



TENGU

A novel by Tetsutaka Shibata

Being a Translation from the Japanese of the Prologue and First Chapter

By Christopher Southward

Prologue

Movement in the atmosphere: a breeze. As cold moonlight spilled through the parting clouds the jet-black darkness of night receded and the bluish-white outline of the forest slowly emerged.

Mineo Komaku sat crouched in the shadows of a dried-out sluice, blowing hot breath through the fingertips of his cotton gloves to keep warm, in the same motion easing back the bolt of his Murata Type 20 rifle to check for a live round in the chamber before relocking it: a combination of actions he'd already repeated any number of times in a matter of minutes.

Settle down, old boy!

Komaku took a deep breath and forcefully exhaled in an attempt to calm his nerves, now grasping the rifle's stock in both hands as he quickly surveyed his surroundings.

The white trunks of rows of apple trees bent and swayed around him in the wind, casting shadows that looked like skeletons in the moonlight. They wriggled and loomed, at times making Komaku feel as though they might pounce upon him at any moment.

Get it together!

He felt a slight brush against his skin and bolted upright, nervously scanning the shadows for a lurking presence, but there were only the whisper of the windblown treetops, the sound of flowing water, and the rustle of an army of field mice foraging food for winter in the tall dead grass. All was as peaceful as it should be, except that *something* was moving towards him.

A sudden parting in a stand of apple trees blotted out the moonlight and caught his attention. Lifting his gaze, he found a gaping void of darkness straight ahead: it would come

from the void if it came at all; plain old hunter's intuition and years of experience in the field made him sure of it.

He took another deep breath and forcefully exhaled as he slowly raised the rifle with dead-aim on the darkness ahead of him. He wondered what it could be. A spirit? Ridiculous. A monkey, perhaps? Or a deer? No, it couldn't be either. He had it: a black bear! Yes, that's what it was. It had to be a black bear; what else could it be?

Even as a veteran hunter Komaku was terribly nervous. Hunting after dark was strictly prohibited, and this would be the first time that he'd hunted either alone or in the dead of night. But he was here, nonetheless, and he knew that his single-shot Murata gave him only one chance to put the bear down: if he missed then he'd be done for.

He waited for what must have been hours. He'd had a few drinks earlier in the evening but the cold was getting to him now that the effects of the alcohol had begun to wear off. He blew again into his gloves to try and warm his hands but his fingers were already numb beyond repair. A glance at his watch told him that it was after 2:00 a.m.

Humph! I guess it's not coming, after all!

He'd had his target in his sights just a moment ago but now it was gone. He needed a cigarette and he longed for a drink and the warmth of his wife's body next to his own. Maybe this was no night for hunting, he thought. Maybe he should pack up and head home.

Then it happened: a sudden shift in the wind that sent the field mice scurrying. Something was approaching; he felt it. It must be the beast.

Komaku got onto his knees and pressed the rifle stock to his shoulder, pointing the muzzle into the night and setting his aim.

Sounds in the darkness: treetops rustling; branches snapping; footsteps; and heavy, labored breathing. It was close. Just ahead of him now.

He released the safety and waited, now slowing and holding his breath so as not to give away his position. A moment later a dark, ominous shadow emerged from a parting in the thicket of kumazasa stalks just in front of him. Komaku prepared to lure in his prey and put it down with a perfectly placed slug, setting his sights on the beast and calmly tracking it as it moved towards him.

It seemed unaware that Komaku was there, and now as it loomed as a silhouette against the backdrop of the full moon, he saw for the first time its entire form.

What the...!!

His heart leapt into his throat as he realized that this was no black bear; it appeared to be human, but...

Komaku hesitated to fire, allowing the beast to grab the rifle by the barrel and snatch it from his hands.

‘Wait! I’m...!’

Komaku strained to speak but before he could finish the beast slung the rifle sidelong and struck him a solid blow square in the side, breaking most of his ribs before plucking him from the sluice and throwing him across the orchard. He landed rolling and spewing blood from his mouth as the beast tossed the rifle aside and calmly approached. Now pulling himself to his feet, Komaku ran as quickly as his wobbly legs would carry him.

‘Help...! Me...!’

He screamed as a beastly howl ripped through the night. There was no escape but he kept running, stumbling through the orchard towards home as his legs stubbornly lagged behind. He was dazed and confused. Was this a nightmare? Some twisted reality? There was no telling. Komaku pissed himself, scrambling to get away as the beast howled again behind him, still louder than before. He collapsed to his knees as his back gave out.

Shoulders and elbows twist and contort into impossible positions as the beast snatches him from the ground by the left arm and whirls him about, now releasing him to send his body flying through the air like a spear and crashing again to earth, the impact crushing his spine. As he lands Komaku is struck by the strange absence of pain.

He's losing air, his breath seeping through punctured lungs until respiration ceases. Though no longer breathing, he keeps moving, scratching and clawing his way across the ground like an injured insect, gasping,

'He—l—p! Me—!'

Though his house is only a short distance ahead, to Komaku it's light years beyond reach.

The hunter has become the hunted. Komaku lie's paralyzed as he beast bears down upon him, its mouth watering at the sight of its prey caught in the death throes.

This is it...

Komaku surrenders himself to his fate, sure that he'll be slaughtered. He hears heavy breathing behind him: now on his back; now in his ears. The beast grabs him only steps from his house, this time slinging him across the orchard by his right arm, the whip-like force snapping his neck.

'No—! St—o—p!'

Komaku lies in a bloody heap, paralyzed but fully conscious. He can't breath. He tries in vain to fill his lungs with air as blood rushes into them and dribbles from his mouth, the taste of flesh flooding his senses. Flat on his back now, he looks the beast face-to-face as it crouches over him, a shadow of gargantuan proportions, its eyes aglow with the light of the moon and smoldering with primordial madness.

Komaku shuts his eyes as a massive hand covers his face and blocks his view.

Enormous fingers begin to squeeze his skull with incredible strength.

‘St—St—Sto—p! You’—re hur—t—ing me—!’

Oh, Death! Please, come quickly!, he prays, his least wish being that he should soon blackout.

The agony would soon pass and Komaku soul would be released. His last memory was the sound of his cracking skull.

It was winter in the forty-ninth year of the Showa Era, and deep in a frozen village of Gunma Prefecture a most horrible murder had just occurred.

Chapter 1: The Reunion, Part 1

Twenty-six years, and a long time it was. Many things had changed in that time: people had passed on and moved away, and even the landscape had gone through its requisite metamorphosis, leaving intact only dim traces of the past. But a few things remained unchanged: among them being the town of Bakuro in the city of Numata, still battered by gale force winds sweeping over Tanigawa Ridge.

Keiichi Michihira, journalist for The Central News Agency, exited a taxi in front of an old-growth zelkova guarding the grounds of Suga Shrine. Closing the door, he spent a meditative moment beneath the tree gazing into its lush foliage, taking a deep breath and forcefully exhaling before setting out along the night-darkened road. It was early December and already the air shimmered with falling snow.

Having started out in the wrong direction and lost his way, Michihira backtracked and turned into a familiar alley where memory rushed upon him and brought him back to his bearings. Laughter spilled from a nearby pub, the smells of liquor and grilled meat filled the

air, and the narrow passageway glowed with the light of neon signage and dim red paper lanterns hung at the entrances of bars and brothels crammed into every open space. He felt warm and comfortable, as though having just stumbled across a long-forgotten childhood toy hidden inside a dresser drawer.

Tucked among a row of storefronts was Haguruma, a restaurant serving modest home-style fare, which he found with little trouble. As he approached the entrance he noticed that the cracked and chipped glass door had been replaced by a sliding latticed one constructed of unfinished wood. A white acrylic sign had taken the place of the torn paper lantern, but with a peek inside he noticed that the restaurant had retained its old charm.

He was early. Dusting snow off his hat and coat, Michihira ducked the storefront curtain and slipped through the entrance to find that even the restaurant's layout was just as he remembered it. On his right was a bar that seated six or seven with a small kitchen and preparation area inside, on his left was a raised, open-matted room with a row of three tables that seated four diners each, and a private dining room lay straight ahead, partitioned by a sliding paper-and-latticework wooden door. Yes, everything was just as he remembered it, right down to the place settings.

The place was near empty, the only customers being a pair of businessmen sharing after-work drinks at a table in the back of the matted room. Ohnuki had yet to arrive, so Michihira removed his tattered Burberry coat and took a seat at the far end of the bar.

'Welcome! What'll it be?' A dainty lady wearing a kimono emerged from the kitchen and greeted him.

'I'll take a beer.'

She must be well into her 30s, Michihira thought, carefully observing her as she retrieved a beer from the cooler, popped the cap, and poured it into a mug, all the while taking care not to bump the rack of skewered meats standing next to her.

