noting that Obuchi looked as tired as he felt. Obuchi took his mentoring position seriously and it was common knowledge that he’d helped many employees including the Chinese trainees. Chen had mentioned that Obuchi had arranged for Chen’s sister to study at Osaka University through his old professor. He was respected because of this as well as for his commitment to TKD and to the project.

Chris was thrilled. Although he’d been to dinner with Obuchi, it was the first time he’d been invited to his home. He knew that next to New Years, O-Bon was the most important Japanese family holiday and that on O-Bon Japanese launched small candle-lit boats for the souls of their ancestors. He knew about the dancing and the carnival atmosphere. What else did he know? Was it Shinto? Was it Buddhist? Again he felt uneasy at his own lack of information.

That week Chris felt more effective than he had in months. He worked long and hard and even Ishi-san was impressed. In addition to his work, he was studying Japanese and now understood much more of it. Every day he slowly plowed through a news paper article. The papers were full of Koizumi’s official visit to *Yasukuni* shrine. Japanese groups were demonstrating against the visit and there were several candle light vigils. This protest was democracy at work, Chris thought trying to block out his experience at Yasukuni Shrine. The demonstrations against Koizumi’s visit had reaffirmed his belief in the Japanese people. Perhaps Mori was right, he thought. Perhaps the Japanese people should make the decision about Yasukuni. They were headed in the right direction.

He’d just finished his dorm breakfast and was preparing for work when Chen approached him. Because of his late hours, he’d been out of touch with Chen for the last weeks and had refused several drinking and dinner invitations. Now he was glad to see him. “Good morning, Chen,” he greeted.

“Good morning,” Chen returned and quietly took a seat beside him, put down his tray, and picked up his *miso* soup. “It’s August 10th, he added in a solemn voice.

“Yes,” Chris agreed, wondering where the conversation was leading.

“Chris,” Chen said in low voice. “I know that you think a great deal. You are a real thinker.”

Chris laughed. “Don’t flatter me, Chen.”

Chen did not smile. “We need your help, Chris,” he said bluntly. “We must protest Koizumi’s decision to make an official visit to Yasukuni shrine. We must protest this insult. You must help us. The Chinese trainees are going to protest with a one-day strike on August 14th. It will be a strike by the people who know the situation best. Japan will hear our voice. It would make a real difference if you would join us. We will have reporters there to cover the story. This could mean a great deal for the Chinese community in Japan and for China,” he whispered.

Chris nodded slowly, trying to collect his thoughts, and recalling all the articles he’d read on the subject and his talk with Mori. “But the Japanese are protesting,” Chris said and spoke about the fact that even Emperor Hirohito was against official visits to Yasukuni shrine. And besides, Chen, I’m not Chinese. I’m a total outsider.”

“You’re important, it’s important that as a black American you show your solidarity with the Chinese community. We must put pressure on the Japanese government and show our face to the Japanese people. Nihon Keizai Shimbun’s leak about Hirohito’s displeasure in 1988 over Yasukuni’s Shrine decision in the late 1970’s to include Class-A war criminals of World War II in its list is critical. According to the memorandum, written by the last Imperial Household Agency Grand Steward Tomohiko Tomita, the reason late Emperor Hirohito had not visited the shrine since 1978 was his disgust at the shrine’s decision to honor the Class-A war criminals. That leak is just more Japanese politics, the opposition’s push against Abe-san’s bid for power as Abe-san says he will continue the Koizumi tradition of Yasukuni visits. It was a very timely article. What the Chinese community wants to do is real.”

Chris was annoyed. If Chen had approached him just after his Yasukuni visit, he would have been delighted to help with the demonstration. But now Japanese as Koizumi’s visit to the Shrine approached, Japanese were publishing articles like the one on Hirohito’s refusal to go to the Shrine. Many Japanese were also demonstrating. “Why don’t you join one of those candle light vigils?” Chris said in a dry tone, “I think they could use your help.”

“Chris,” Chen tone was abrupt. “I thought you understood. We must protest as Chinese with a work strike not a vigil. We are working on a top priority government project and walking out on that project will really make a difference. You understand that don’t you? You must. We must also protest as members of the foreign community, yes, in solidarity with the Chinese community. Even Bush has made remarks against Koizumi’s visits to the shrine. You must join us. Our protest must be related to work.”