There was something there that he recognized; something that joggled a long-lost memory. Did he know this woman? A glimpse of her creamy skin peeking from beneath the sleeves of her kimono as she secured them and poured the beer convinced that he did. She bore a striking resemblance to the restaurant's previous owner, Kumiko; she might even pass for her identical twin. From her plump lips and big black eyes to her neck now gracefully stretching from beneath the collar of her kimono, she reminded him, every bit, of that woman whom he secretly desired in his youth. The only difference between the two was their age: Kumiko was already into her forties then.

'Excuse me, but is your name Chizuru, by any chance?' he asked.

She paused mid-pour, perplexed, her smile now gone.

'Yes... it is, but... why do you ask? Have you been here before?'

'Ah, a long time ago, yes. I guess it's been twenty-five? No, twenty-*six* years since I was last here,' he recalled. 'How's your mother? Is she well?'

'No. Mother passed away four years ago. Drank herself into an early grave.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know. Well, I didn't mean to startle you. It's just that you look so much like her that I was taken aback a moment there!'

She now fixed Michihira with a curious stare, as though trying to unravel her own tangled web of memory. She smiled faintly a moment later, as though something had just become clear.

'Wait a minute! You're not that journalist, are you? The one who gave me the changeable doll? I can't believe it! It's *you*, isn't it?!' she exclaimed.

Time had left a chasm between them, but it now began to disappear like the sudden clearing of a heavy fog.

Michihira thought about the doll, slowly recalling the day he bought it. It was a brisk evening in late autumn, and fallen leaves rustled in the wind. He'd been out wandering the backstreets of Numata when he suddenly found himself standing before the dusty show window of a small toy store where a certain sun-bleached doll on display behind the glass caught his attention, and before he knew it he was inside the store making the purchase.

Exactly what possessed him to buy that doll is beyond him now. Perhaps he saw it as a mirror in which reflected his own soul. Or maybe he wanted those dimming blue eyes to see a world much broader than that which they saw through the show window. Whatever the reason, he soon found himself with box in hand, stepping out of the store and strolling the city streets, journeying wherever his feet would take him, feeling as though under a strange spell as he meandered from one block to the next until he finally bumped into Ohnuki near the grounds of Suga Shrine, right underneath that old zelkova tree.

Hoping not to be seen, he dropped his gaze as they approached each other but no sooner had their strides met than Ohnuki called out to him and asked him to join him for a drink: they ended up at Haguruma.

‘A doll? Yes, I vaguely remember it. You must’ve been about seven or eight then.’

‘Yes, that’s sounds about right! But I’m so embarrassed! I must’ve been such a show-off then. You see, Sir, I wasn’t used to having young men visit us, so...’

‘Please, don’t call me ‘Sir’. The name’s Michihira.’

‘Yes! You’re Mr. Michihira! I remember how I just silently stared at the floor when you gave me the doll. See, there was no man in our house and I just wasn’t used to having one around, so it took me a while to get used to you.’

Kumiko was a widow then, and most of her customers were policemen or somehow otherwise affiliated with law enforcement, and word had it that even her husband had been a detective with the Numata Police Department. He died leaving behind his daughter Chizuru, who lived with Kumiko on the floor above the restaurant. An imaginative child, she whiled away her afternoons playing in the back room of their apartment as she waited for her mother to return home.

Michihira took out a Marlboro and was just about to light up when he felt a tiny presence behind him: a tot's eyes on his back. As the latticed door behind him at the rear of the restaurant slid open he spun around to find a smaller version of Chizuru standing there, her face protruding through the gap. She was the spitting image of her mother, twenty-six younger.

'That's... my daughter,' Chizuru said.

'Oh? What's her name?'

'I call her Hiroko. You know, meaning "open and happy child." It's just that I've spent my whole life in this little town and I want her to see much more of the world than I've seen; to have more opportunities than I've had.'

Chizuru had referred to the little girl as "my daughter," Michihira noted, not "our daughter." Now that he looked at her, he realized that he could find no traces of her father in those eyes now fixing him with the same curious smile her mother had given him all those years before. Yes. She was surely her mother's child, he thought, and as far as he could tell, she was all Chizuru. Still, he didn't press for details, acknowledging every person's right to keep a hidden past; that's just the way of life.

'Say, do policemen still stop in the way they used to?' Michihira asked in an abrupt change of subject.

‘No, not the way they used to. Not at all, really. I guess the only one who still visits is Mr. Ohnuki,’ Chizuru answered as she stacked several hot-off-the-grill skewers of meat onto a plate.

Shunichi Ohnuki—forensic specialist for the Numata Police Department. Colleagues and a close circle of journalists endeared him with the nickname ‘Mujina,’ or ‘The Badger.’ He’d have been in his mid-30s at the time of the incident. He was moderate in height but stoutly built, with broad shoulders and a thick, muscular back. He’d shown Michihira the ropes of the trade when he was a rookie journalist and broke him into the ways of enjoying good liquor, to boot.

He’d called Michihira out-of-the-blue a week earlier: it was the first time they’d spoken to each other in twenty-six years. In a calm but demanding tone Ohnuki had said that he needed to see Michihira about something; an urgent matter. He gave instructions on when and where to meet him and hung up the phone.

‘Is Mujina still on the force?’ Michihira asked.

‘Yes, he’s still working, but I hear he’s set to retire come year’s end...’ Chizuru said, stopping mid-speech and glancing away in a curious attempt to avoid Michihira’s gaze, sounding as though she’d meant to say something more. Michihira finished off his beer and ordered a bottle of heated sake. He glanced at his watch to see that it was a little after their meeting time of seven o’clock. Restless, he lit another cigarette, smoked about a third of it, and pressed it out in the ashtray in front of him.

Just then, a cold wind gusted into the room as the front door slid open. Michihira turned expectantly to find a frail, middle-aged man standing in the doorway. Wrong guy, he thought, but as soon as their eyes met the man gave a slight nod of acknowledgement.

‘Ah! It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?! You haven’t already forgotten me, have you?’ he asked as he entered the restaurant. He’d lost a lot of weight and his face had thinned so that Michihira didn’t recognize him as his friend of many years. His nicely kept crew-cut had thinned and grayed but he still had that boyish, devious sparkle in his eyes.

‘Mujina?’

‘None other! So, you’ve finally recognized me, eh?’ As Ohnuki settled onto a stool next to Michihira Chizuru placed a bottle of Kitsuchomu label sake in front of them.

‘Mr. Michihira! Were you holding out on me? You should’ve told me that it was Mr. Ohnuki you were meeting!’ Chizuru playfully scolded him as she prepared a light shochu and water for each of the gentlemen.

‘So, I take it that you two have already met?’ Ohnuki chimed in. ‘What a bummer! Just when I thought I’d surprise you! So, how old are you now?’ he continued, turning to Michihira.

‘I’ll be fifty in the coming year,’ he answered.

‘You don’t say? *Fifty*?! I guess we’re both getting on years, no? Have you married?’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you would’ve, right?’ Ohnuki replied, sneaking a pour of shochu when Chizuru wasn’t looking and tossing back nearly half of it in a single gulp. The trio sat awhile and kicked around talk of the old days until the topic of discussion eventually turned to Chizuru’s doll, of which Ohnuki had absolutely no memory. Her efforts to help him recall it being in vain, Chizuru soon disappeared upstairs and returned with the worn-out doll dangling from one hand. It was stained and dingy with an arm missing, but its big blue eyes were the same as ever: dreamily staring out into an unknown world.

They spoke of the late Kumiko, and then of Ohnuki's recent family affairs; he told them that his eldest daughter had married some years earlier and that he already had two grandchildren. Michihira vaguely remembered having met his daughter once or twice before when he spent nights at their home.

The two businessmen settled their bill and left the restaurant around nine o'clock, leaving Michihira and Ohnuki as the only customers. Chizuru then shut the curtain and headed upstairs to put Hiroko to bed.

'So, what's the urgent matter you needed to discuss?' Michihira asked, 'Your call surprised me, coming so suddenly, and all. Don't tell me you called me all the way out here just to reminisce over old times!'

'Of course not. You should have an idea as to what it's about. It's the most notorious case in the history of Numata,' Ohnuki told him, 'I'd been mulling over it awhile and meant to call you about it but I kept putting it off. Before I knew it I'd become an old man and realized that I was running out of time.'

'Are you talking about the incident in Shikamata Village?'

'That's the one. Have you had a chance to visit?'

'Yes. I stopped there on my way to meet you today.'

He'd never forget Shikamata—a tiny village situated at the base of Numata's Mt. Kasho consisting of seven ramshackle houses that lined a ravine surrounded by dense mountains and forest.

'Oh, yeah? How was it?'

'Nothing special, really. You know, of all those houses only a couple abandoned ones remain. Nothing was left of any of the others. I guess the only notable things that I found

were the overgrown apple orchard and a solitary old camphor tree,' Michihira said, 'Humph! To think that that one tree made it through the fire!'

The camphor. Yes, enormous trees, too, lived in this now desolate village, and some of them were so great that they blotted out the sky. Michihira thought for a moment of the night when they set fire to the village and how the sky glowed red-orange with the light of the flames.

'You know, that place has been deserted for more than twenty years now,' Ohnuki said. 'We've still got time, but not much. I still go and visit every summer, and every time I'm there I notice how the forest has encroached upon the village a little more. I figure in, say, five years time you won't even be able to tell that anyone ever lived there.' He finished his drink and added ice to his glass before pouring into it a generous amount of shochu and a drop of water.

'But, come to think of it, I did see something strange while I was there. Haven't you noticed it, too?'

'What?' Mujina asked.

'Right at the junction of the service road and the road leading to the village there were these deep ruts run into the ground,' Michihira said and continued, 'Do you remember Saeko Kinetsuka? They were right there at the edge of her property. It looked as though her land had just been tilled.'

'Yeah, I noticed that, too! Must've been a couple of summers ago. One day I was out wandering around and found myself out there near her house. There were fresh sprouts in the garden!'

'Who could it be?'

'I don't know. Must be someone who survived the whole thing.' With this, Ohnuki gulped down about half of his drink.

It was a strange way of drinking, Michihira thought; something was different. Hardly touching his food, Ohnuki sat and talked at length without so much as taking a sip of his drink, as though he'd forgotten about it. Then he'd suddenly stop and pick up the glass as if he'd just remembered it and stare at its contents contemplatively before tossing back at least half of it at a go, grimacing like a condemned man drinking his fated poison. It was that strange way of drinking one sees among men who have given up on life and feel as though they are down to their last prayer.

'Tell me, Michihira, what made you want to go out to the village?'

'I don't know. It was the first time that I'd been out to Numata in twenty-six years, so I thought I'd stop and take a look while I was here.'

'Really? That's all there is to it? Go on and tell me! I'll bet you're haunted by the whole thing, just like I am!'

'Psht! Not in the least!'

'Either that, or it's Saeko. Right? Try as you may, you just can't forget her. Is that it?'

Saeko. Even now, the very mention of her name fills Michihira with heaviness, like lead in the stomach. He wondered if she were still alive somewhere, but for all he knew she might be long gone from this world; he didn't even know that much. Instead of answering he silently poured more shochu into his glass and lifted it to his lips as Ohnuki went on,

'Well, I'll be honest. I just can't forget it. Seems like time has stood still since then.'

'Is this what you wanted to talk about?' Ohnuki braced himself, staring at the liquid inside his glass as he sat rock-still with his hand rested on the rim. He finally spoke,

'I want to reopen the case. To settle it once and for all,' he said.

‘What? Are you serious?’

‘You bet I am! Do you know how many people died there? And, to top it all off, the killer is still on the lam! Mind you, I’m not the only one who wants to get to the bottom of this. Not only do I have the support of the local police department but a few of the survivors are cooperating, too.’

‘But how are you going to do it? It’s been more than a quarter of a century. We’ve got no witnesses and there’s not a strand of evidence to be found. I just don’t see how it can happen.’

‘Well, now, that’s where you’re wrong! Evidence? Not to worry! I’ve got it! Plus, there’s technology today that we didn’t have back then. The kind of stuff that’ll break this case wide open. All we need is the key. I assume you still have it, don’t you?’

‘The key’ of which Ohnuki spoke was a lock of the culprit’s body hair: the only surviving physical evidence pertaining to the incident. Be it from man or beast, no one is sure, but Michihira found it lodged beneath one of his fingernails.

‘That case should’ve been closed by now. The police had no suspects.’

‘Sure, but this time the police won’t be running the investigation. I’m gonna do all the legwork myself, and I intend to start by having DNA analysis done on that hair sample. Just think of it. This is groundbreaking technology that we didn’t have in those days! All I want is to find out what on earth that thing was, and if I can do that much then I’ll be satisfied. The only catch is that you have the only evidence that’ll help us to get that far. All that the police was either lost or has been so badly altered that it’s no longer usable; everything else went up in flames with Saeko’s house. So, I was wondering if you’d let me borrow it a short while if you still have it.’

‘Look, I’ll do it only under the condition that you leave me out of this! I don’t want anything more to do with it! Understand?! I just want to forget all about this whole thing!’

Chizuru returned from the second floor a little while later. Not to disturb them, she retreated to the kitchen to wash the dishes. Michihira looked on concerned as Ohnuki made himself another stout drink and tossed it back before confiding in his friend.

‘Michihira. You’re a good guy, feigning ignorance when you must’ve have figured it out by now. You know that I’m not well but you’re nice about it. As a matter of fact, you and Chizuru are the only people who will let me drink in peace,’ he said. Michihira lit a cigarette without saying a word.

‘I’ve got cancer,’ Ohnuki told him, ‘and I don’t have much time left. Six months at most. You’ll have to understand that I’m doing this because I don’t want to leave anything undone,’ he said as the ice inside his glass gave a soft clinking chime.

Chapter 1: The Reunion, Part 2

It floated in a dark, timeless void.

Michihira lay short of breath and surrounded by close heat, his body an offering to the pain.

Moving in and out of rapidly fading consciousness, he glimpsed a white, transparent figure as it slowly drifted past him. Translucent at first, it slowly took on greater definition right before him, morphing at will.

The figure split into two parts, one of which danced graceful lines in the darkness while the other extended its arms towards Michihira, enticingly hovering above him. He discerned this figure to be a woman whose face beamed with ravishing beauty above a globular mass pulsating somewhere near chest-level.

Her name skirted his mind: Sacko. It made perfect sense to him; it could be no other way.

He held out his hand to touch the figure in front of him but he couldn't reach it. The second figure now loomed black above him, so vast that it threatened to overshadow his very soul. Driven by its own motives, it fully extends its muscular arms in an attempt to capture the white one. The latter fends off its advances but all is in vain as there are no hiding places. Instead, the figures wrangle, wriggle, and squirm on the floor.

'Stop! Let go!' The white figure screams, scowling. 'Stop!' it howls as its black assailant slowly turns to face Michihira, its eyes aglow. Speechless, Michihira lets loose with an aspirated shriek.

■

He awoke to the ring of the telephone. Groping at his pillow and finally reaching the nightstand, he found the receiver and lifted it to his ear mid-ring. It was Ohnuki.

'Michihira! 'Hope I didn't wake you.'

'Well, you did.'

'Two things. First off, about our man. Seiji Kobayashi has agreed to meet with you.'

He was in rare form: official mode. On the telephone Ohnuki sounded much different than in person, measuring his speech with the cadence of a veteran police officer trained in protocol.

'Time and place?'

'I know it's short-notice, but he'll see you this afternoon at three in the lobby of the Silver City Hotel in Numata. Can you make it?'

Michihira glanced at the clock. It was 10:30. From his apartment near Tokyo's Shakujii Park he could easily get there by way of the Neruma Interchange and then the Kanetsu Expressway. He'd be there in no time. Plus, it was Saturday and he had the day off.

'Sure. No problem.'

'One more thing. I'm checking into the hospital today, so I won't be able to meet you, but I'd like you to stop by my house in the morning if you're gonna be in Numata overnight. There's something I want you to have since there's no use in me keeping it. Either my wife or daughter should be there to give it to you. I suggest you go by car, if possible.'

'Yeah. That was my plan.'

With this much settled they hung up. Michihira knew exactly what it was that Ohnuki wanted to give him, but he couldn't imagine it to have increased to such volume that he'd need a car to move it. But then, he thought, Ohnuki practiced the old school style of police work. All the notoriety of Japan's police departments for their studious handling of evidence wasn't enough for him, and where the outcome of a case depended on the integrity of key physical elements it certainly couldn't be entrusted to unknown hands.

Michihira drew the curtains to find the sky clear and blue: no need to worry about snow. He took a shower to cleanse himself of sweat, drank a cup of filtered coffee, and packed his overnight bag with enough clothes and supplies for two nights before heading out to the parking lot.

His Jeep Cherokee was a nearly antiquated '95 model with 62,000 miles on the engine, and though he hadn't driven it in three weeks it turned over and cranked on the first try. It was battered and rusty but it never failed him when he needed it, and while it wasn't the most attractive vehicle it served him well. In fact, its utility and dependability were what he most appreciated about it.

Michihira weaved his way through the crowds ahead of the train station and entered the Kanetsu Expressway at exactly noon. He'd have lunch at a rest area along the way to save time. A week had passed since his reunion with Ohnuki, when he ultimately gave in to his proposal and agreed to a set of conditions. The first was that he'd give Ohnuki the piece of evidence he'd requested—that lock of the culprit's body hair that he had stashed inside a desk drawer at home. He'd put it inside an empty film case and hand-labeled it TENGU: BODY HAIR. DECEMBER 1974. Now that he thought about it he recalled how the villagers were convinced that the culprit was not a man but one of the most feared of Japan's mountain-dwelling beasts—the tengu: a goblin with supernatural strengths.