Chris liked Chen and wanted to help. What he had seen at the shrine was a terrible reminder of how history could be distorted. Yet he was torn. He thought of Mori’s gentle face as he reminded Chris that each country is a sovereign power and must make their decisions. “Look at Iraq,” Mori had said recently, “US is trying to create an American democracy in Iraq and the result is a civil war.” Chris had nodded. Mori made sense. Then he thought of Obuchi. He knew that Obuchi was not only responsible for the project but also for the behavior of everyone in the lab. He realized that Chen understood this as well. He nodded vaguely and said that he would give Chen an answer soon.

The next night he dressed carefully but casually for his dinner at Obuchi’s home. Obuchi had explained that first they would go with his family to the neighborhood O-Bon dance and then return to his home for dinner. Obuchi-san would meet him up at the station at six.

Recognizing Obuchi-san at the turnstile, Chris waved. To Chris’s surprise eight hands waved back. Obuchi-san quickly introduced him to his wife Yasuko, his sixteen year-old daughter Emiko, and his ten-year old son Ichiro. “Father couldn’t come,” Yasuko explained, referring to Obuchi senior, who lived with them. “You will meet him at home.”

Obuchi-san made small talk as they walked through the small narrow streets to his house. The neighborhood had a friendly feel and they passed many families in summer *yukata* on their way to the festival. Several passers-by bowed to Obuchi and he explained that the family had lived in the neighborhood for several generations. By the time they reached the house Chris felt at home and struck up a conversation with Emiko and Ichiro.

Obuchi’s tiny house stood at the end of a tree-lined lane. Several potted plants adorned the entryway and the door slid open as soon as they approached. Obuchi senior, who was a man of about eighty with a lined and weathered face, bowed and bowed. Chris felt most welcome. As he sipped his tea he was reminded of times with Okuma-sensei. Yes! He’d been right to work hard and drive the project forward. It had given him a passport into this wonderful family circle. He smiled, noting Emiko-chan’s bright face the cellular phone tucked in her pink plastic purse and Ichiro-kun’s sweet smile below his baseball cap. Families in Japan weren’t so different than his own, he decided.

Obuchi-san took him into a side room and pointed to a *yukata* hanging from the wall. “It would be our great honor if you would wear this, Chris-kun,” he said softly. “We ordered a large size for you.”

“The honor is mine,” Chris returned softly.

The O-Bon festival sprawled over several small streets next to the river. The neighborhood had set up a dais and podium on the riverbank. Skilled middle-aged women directed the slow dance from the podium while the crowd below followed. Children ran through the crowd at breakneck speed, with their hands full of cotton candy and bags of swimming goldfish. Food and game stalls lined the lantern-draped streets. Their reflected light dotted the river and Chris felt transported to another age. Yasuko and Emiko stood on either side of him and helped him through the slow dance. As he clapped in unison with them, he remembered Okuma-sensei and his stories of Japan. This was the Japan he’d been yearning for. Banishing Yasukuni Shrine and Chen from his thoughts, he felt satisfaction at working hard and being the nail that didn’t stick up. He’d done the right thing.

Several hours later they were home. Yasuko-san had prepared a traditional Japanese meal and there was a great deal of laughter as the family gathered around the table. Emiko-san served him rice and everyone joked at her serious expression.

“Emiko-chan, I wish you’d be as serious about school.”

“School is boring,” she returned, brightly eyeing her cellular phone as it rang.

“Not now!” Her father warned. “School might be boring but without it where would we be.

Emiko-chan doesn’t like to study,” he explained sadly.

Chris nodded. “I have a sister just your age,” he said slowly in Japanese. “She doesn’t like to study either but I made a deal with her. For every A, I put a hundred dollars in her bank account.”

Emiko didn’t seem impressed and took out her cellular phone. Her bored indifference reminded him of his young sister’s attitude and Chris felt himself becoming annoyed. “I fought for an education,” he said directly to Emiko despite the astonished looks of the Obuchi family. “I fought because I know that education gave me choices in life. The man who helped me was Okuma-sensei, the only Japanese for miles around where I grew up in Texas.” He had them now. Even Emiko stopped gazing at the cellular phone and looked interested as he told the story of his long friendship with his Karate teacher Okuma. His voice lowered as he related how, in the sixth grade, he’d been testing the system and in an uncharacteristically wild moment had shoplifted a tee-shirt with some friends and been arrested. He and the others had been released with a warning.