The second condition was that Michihira agree to meet with one Mr. Kobayashi and hear what he had to say about the case. At the time of the incident in '74 Kobayashi was 27 years old and serving as a highway patrolman for the motorcycle division of the Numata Police Department, whose records show reports of an automobile accident within city limits in the predawn hours of September 26th in the 46th year of the Showa era. As the first respondent to the scene he should've seen something. Michihira recalled something that Ohnuki had said when they met,

There was this peculiar car crash near the end of that year... and I just can't get past the thought that it has everything to do with this case.

Michihira remembered having long ago heard about the accident. As soon as he got back to Tokyo he went through his notepads in search of any notes that he might have taken concerning it. His notes began October 4, 1974, and he found the following entry on the third page:

*2am, September 26. Auto accident at Tanbara. US Department of Defense vehicle. Driver fled on foot. Investigate possible connection with Tengu incident.

The notebook was faded and yellow with age. It was the first time that he'd opened it in twenty six years, and while he recognized the handwriting as his own he didn't remember inscribing the words it contained, but as he sat and read through his notes a wave of memory rushed upon him, allowing him a piecemeal recollection of the facts as he knew them. His own need to establish a causal relationship between the auto accident and the Tengu case gradually began to make sense again.

Kobayashi had retired from the police force nearly fifteen years earlier and subsequently taken over his family's garment business in Numata City, but Ohnuki knew better than to approach him directly for information. Though Kobayashi was no longer on the police force the mere rumor of a current officer meddling in a case for which the statute of limitations was still valid would be enough to get him into a world of trouble. This is where Michihira came in: playing the part of the curious journalist with a benign interest in obscure factoids would enable him to procure the information they needed in order to proceed with solving the case.

The third and final condition was of a personal nature. Ohnuki knew at the time of their meeting at Haguruma that he was scheduled to check into the hospital for chemotherapy the following week.

'Promise that you won't visit me in the hospital, no matter how bad-off I get,' Ohnuki demanded. 'If you do, I swear, I'll never speak to you again,' he'd said teasingly. Michihira surmised it to be his friend's wish that no one other than family members see him on his sickbed. Maybe he meant it as a final gesture of genteel mannerism.

Michihira arrived at the hotel at a quarter to three. Entering a café and ordering a coffee, he then took a seat in a corner that allowed a good view of the lobby so that he'd be able to see Mujina when he arrived. He waited. The fact of the matter was that he hadn't the slightest clue as to who this Kobayashi was but he later told him that he remembered Michihira. To the extent that he was well known even among the ranks of the patrol division, Michihira must have been a rather troublesome presence for the Numata Police Department.

For his unorthodox field tactics Michihira was known by colleagues as 'Mamushi', or 'The Viper.' Notorious for his tenacity with interviewees, having tracked down a source he'd hound them until they'd supplied him with information sufficient to his purposes; kick, scream, and cry though they may. On more than one occasion where he exceeded the boundaries of decorum he found himself subject to lawsuits and even death threats for his trouble. Badger and Viper: for all the inherent potential for antagonism, they made a suitable team.

Kobayashi showed up at the hotel a little behind schedule. Knowing that he was meeting with a former police officer, Michihira had braced himself for the worst possible scenario he could imagine, but his apprehension turned out to be ungrounded.

Kobayashi walked into the lobby smiling, wearing a garishly patterned jacket with his potbelly protruding through the unzipped front and a pair of flimsy sandals on his feet, and to Michihira he better fit the image of a strip mall salesman than that of a former motorcycle cop.

On his way in Kobayashi stopped and flirted with one of the waitresses before ordering a coffee and taking a seat in front of Michihira and getting directly to the matter at hand.

'I understand you're investigating an auto accident that happened twenty-six years ago,' Kobayashi said, 'A curious one, aren't you? Just like me!'

Thus relieved by his friendly manner, Michihira settled into his chair.

'Yes. I'm looking at all the available statistics on accidents involving vehicles registered to US military personnel for that period,' Michihira ventured, 'I just thought you might be of some help.'

Kobayashi immediately spoke up, making light of Michihira's apparent nervousness,

'Stop kidding me! You're investigating the tengu case, aren't you?' he pressed, 'If Ohnuki sent you then that much is a dead giveaway. Look. I've given up the whole cop bid, so you don't have to worry about me ratting you out. I'll tell you all that I know if it will help you,' he said.

When his coffee was served, Kobayashi added a generous amount of milk and sugar and took a sip. He then settled back into his chair and, like a seasoned storyteller, began to relate things as he knew them.

Chapter 1: The Reunion, Part 3

It was the midnight hours of September 25, Showa 49. Police reports show one Kent Rigby posing as a US Army first sergeant and driving a charcoal-gray Dodge van in the Yuzawa-bound lanes of National Highway 17 out of Tokyo. His age was reported but hitherto unconfirmed as 36, but more important is the fact that he may have been operating under an alias, and it is not clear where he was headed in the dead of night. Everything was in order, it seemed. That is, at least, until he reached Numata city limits a little before midnight.

If anything could've hampered Rigby's plans it would have been a bank robbery that occurred on the evening of the 25th. Brandishing a sword, the thief had slipped through the

bank's rear entrance where he forced his way into the safe and frantically tossed several \$2000 wads of bills into a bag before escaping. Reports of the robbery were repeatedly broadcast on television and over the airwaves, but Rigby was clueless since he hadn't the slightest working knowledge of the Japanese language.

Oblivious to the high-stakes manhunt, he would have run into the first roadblocks just as he entered Numata, but since they were set up only in the lanes leaving the city Rigby's van made unnoticed and unimpeded passage.

The Police Department's tight security and inspection at all major points exiting Numata that night were targeted at a white compact vehicle suspected to be driven by the bank robber. The roadblocks had been in place since 6pm, and Officer Kobayashi was stationed with several other officers at an exit point on the Yuzawa-bound lanes of National Highway 17. He'd already been there six hours manning one of two motorcycles posted on alert in support of a single patrol car and a transport vehicle carrying pylons and other blockade equipment.

Having previously worked a number of roadblocks, Kobayashi knew the slim odds of catching the suspect while on watch. In fact, he'd never so much as made a traffic arrest, so his expectations for the night were low.

His Honda CB750 had nearly 45,000 miles on the engine. He stood next to it and watched in a drowsy stupor the steady procession of cars slowing and then stopping for cursory inspection before accelerating and leaving the checkpoint.

It was then that a particular driver's suspicious reaction to the roadblock caught his attention. In what Kobayashi first thought to be a truck, the driver made a sudden stop about 100ft from the inspection point and pulled the vehicle onto the shoulder. Noticing his actions, two officers posted at the patrol car approached the vehicle with red-tipped

flashlights and signaled the driver to stay put. It was Kent Rigby. The time was 12:18am, September 26. Had Rigby known about the bank robbery he probably would also have known the purpose of the roadblock and thereby passed through it without incident, but such was not the case and it was too late to correct his error.

The Dodge van bore US military license plates—off-limits to civilian police departments without overwhelming cause to inspect—but to the extent that Rigby seems to have mistaken the roadblock to be for himself and caught the officers' attention, he represented an exception to this unwritten rule.

He panicked, and before he knew it the officers were heading towards him. Rigby threw the gear into reverse and hit the accelerator, slamming into the transfer truck sitting directly behind him before putting it back into drive and gassing it again as he banked a hard right and barreled down Nat. Hwy 17 against traffic.

Officer Kobayashi saw the whole thing. Just as Rigby sped away he jumped onto his motorcycle, flipped on the siren, and was immediately in hot pursuit of the van. On backup were his motorcycle partner Officer Shimura and the patrol car officer. The Dodge van was bulky but it packed a 5.7 liter V8 engine that enabled the driver to reach race-velocity if he so desired, and this is exactly what Rigby did, forcing oncoming traffic out of the lanes as he tore down the darkened Hwy 17 at speeds approaching 100mph.

Leading the chase, Officer Kobayashi saw that one of the van's rear suicide doors was ajar and nearly off the hinges. It was then that he also noticed the US DOD license plate, but this was clearly a high-stakes situation and he wasn't about to let slip a chance to make what could turn out to be an important arrest. But barreling down the potholed Hwy 17 at night against traffic was enough to strike fear into even the best motorcyclist, and Officer

Kobayashi was no exception, so he dropped his speed and backed off a bit but maintained visual contact with Rigby's van.

'That's strange,' Michihira said, 'Surely he'd have known that as a serviceman the Japanese police would have let him be.'

'Sure, but I'm thinking that he must've had some sort of suspicious cargo stashed inside the van.'

'But the police don't inspect US government vehicles, do they? Extraterritoriality would have made sure of that, and I'm sure it was still in effect then. Unless, of course, Rigby was mixed up in something involving the US military that had the potential of implicating the Japanese police,' Michihira said.

'Humph. Well, there's no way of knowing now,' Kobayashi said and continued with the story.

Rigby must've remembered the other roadblock as he sped back towards Tokyo along Hwy 17 because he slammed on the brakes as he neared a traffic signal and made a sudden left turn, exiting Nat. Hwy 17 onto Municipal Highway 265. The officers followed Rigby deep into the mountains on the gradually narrowing highway, and as he tailed the van Officer Kobayashi suddenly realized that they had their man.

Highway 265 heads northward through Mt. Hataka, but it soon detours westward and eventually merges again with Hwy 17. Several auxiliary roads break off from Hwy 265 and lead to either the summit of Mt. Kasho or to the roads following the banks of Lake Tanbara. Rigby had unwittingly sprung his own trap, oblivious to his deepening predicament as he madly outran the police.

Officer Kobayashi relaxed and slowed the chase, self-assuredly watching as Rigby distanced himself from the pack and his taillights disappeared into the mountain's pitch-black darkness. A moment later the sound of an enormous crash echoed through the night.

This is it! Kobayashi switched off his siren and prepared to apprehend Rigby as he got off his motorcycle and pushed his way through the pitch-black darkness. He soon found the van overturned in an embankment to the right side of a sharp left turn, headlights still ablaze. Just ahead, a white-skinned man navigated the glow to escape into the woods on foot, but Officer Kobayashi didn't pursue him: if this guy were a US soldier then he might be carrying a gun. Instead, Kobayashi slipped his New Nambu .38 Special out of its holster, checked for a live round in the chamber, and waited for backup, feeling more nervous than he'd ever felt in his twenty years as an officer.

'Rigby was finally caught, wasn't he?' Michihira asked. They were already on their second cups of coffee.

'Yeah. Later that morning, around seven,' Kobayashi answered, 'But we couldn't be sure about his identity since he had no ID and he wouldn't tell us his name. Our only recourse was to query the Americans with the plate number through Foreign Affairs. They gave his name as Kent Rigby and said that he was a deserter from the US Army who'd stolen the van two days earlier from Yokota Air Base escaped into the night. Now, keep in mind that this information comes from the Americans, so I can't attest to its accuracy. Later that evening their MPs came and picked Rigby up and whisked him away. Come to think of it, they didn't seem all too concerned with what had happened.'

The Japanese police often referred to US military personnel as 'the Americans,' and Michihira now recalled that Ohnuki did the same, indignantly infusing the term with irony that owed to their status as men who thought themselves above the law.

'I wonder where he could have been going,' Michihira said.

'Beats me. We prodded him but he never said a word.'

It didn't make sense. There were no US facilities anywhere along Hwy 17, so it would be impossible now to find out where Kent Rigby could have been headed.

'But there's something else. Something about this whole thing that I just can't figure out,' Kobayashi said, 'See, Rigby didn't look anything like a soldier. I remember that he was unshaven and uncut, and he was a runt of a little fellow. Desertion is serious crime, you know. A felony, at that! So you'd think they'd have locked him up after they caught him, but you know what? I saw him in Numata not ten days after the accident!'

Kobayashi had a point. It wasn't long before that the US had gotten out of Vietnam, and deserters were usually handled severely. If his reported status was legit then Rigby would have been court-martialed and imprisoned for years.

'Which would mean that he wasn't a deserter, after all?' Michihira asked.

'Who knows? All I can say is that he looked something pitiful when the MPs came and got him. I thought he was going to break down into tears when they put their rifles on him. It turns out that the vehicle he stole was one of theirs. A police van. The car theft alone should have been enough for them to put him away for much more than ten days.'

'A military van?'

'Sure was! Didn't you know? It had 'MP' painted across the side in big white letters! But another thing that I can't figure out is this. Of all the vehicles he could have used, why did he choose that cumbersome van? That thing's not a normal vehicle, you know,' Kobayashi said.

'What do you mean?'

Kobayashi explained. ‘Well, the rear door had a window. You know, one of those steel-latticed deals? And it opened only from the outside. Now, you’ll recall that one of the doors was badly damaged when Rigby crashed into the transfer truck, but my point is that this was a special-use vehicle. A prisoner transport.’

‘And what happened to the van?’

‘The Americans came and got it that afternoon. Loaded it onto a flatbed truck and carried it off.’

They’d talked for nearly three hours. By the time Kobayashi got up to leave it was dark out.

‘Let me know what you find, will you?’ he said as he turned and walked out of the café.

Michihira did a mental review of all that he’d just heard, convinced that there was something strange about the whole thing, no matter how one looked at it. First of all, supposing Rigby really was a deserter, what should that mean for the case? Secondly, Michihira recalled seeing several American servicemen passing through Shikamata and hanging about the village right around the time of the incident. One of them was a short, blonde-haired man whom he once spied loitering near Saeko’s house. Might that have been Kent Rigby?

Then there was the van. Assuming that Kobayashi was right and it was an MP transport, whatever Rigby was moving had to have been massive. Finally, there was the crash on the mountain road. Michihira paused, struck by a sudden realization: Rigby had overturned the van less than a mile from where Saeko lived in Shikamata!

Chapter 1: The Reunion, Part 4

The recent spate of murders naturally stirred much fear and anxiety in local residents, but only in a city like Numata could a tengu be counted among the suspects.

Plain and simple, Numata is tengu territory. From place name allusions on street signs near the transportation center to graphic depictions of its likeness, visitors are assailed by all manner of popular references to this mythical creature scattered throughout the city; they serve as powerful lures into a world of all but lost tradition.

Hailed as the northern Kansai region's most popular festival, elements of the Gion can be found as far away as Numata, where mid-summer brings the Tengu Festival and the parading of giant floats bearing the characteristic red-faced depiction of that mountain goblin.

Numata's tengu legend originated at Mirokuji—a temple of the Tendai Sect Buddhist that was established in the first year of the Kasho era (848 AD) by the eminent priest Ennin Jikaku Daishi of Mt. Hiei. The temple is dedicated to the Kashozan Chinju Chuho Boddhisatva—also known as Chuho Sonja—and worshippers at the hall bearing his name commonly refer to him as Tengu.

A child prodigy and Buddhist monk of superhuman abilities who performed many miracles while in meditation and service at the temple, Chuho attained the highest level of being but forewent enlightenment in order to dedicate himself to leading others to the path of Nirvana. It is said that as the monk announced his intentions to high priest Ryozenji his soul ascended to heaven, leaving behind the mask of the tengu.

This legend gave birth to a wealth of folktales and traditions invoking the spirit of the tengu throughout the villages surrounding Numata, and while it may have seemed implausible that in 1974 there still were people who believed in the earthly existence of mythical creatures, the days following Kent Rigby's crash brought with them a series of

mysterious occurrences in Shikamata the likes of which the villagers were wont to describe as none other than Tengu's handiwork.

The first of these was the sudden, unexplained pilferage and destruction of the pre-harvest apple crop. That the mountains surrounding Numata were home to an indigenous species of monkey that annually fed on the orchard's bounty was well known among the farmers who allowed for this inevitable loss, but the combination of a notable difference in the volume of fruit taken this year, the deplorable condition in which the trees had been left, and the odd teeth markings found on the apple cores—clearly not a monkey's—were all causes for great alarm in the village.

Next, there came several reports of villagers hearing eerie sounds in the dead of night: hoarse, lamenting howls that made one tremble with fear. Many of them having previously worked as hunters, the inhabitants of Shikamata knew well the behavior patterns and various calls of the animals that lived in their surroundings, but what they were hearing now was unlike anything they had ever encountered.

Then there were the successive disappearances of two village dogs—presumed to have been spirited away by the tengu—as harvest time approached and passed. The owners reported hearing yelps in the middle of the night but, terrified of what they might find, they refused to check on their pets tied up outdoors until morning when they went into their yards to discover their dogs missing, their empty collars and leashes lying in the grass. Two days later a villager stumbled upon one of the missing dogs in the forest, its body fully skinned, bones stripped of muscle and sinews, entrails either missing or partially devoured. The discovery was evidence enough to support of the villagers' deep-seated notions, sparking the imaginations and fueling the fears of all the residents of Shikamata, and it wasn't long before reports of tengu sightings began to spread throughout the village.

■

On October 1, roughly five days after Kent Rigby's accident, Sada Kinetsuka was out walking the Shikamata backcountry with a woven bamboo basket strapped to her back, gathering wild mushrooms. She was alone.

Of the seven houses in the village two were abandoned and three of the remaining five bore the Kinetsuka family name. Sada was 87 years old at the time and the village matriarch, and having grown nearly deaf with age she knew nothing of the recent talk of the tengu.

A common fear among the village elders was that of bringing excessive burden to their families with age. It was a concern that wasn't easily mitigated, but Sada knew that she had two chances annually to redeem her standing at home: the wild vegetable season in spring, and fall's mushroom season, and it happens that Sada was regarded as the best mushroom picker in the village. On October 1st, having forgotten that her son and daughter-in-law had told her to stay out of the forest, she set out in search of a certain few species of edible mushroom: the shimeji and shishitake, and with a little luck she might even find a few maitake.