“The morning after the arrest Okuma-sensei drove up to my house. I still don’t know how he heard about it,” Chris’ voice was lower still as he described how he’d taken Chris’ hand and led him to the car. That day they drove a hundred miles into the desert. It was spring and the desert was blanketed with tiny blue wild flowers. Okuma never spoke to him about the theft but simply ordered him out of the car and began to walk. At first Chris thought that they would have a picnic and return home. Then he thought that if he slowed the pace Obuchi would come to his senses. After an hour he realized there would be no picnic. After four hours Chris still kept pace with the older man. They walked across the blue and purple wild flowers that blanketed the Texas hills and they walked across the scrub brush, the gopher holes and the scorpion nests. The sun was warm and the sky was a clear blue and still they walked. By the time they returned to the car, Chris’s step matched Obuchi’s exactly and Chris knew he would never steal again.

The room was quiet. “You had a true Sensei, Chris-san,” Obuchi senior said quietly.

“Yes,” Chris agreed. “It’s because of him that I went to MIT and because of him I am sitting with you today.”

The room was silent.

Obuchi-san spoke softly, looking directly at Emiko. “Thank you for your advice. You are wise,” he paused and continued in a grave voice. Emiko nodded and slowly put away her cellular phone.

Obuchi continued. “Chen and the other Chinese will go on strike if Prime Minister Koizumi goes to Yasukuni shrine. I was astonished. When I questioned it he became furious. ‘You know why’ he answered. ‘Japan must confront its past’. But Japan has apologized to China, I told him. Most Japanese don’t agree with Koizumi’s visit to the Shrine. There are many vigils in protest to the visit. Japan is becoming conscious of the terrible things that it did in China. Besides, Chinese leaders go to the shrines of their war dead. Americans also pay official visits to war memorials. This will cause the company a lot of trouble. You’re friends with Chen, aren’t you Chris?”

Chris froze. Had he been invited here only to be asked to intercede with Chen and the other Chinese for Obuchi? Did Obuchi know that Chen had asked him to join the strike? Of course Obuchi-san knew. It was his business to know. Glancing at young Ichiro’s pale face, he remembered the story of Ichiro’s diabetes and the Obuchi’s wish for him to be assessed by a doctor in America, and realized the enormity of Obuchi’s-san situation and what his position at the company meant to this family. They were all staring at him...waiting for his

comment. He wanted to tell them that he would speak to Chen, reassure them that the war had been over for sixty years, and most of all he wanted to say that “war was war.” But he remembered his visit to Yasukuni shrine and his lips did not move and he sat dumbly staring at the table.

“Koizumi-san is wrong,” the words came from the deepest part of Obuchi senior’s belly. “Tojo was a terrible man. Official Japan must never pay respects to Tojo. Japan did terrible things in China! We killed more than six million Chinese civilians. For what? For nothing. We did unforgivable things! Things that no one likes to talk or think about. Let Chen go on strike. Let the newspapers report the story. More Japanese need to know the truth. That truth is ugly and we must learn from our mistakes. I was there. My friends in my college class were there! China! Philippines! I know!”

Yasuko-san covered her mouth and Obuchi-san bowed his head. No one disputed Obuchi-senior’s declaration. It had the force of honesty, the kind of truth that comes from experience, the kind of rage that comes only from betrayal. The family slowly made motions to normalize the evening. Yasuko-san poured tea while Ichiro-kun ran to show Chris his stamp collection and Emiko-chan cleared the dishes. Yet through all this Obuchi-senior’s voice resonated. Once more Chris was in Texas, facing the tall white doctor’s condescending smile, as he was told to relax, study less and the headaches would go away. Once again he was again in an MIT classroom, his hand waving, knowing that the professor didn’t see him. Yes, he recognized that voice.

Obuchi-san and Ichiro walked him to the station. They walked quietly through the deserted streets. A light rain was falling but no one commented on it and they strode steadily and easily. At the turnstile, Obuchi-san bowed and put his hand on Ichiro’s small head encouraging him to bow as well. In just a few days, Chris thought, Obuchi’s and perhaps Ichiro’s future would be decided. In just a few days Obuchi would be held responsible for the news articles and the interviews with Chen.

“Don’t worry,” Obuchi-san said in a soft rounded voice, as though reading his thoughts. Patting him gently on the shoulder, he bowed. “Please don’t worry,” he repeated softly. Chris mounted the steps to the train slowly. When he turned Obuchi-san and Ichiro-kun bowed again.