Rumors of a recent tengu sighting had kept the villagers out of the woods for several days, leaving the hills lush with fresh, untouched mushrooms. Beside herself with her quick discovery of a healthy shimeji patch, Sada picked carefree, in no time filling her basket to the brim.

No sooner had she sensed a strange presence in the grove than a long shadow fell upon her as she stood stooped over the mushroom patch. Spinning around to see what was

there, she found standing over her an enormous, strange-looking creature the likes of which she'd never before seen. Half-man, half-bird, it was garbed in a blue kimono and headgear similar to the eboshi worn by Shinto priests. Sada thought that it must be a tengu as she stood stone-still in the creature's shadow, at once amazed and terrified as she gazed at its peculiar form.

Towering over Sada, the creature regarded her with a long, silent stare before finally taking a few steps towards her and reaching into the basket strapped to her back. Grabbing a handful of mushrooms, it tossed them into its mouth and began to chew, apparently displeased with their flavor as it immediately turned and spat them onto the ground at its feet.

What was she to do? Overcome with fear, Sada prostrated herself at the creature's feet in a fit of hysterical weeping and trembling. Unable now to bring herself to look upon its form, she went on bowing and praying, reciting over and over again in earnest all the sutras she knew by heart. Having gone on in this manner for what must have been about half an hour, Sada at long last slowly raised her head as a breeze blew through the meadow to find that the tengu had disappeared.

The details of Rigby's car crash near Shikamata were as yet unknown in the village at the time of the tengu sightings, so no one ventured to draw a connection between the events; not, at least, until the third day following Sada's encounter with the tengu, when the first horrific murders occurred.

Chapter 1: The Reunion, Part 5

Early morning, October 4th in the year Showa 49. Kenkichi Tashiro—an officer on assignment to Sayama in the town of Kamihouchi in Numata City—was in the middle of

breakfast when he received a call from the alarm center at the Numata Police Department.

The time was 7:10am.

He hurried to lower the volume of the NHK News broadcast, slurped down the last of his miso soup, and picked up the receiver. The officer on the other end spoke without ceremony.

The center had just received an emergency call from Shikamata Village, not far from the Department. A bear attack. One confirmed fatality: a man in his forties. It was the only information available, but they needed him to hurry there and take a look.

Telling his wife Shizue that he needed to respond to a call, Tashiro asked her to answer the phone and take messages for him while he was out. He then hopped onto his motorcycle and headed for the village, a pickled radish clenched between his teeth.

Shikamata was less than twenty minutes from Sayama, where the village's reputation as a land of mystery was well known. Situated directly between Kamihouchi's wards of Sayama and Tanbara, Shikamata is home to a total of fourteen people living in five homes. While commonly known in neighboring towns as a hunting village, Shikamata is also rumored to be a settlement of outcasts whose lineage dates to the days of the Taira clan.

It wasn't until after the 30th year of the Showa era that the domicile registration system was implemented, before which not even mail could be delivered to the secluded hamlet, and it was only by a matter of chance that police jurisdiction over Shikamata was established. Until recently it was unclear whether the hamlet's cases should be handled by the police of Tanbara or Sayama, but a fatal hunting accident two years ago tacitly settled the matter when Officer Tashiro happened to be headed towards Shikamata and responded to the call.

Officer Tashiro abhorred the Shikamata villagers. Their provincialism was enough to make him want to believe the rumors that they were outcasts, and their refusal to acknowledge his presence convinced him that they harbored an inexplicable antagonism towards him as an outsider stationed near their village. Whenever he went to Shikamata and questioned residents for information on cases they often evaded him by responding in that bastardized dialect particular to hunters. Such was the case a couple of years ago when he responded to the hunting accident, which went unsolved as the result of collusion by the residents.

Their attitude was different today, however. Officer Tashiro arrived in Shikamata to find most of the villagers gathered in the garden in front of Mineo Komaku's house, their faces flush with terror. The front door was open and the threshold was covered with a tarp under which Officer Tashiro noticed a blackish-red puddle of blood as he stepped through the entrance.

'It's... Mineo,' someone said.

Tashiro bent over the body, gasping for air as he lifted a corner of the tarp. What lie underneath the fabric could only be described as a heap of flesh wrapped in bloody, shredded cloth. The head was crushed and the eyeballs dangled from their sockets.

Officer Tashiro replaced the tarp, struggling to hold down his breakfast as he straightened himself. He remembered Mineo Komaku as one of the only villagers who cooperated with his investigation two years earlier, and he'd been to his house several times to collect information.

'There are two more,' came a voice from behind, 'Inside.' It was village chief Kunio Kinetsuka. Thus prompted, Officer Tashiro left Mineo's body and stepped into the depths of the house, cringing at the thought of what awaited him as his eyes gradually adjusted to

the darkness and he began to make out a disarray of objects and bodies. Ahead of him the sliding doors were all splinters and shreds; furniture was overturned and broken.

Entering the center room he found the shoji and plastered walls streaked and splattered with dried blood that looked like black paint in the dim light, and in the eight-mat room on the mezzanine above the earthen floor a woman lay spread-eagled and all but stark naked with her nightgown ripped and twisted around her waist. He presumed the body to be that of Mineo's wife, Nobuko Komaku, but the head and face were so badly mauled that he couldn't be sure. Farther ahead still, from beneath a fallen latticed door in the rear room he glimpsed a leg of the third body.

This was no bear attack; Officer Tashiro was sure of it. Gasping for air as he stumbled out of the house, he unequivocally declared as much to the villagers gathered in the garden.

'Is there a phone I can use?' Officer Tashiro put in a call for support to the Numata Police Department. Half an hour later two patrol cars bearing four detectives pulled up to the house, and behind them there soon arrived the coroner, a team of forensics specialists, inspectors, and more than a dozen police officers. Even Ohnuki—the true backbone of the Numata Police Department—could be seen milling about the group. Within minutes the village was abuzz with the most activity known ever to have shattered its usual silence.

An investigation command center was promptly established at the Department under the designation "Shikamata Village Single Household Triple Homicide Incident" The deceased were later confirmed as Mineo Komaku, age 42; his wife, Nobuko Komaku, age 43; and his father, Takefumi Komaku, age 76, who only a year earlier had collapsed with a stroke and fell into a coma from which he never recovered. Mineo Komaku was survived by

his 17 year-old son only son who was away searching for work in Maebashi and thus went unharmed.

Autopsy reports concluded that all three victims were clubbed to death with a heavy steel pipe or similar object. This later became the official position taken by the Numata Police Department, also to be posted in its bulletin, but no pipe was ever found. The strongest piece of physical evidence in the case was a rusted 20-caliber Murata rifle found lying in the apple orchard behind the Komaku home, later identified in sworn testimony by several villagers as the property of the late Mineo.

The rifle was discovered at a distance of more than 200 yards from the house, its barrel bent and the solid walnut stock shattered to pieces. The chamber was charged with an unfired 20-caliber slug, from which detectives inferred that the killer wrested the rifle away from Komaku before he could pull the trigger. Komaku then ran for his life, escaping to his house only to be caught and maimed there along with his family.

On the rifle were found fingerprints thought to belong to the killer, as well as hundreds of footprints in the orchard, the garden, and the hills surrounding the house, but the police reports were utterly silent on these details. Hound dogs put on the trail followed the tracks northward into Mt. Kasho, but the search ended at the base of a cliff of such steepness that no human being could possibly have scaled it.

Police interrogations of the villagers concerning the events leading up to the murders resulted in reports of screams and moans in the predawn hours of the fated night. A combination of information culled from statements made by villagers and the autopsy results enabled police to place the time of the attack at approximately 3am on October 4.

Most of the statements given proved beneficial to the investigation but some were so incoherent as to offer no substantial leads, and while everyone questioned claimed not to

have witnessed the murders the most nonsensical theories and opinions abounded in their wake.

Some held that the slayings were the work of an Asiatic black bear; commonly thought to be a cunning descendent of the brown bear. Others insisted that they were the result of a curse exacted by the spirit of Shinichi Kinetsuka as revenge for his hunting death two years past. Then there were those who, presenting perhaps the most implausible explanation of all, wrote the incident off as the work of a tengu.

Of all the statements given during the investigation the most reliable came from Kunio Kinetsuka, who lived in the house next door to the Komaku residence some 100ft away. Kunio had served many years as village chief and was entering his mid-fifties. He'd heard of his mother Sada's reports of seeing a tengu as she picked mushrooms in the forest, but he had no intention of entertaining the outlandish notion that such a creature existed anywhere except in mythology.

According to Kunio, a small gathering of men took place on the night of the murders. It was the usual get-together of household heads that always happened at Kunio's house. In addition to Kunio there were in attendance Mineo Komaku and his nephew Seiroh Komaku, who lived in a house to the rear of his orchard, and Kunio's brother, Seiji Kinetsuka. No one from the outlying house attended; widowed after her husband Shinichi Kinetsuka's passing two years earlier, a woman by the name of Saeko was its sole occupant, and on the night of the gathering she was home watching the house, as usual. The meeting's purpose was to address the upcoming harvest and the losses expected for this year's crop.

During its heyday as a hunting hamlet the villagers of Shikamata annually trapped a number of deer and wild boar, but since their survival could hardly depend on the sale of a few furs and cuts of meat they were forced to develop a new trade, and it happened that

apple farming was the only viable alternative that would provide a stable source of income and keep their families fed.

More apples had been lost in the past week than in the greatest annual loss recorded. Though each household cared for its own orchard, the plots were the common property of the village as a whole, so the overall health of the crop was the concern of all. At the current rate of crop loss, the villagers expected a reduction by no less than half of their annual revenues, which was dependent upon a single harvest; the men were called that evening in order to come up with a plan of action.

The apple crop was in most cases eaten by monkeys, crows, and other scavengers. Deer and bears might also occasionally be spotted in the orchards, but since each species' numbers were limited the volume of losses usually fell within a predictable range. This year, however, both the volume and pattern of losses showed a marked departure from precedent, in some cases with several bushels of fruit being taken in a single night from healthy, apple-laden trees that the villagers later found ravaged beyond repair. And since the attacks on the trees happened primarily during the midnight and predawn hours, no one is said to have seen any of the suspected animals.

The men's meeting involved the enjoyment of a bit of alcohol, so all of the attendees were in high spirits. At one point someone lightheartedly mentioned *tengu*, in response to which the entire group burst into laughter. But with the recent disappearance of the dogs and rumors of sightings floating around it was clear that this mythical creature was foremost on the minds of all present, and try as they may to avoid the subject they would soon be obliged to acknowledge this fact.

Mineo Komaku was the only person among the men who from the beginning took a hardnosed stance in response to such nonsense. Recognized by one and all as Shikamata's

only expert marksman, Mineo was of the opinion that the predator was a brown bear.

Drawing courage from the liquor coursing through his veins, Mineo soon proposed that the group set out that night to stalk and take down the bear. No one took him up on his offer. Instead, they all protested on the grounds that hunting season had yet to begin, but it was more likely that they all were terror-stricken by the rumors. Everyone, that is, except Mineo, who apparently decided to go after the bear on his own.

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The first transmission arrived at Keiichi Michihira's Central News Agency office at approximately 10am on the morning following the murders. Most of the agency's experienced reporters were currently on assignment to Vietnam and surrounding countries, so that by noon on an average day the only personnel in the office might be a rookie journalist who manned a section referred to as 'the desk.'

The morning of the 4th was business as usual. Michihira was joined in the editorial section by the desk manager Haruhiko Kanbara and a few rookie journalists to form a skeleton team. Michihira took the call when it came in and conveyed the info to Kanbara.

'What a mess! Just when the entire office is out on assignment!' he replied as he read Michihira's memo. Wisps of steam rose from the cup of coffee on his desk and evaporated in the glow of sunlight piercing the office through the window. Michihira stood silently before Kanbara's desk and awaited instructions. 'Humph! Three dead in a single house! Well, what can we do? We're gonna have to send someone.'

'Uh, Sir,' Michihira started, 'what do you say I go and check it out first? I'll go and take a look, and then you can send a relief later on if you like.' Kanbara fixed him with a skeptical stare.

'You got any experience doing independent legwork?' he asked.

‘No, Sir. Not yet.’ Michihira was only two years out of university.

‘Well, who’s gonna do the shooting? Oh, that’s right! You’re handy with a camera, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, Sir, I am.’ He’d majored in photography at University of Japan’s School of Art. Photography was his calling and he’d always wanted to work as a photojournalist.

‘They still haven’t found the killer...,’ Kanbara said as though speaking to himself. ‘This could turn into a long and difficult case, you know!’ he warned.

‘Yes, Sir, I understand.’

‘There’s bound to be a lot of blood and guts!’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You’ll need a car. Do you have one?’

‘Yes, Sir, I do.’ Michihira had found two loves while in college—driving and the mountains—and he’d bought a compact four-wheel-drive Gemini SJ10 to use as his excursion vehicle.

‘Okay, good. So, we’re set. Stop by the accounting office to pick up your per diem and get on out there!’ Kanbara said as he wrote an order for ¥100,000 per diem pay and handed it to Michihira. It would be enough money for several days’ food, supplies, and lodging.

Money in hand, Michihira grabbed a camera and several rolls of film and darted out of the office. From his office in Yurakucho he took the Yamanote Line to Ikebukuro, where he transferred to the Seibu Line, which he rode to Shakuji Park Station and got off the train. Stopping at his apartment for about five minutes to quickly pack his overnight bag, he then hopped into the Gemini and sped off to the Neruma Interchange to connect with the Kanetsu Expressway, which at the time went only as far as Kawagoe. From Kawagoe

Michihira took National Highway 254 to National Highway 17 where at last he found himself headed towards Numata City, the two-cylinder Gemini spewing white smoke as he pushed the accelerator nearly through the floor and the engine to a top speed of just over 40mph.

He finally caught up with the flow of traffic, but even at top speed it was three o'clock when he arrived at the Numata police station, where the first call he received was from Masaaki Matsui—a reporter for The Gunma Daily News. They planned to meet right away.

Michihira's first official interview as a journalist began at 3:30pm in front of the investigation command center at the Numata Police Department. Through his meeting with Matsui he was able to put together a basic outline of the case, but the information he gathered was so terribly fragmented that he'd be hard-pressed to begin his investigation with confidence.

According to Matsui a forensics team was at this very moment collecting fingerprints and examining tracks left at the crime scene, but in due consideration of their efforts it made little sense to Michihira that the Department should be conducting a separate investigation in an attempt to validate the theory that the culprit was a bear or some other wild animal. Directing the command center was Police Chief Satoshi Watanabe, with Deputy Chief Takuya Atsuda acting as press officer. Once inside the station Michihira put the question directly to Atsuda,

'How can it be that where you have fingerprints you don't know whether the killer is man or beast?' he asked.

‘It means that we have yet to determine whether or not the fingerprints belong to the culprit who committed the murders.’ Atsuda answered in what sounded like a prepared statement. Would he have Michihira to believe that bears have fingerprints?

‘But, there were tracks also, weren’t there? If the killer was human then he would have been wearing shoes, and if a bear...’

‘Slow down, Youngblood! Didn’t you know? Even the bears around here wear shoes!’ Atsuda mildly interjected, but his statement was clearly meant to intimidate the inexperienced Michihira.

Following the interview with Atsuda, Michihira put the same question to Matsui, a salt-and-peppered, mild-mannered man in his mid-30s.

‘The only species of bear found on Honshu is the brown bear,’ Michihira noted, ‘Of course you’re aware that the brown bear is a plant-eating species. Now, do you really believe that a peaceable brown bear would have made such a gruesome attack on human beings?’

‘You’ve got a point there. It just couldn’t have been a brown bear. There’s just no way,’ Matsui answered reflectively as he walked alongside Michihira.

‘But then, the police are also following the line that it could’ve been some other animal. What could they be thinking that it is?’ Matsui fell silent as Michihira pressed, visibly struggling with the thought of how to broach the subject.

‘You know, now that you mention it, I recall overhearing Ohnuki from forensics once say something about an escaped gorilla or orangutan.’

‘A gorilla?!’ The words fell upon Michihira’s ears as nonsense, but he knew that an escaped gorilla as a simple matter of fact wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. It was only a few years ago that a tiger had escaped captivity at a temple on Mt. Kano in Chiba Prefecture and caused an uproar. To be sure, while gorillas, too, are vegetarians by nature they are

prone to violent outbursts, but is it plausible to argue that a gorilla would attack and maim three adult human beings? It all boiled down to one fact: the police were hiding something. Even a young and inexperienced Michihira knew this much for sure. And certainly his intuition wouldn't mislead him.

Chapter 1: The Reunion, Part 6

Michihira faces a Pandora's Box.

He sits at his table in the dim late afternoon light, staring at a freshly poured glass of Jim Beam that he holds in his right hand. From between two fingers of his left hand the ashes of a smoldering Marlboro fall silently to the table.

An old cardboard apple box sits in front of him, firmly sealed with heavy cellophane packing tape. Both the box and the tape are sun-bleached and parched. From the looks of the box it must have sat around untouched for years. The top is labeled with a red marker in Ohnuki's handwriting, MATERIALS: SHIKAMATA INCIDENT.

Already an hour or more has passed since Michihira returned from Shikamata to his one-room Shakujii Park apartment. He's spent that time drinking whiskey in silent contemplation of the box that sits before him.

Pop said that as a detective with limited perspective he could do only so much with this stuff, so he thought it would be a good idea to have a journalist's eyes go through it. Maybe you'll find something that he's missed.

Michihira recalled what Ohnuki's wife Ryoko had told him when he stopped by their home to pick up the box. She'd visibly aged with the years but she was keen as ever, and she still used that good-natured, direct way of speaking that was all her own. She remembered

the minutest of details: how Michihira loved wild mushrooms, for example, and how he was a heavy sleeper and once burned his hand a morning while drowsily preparing breakfast.

What did Ohnuki expect him to do with the materials? It should be easy enough to find something that he might have overlooked, but whatever Michihira discovered should be thought of as no more than a few curios that would serve only to satiate his own intellect since he had no notions of casting new light onto this long-languid case.

Michihira pressed out his cigarette butt, now burning his fingers, and lifted the Baccarat rocks glass to his mouth to toss back about half of its contents.

There's a lot that can come up in twenty-six years.

Those were Ohnuki's words to Michihira that night at Haguruma. Michihira thought that there was some truth in the statement when he heard it, but it also sounded like no more than so much lip service. He was stumped; without a clue to Ohnuki's motives or the task he expected him to fulfill.

■

A single drop of water coursed its way down a mountain and it was certain that this drop of water would soon attract and merge with many others to form a flowing stream. The stream would merge with still others until it became a raging river. He'd not have to worry about leaving his fate to the flow of the river as it would be swept away by the current without regard to his will. In short, the fields had ripened and the time had come for their bounty to be harvested.

Without his having realized it the twilight had faded and Michihira found himself staring into darkness. He finally came to his senses and switched on a lamp. Then, pulling out his Victorinox Swiss Army knife, he put the tip of the blade to his Pandora's Box with the soft fluorescent beams of the lamp serving as his guide.

Inside the box lay a stack of notebooks yellow with age, several manila envelopes, and a few maps and other assorted documents, all neatly bundled and slumbering. So delicate were the items that he thought they might disintegrate the moment he opened the box and exposed them to fresh air, and as he carefully touched the pages he began to sense the weight of the years that they carried: a sensation beyond words that could only be felt with his hands.

He opened one of the notebooks to find the pages covered with oversized columns of lettering that filled two lines each, written in tight formation with a heavy hand. The handwriting was neat, but slightly illegible, and as he flipped through the pages Michihira remembered all the New Year's greetings cards he'd received from Ohnuki in the years following the incident.

Michihira replaced the notebook and opened one of the manila envelopes to find it stuffed with an inordinate number of black-and-white photographs; each envelope had the name of a victim written across the front. Taking out the envelope labeled MINEO KOMAKU, he emptied it of its contents and spread the photographs across the table before finishing off the rest of the Jim Beam in his glass and refilling it.

The envelope was filled with about fifty 4x6in cabinet photos, which struck Michihira as odd since police departments usually printed photographs of physical evidence on paper cut to dimensions of 8x10in or greater. Maybe these were contact prints that Ohnuki made for himself.

The photos were taken with a steady gaze, covering every inch of Mineo Komaku's corpse without flinching from the task of representing it as an ultimate physical truth, with special attention given to the crushed skull and mutilated face. They were the types of

photos that most people would shrink from taking—a fact that came to Michihira as testament to the steel nerves of the seasoned journalist who’d wielded the camera.

Michihira had spent several years in his youth as a photojournalist covering the battlefields of Africa and the Middle-East, and he knew all too well the types of transformation the human body undergoes after death. Unless a person looking at these photos now knew that the area depicted contained his jaw line, the crushed skull and the eyeballs and teeth lying on the ground next to it would appear as no more than a heap of minced flesh.

Among the stack of photographs was one in particular that caught Michihira’s attention. It was the only photo enlarged to 8x10in, and it was covered with a sheet of tracing paper on which thin lines such as one might find in a contour map were drawn in pencil. Below the tracing was a note that read, “Reference Notebook #1, Page 6.” Removing the tracing paper, Michihira found a magnified photo of Mineo Komaku’s face taken from a nearly full frontal angle.

He took out the notebook labeled KOMAKU HOUSEHOLD TRIPLE
HOMICIDE, #1 and turned to page 6 where he found the following entry:

TOP SECRET

Damage to Mineo Komaku's head and face inconsistent with that normally sustained through blunt force with a heavy object. Injuries appear, instead, to be the result of high pressure applied to the head. Medical examiner Tadokoro confers. Except for bleeding in the cranial sutures and dermal bruises, injuries sustained to musculoskeletal structure appear to be consistent with force applied by abnormally large human hands. Last point is evident but seems implausible.

TOP SECRET

Michihira couldn’t believe it, but shouldn’t he? It was impossible; common sense said so. Ohnuki held the opinion that Mineo Komaku’s head had been crushed by some

superhuman being. Michihira now reexamined the photo and tracing paper to find that the outline resembled a large human hand that was certainly oversized in comparison to Komaku's head.

Michihira finally understood the need for the cover-up: should sensitive evidence be released to the public then this quiet village would surely fall into a state of chaos, dragging Numata City and the surrounding municipalities into a public relations maelstrom. He was now able to temper his skepticism concerning the police department's judgment with a bit of rationalism.

There were legendary sumo wrestlers of enormous strength who were known to crush apples with their bare hands, but that a human should be capable of crushing another's skull in the same manner was unimaginable. Michihira retained a vivid physical memory of being manhandled by the beast, and he thought that if this crushing of the skull were at all possible then that thing could have easily done it.

The notebook revealed the fact that Komaku had sustained many other grave injuries: broken neck; dislocated shoulders and elbows; six fractured ribs; crushed spinal column. Ohnuki's modest entry regarding these injuries was as follows:

Victim's body appears as though run over by a dump truck.

Mineo's wife Nobuko was found in pieces. Official reports stated the cause of death as cranial trauma, but the photographs show the nose, upper lip, gums, and several teeth missing, as though ravenously bitten off. In addition to those of the face and head, there were also several close-up shots of the victim's crotch that showed numerous bruises in the areas surrounding the vagina and anal orifice. Ohnuki's entry on page 10 of Notebook #1 read:

Gashes in face probably the result of biting. Missing flesh has yet to be recovered. Laceration extending from vagina to anus. Dislocation of hip. Both injuries the result of rape.

Page 11 contained the following note:

TOP SECRET

Semen specimen removed from vagina during autopsy. Blood type B. Semen specimen determined missing on August 21st, Showa 50.

TOP SECRET

Ohnuki's entries forgo flair to present the facts in a clinical tone, thus allowing Michihira an easy grasp of the peculiarities of the case. His notes on Mineo's wife Nobuko describe her as a small-framed woman just over 4 ½ft tall and weighing 84lbs, also stating that the killer chewed off her lip, teeth, and nose as he raped her so furiously that he dislocated her hip. Michihira's question here concerned the semen specimen? What happened to it? How could key evidence have been lost while in the hands of the police?

It seemed evident that Mineo's father Takefumi had been bludgeoned to death since he sustained traumatic injuries to the right side of the head. The skull was pulverized and most of the brain was missing. Ohnuki's entry:

TOP SECRET

Parietal lobe crushed. Neck broken. Right thigh bone broken. Brain matter recovered near wall some 100ft away. Weapon first thought to be blunt object struck solidly against side of head, but later determined to have been 6ft-high bedroom threshold. Bruises on left ankle thought to have been caused by intense pressure induced as culprit slung Takefumi Komaku around room by legs and thereby slammed head against threshold, crushing skull: the cause of death. Medical examiner Tadokoro confers on all points.

TOP SECRET

What on Earth happened here? Michihira paused a moment to regain his bearings, his memory of the crime scene rushing upon him and bringing him to the verge of vomiting.

Whoever committed the murders was by no means a normal human being. Which would mean that it must've been some other species, but that didn't make sense, either. Ohnuki's figurative sketch of the killer alluded to a supernatural being that existed only in the imagination.

The first page of Notebook #2 itemized the objects recovered from the crime scene:

Substantial amount of skin recovered from beneath Nobuko's fingernails. No matches found among villagers. Hair recovered from Nobuko's fingers. Also inconsistent with all samples taken from villagers.

That hair and skin samples were recovered was a well-known fact in the reporting circles, but Ohnuki had supplemented this information with the following remark:

TOP SECRET

Evidence confirmed missing as of August 21st, Showa 50.

TOP SECRET

There it is again: missing evidence. This could be neither coincidence nor mistake but only the work of the police—the result of a command made from the inside by a high-ranking official.

The third page following contained a detailed entry regarding the tracks found at the crime scene:

Innumerable tracks discovered in orchard, garden, and hills leading to steep bluff. Each footprint approximately 15 inches long and 8 inches wide. Culprit not wearing shoes but believed to have worn some sort of cloth wrapped around feet. Personal thought: if these are culprit's footprints, subject would be at least 6 ½ft tall and weigh approximately 450lbs.

As Michihira closed the notebook chills coursed the length of his spine. He couldn't shake them.

A tengu.

Could it really be a tengu? he asked himself incredulously.

There he was, on his first visit in the village thrown, as it were, into Shikamata's cauldron of myth. And as it happens, this was also the day when he first met Saeko.