



## Japan's Burakumin: An Introduction

Alastair McLaughlan

"Burakumin maggots...kill eta filth...burakumin have four legs...buraku people cause AIDS..." These examples of anti-buraku graffiti are not from Japan's distant past, but vivid reminders from the 21st century that anti-buraku prejudice remains extant in some sectors of Japanese society.

Although the Japanese word buraku literally means a hamlet or small village, in many parts of Japan, especially southern Honshu's Kansai, Hiroshima and Hyogo regions, the term has a connotation akin to our own word ghetto. Furthermore, the word burakumin (lit. buraku people) is pejoratively applied to denigrate the residents of buraku villages. Anti-buraku attitudes are largely founded on those residents' historical connections to Tokugawa Japan's eta (lit. much filth) and hinin (lit. non-human) outcasts. In particular, the leather and butchery work of the despised eta were once regarded as polluted occupations, permanently and irretrievably infecting those who carried out such tasks, as well as their descendants and associates in all future generations. The Japanese government currently acknowledges 1.2 million buraku residents living in 3000 buraku, while activists claim 3 million residents and 6000 buraku. The difference comes about in part because the government figure includes only those currently residing in a buraku and who claim buraku ancestry, while the activists' figure embraces all current and former buraku residents, including those current residents who claim no buraku ancestry.

Formal discrimination against all outcasts was abolished by the new Meiji government's 1871 Eta Emancipation Edict (Eta Kaiho Rei) but, only since 1969 has the government directed significant financial resources toward overcoming the historical problems of buraku socio-economic circumstances via its series of Laws on Special Measures for Dowa Regions. Together with Japan's postwar economic progress, funding from Special Measures Laws (SML) has helped improve the physical environment of many buraku significantly. However, apart from improved living conditions within many buraku neighborhoods, surveys and buraku activist organizations continue to highlight significant statistical discrepancies between buraku and non-buraku populations, especially in education, social welfare dependency, social attitudes, employment and marriage.

Over the years, many more residents have shifted out of their buraku altogether, a process known as "passing". Although attitudes towards current and former buraku residents have mellowed since the 1960s and 1970s, "passers" may still be liable to discrimination if their buraku connections are subsequently discovered. Accordingly, even today, former buraku residents are very careful about divulging their buraku connections, including even to close friends. Outside of Kansai, most families would not care and, in fact, most have probably never heard of the buraku issue. But in greater Kansai, the issue is still very sensitive and the risk of discrimination, ostracism and graffiti is still very real. One of the leading activist groups, the Buraku Kaiho Domei (BKD), reports more than 300 incidents of specific anti-buraku discrimination in Osaka City alone each year. In their efforts to avoid criticism and prescriptive labels, official government agencies do not use the term buraku at all, but refer exclusively to dowa chiku (lit. assimilation communities) and dowa mondai (the assimilation issue).

Many, but not all, of Japan's modern buraku communities are located on the sites of former eta villages and many buraku residents do have eta ancestry. It is also true that many buraku residents have maintained their tanneries and reputation for the skilled manufacture of shoes, drums, jackets, belts etc. Sadly, this 'leather connection' remains a link between today's buraku and the spiritual pollution enforced upon the eta of the Tokugawa period (1600-1868). Moreover, the reality of continued marginalisation and prejudice is that many buraku are of low socio-economic standing and that many of their older inhabitants, in particular, are unskilled and/or unemployed. Moreover, all buraku residents, whether of eta ancestry or not, are often stereotyped as the perpetrators of crime, drug dealing, violence, prostitution and gang activity.

One of the great ironies of the buraku issue is that with the exception of Chinese/Korean families who have moved into the buraku, the residents are ethnic Japanese and, therefore, indistinguishable from ippan (mainstream) Japanese. This means that even Japanese people who still despise buraku and their residents, actually have no way of knowing whether they are seated next to one on a train or bus, whether their food has been cooked or served by one, whether their taxi-driver, school-teacher, dentist, car mechanic or bar hostess is one, or whether their neighbour is one. However, when the issue is as serious as marriage or employment, substantial sums of money are paid to the hundreds of private investigators who conduct (illegal) background checks specifically looking for any hint of buraku ancestry or association. If any such connection is discovered, the parents will often do their best to prevent their child marrying "into the buraku" by attempting to break the relationship, emotive imploring, bribes, absolute forbiddance or disinheritance.

In spite of having poured billions of yen into attempting to solve what is one of Japan's least discussed social issues, neither the government nor the residents of buraku are completely free from the "buraku problem". This leaves activists scathing over what they see as the government's lip-service approach and at entrenched prejudice within Japanese society in general. On the other hand, many Japanese respond with claims of reverse discrimination – the notion that the problem has already been solved and that the government is now guilty of doing far too much merely to placate the greedy and aggressive buraku organisations. One further contentious issue is the BKD's continued practice of kyudan (lit. denunciation). These feared sessions require the accused individual, company or organisation to appear before a series of public hearings of buraku officials and residents. Each session may last for several hours until the accused admits to the charge of discrimination, promises a "change of heart", and agrees to undergo human rights education and to actively promote buraku justice. The denunciation sessions are highly emotive and, while judges in the 1980s reluctantly approved of the process if strictly monitored, there is serious criticism today that the sessions are themselves infringements of human rights and that they do nothing other than intimidate, drive attitudes underground, and generate even greater anti-buraku feelings.

Buraku which have received government funding are referred to as kaiho buraku (liberated buraku). Their slums have been replaced with multi-storeyed apartment blocks and the communal facilities are often better than in non-buraku communities, including libraries, kindergartens, swimming pools, health centres, aged persons' homes, human rights centres, sports facilities and the like. In addition, social welfare is available for the needy. Sadly however, alcohol issues and negative attitudes towards education are still over-represented and the buraku stigma remains entrenched. Some residents still report getting off buses one stop early so that work colleagues do not see them alight at the "buraku stop" and become suspicious. Furthermore, while very few Japanese are willing to discuss the matter, everyone knows if there is a buraku in their own neighbourhood and where the dividing line defining the community is.

*Alastair McLaughlan lived in a buraku in east Osaka while conducting the field-work interviews for his Ph.D. and subsequent book published in 2003 by Edwin Mellen, NY. His novel Hell for Leather tells the story of Taka, a troubled buraku teenager and, although the characters are fictional, the story draws on many hours of Japanese interviews recorded with buraku residents. He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted December 31, 2005.*

This excerpt from Chapter 4 of *Hell for Leather* portrays the frightening and confusing circumstances confronting Taka and his sister Eri on an almost daily basis: sub-standard housing, alcohol, violence, poverty and discrimination. Woven among these graphic descriptions are equally appalling stories from several buraku elders about their own childhood experiences in the buraku. Readers should bear in mind that many former buraku residents, including politicians, sportsmen, academics, entrepreneurs and others have been successful in their lives and careers. Many, many more have never revealed their buraku backgrounds.

The historic belief by many Japanese in their own homogeneity has produced a strong sense of 'self' versus 'other'. While international travel, trade and marriage have greatly reduced Japanese xenophobia, some Japanese are still quick to accuse, avoid and discriminate against those they identify or regard as 'other'.<sup>[1]</sup>

This includes non-Japanese, especially Korean and Chinese, Japanese children with mixed blood, the native Ainu from Hokkaido, the Okinawans and, of course, those believed to have buraku connections. While discrimination must always be condemned, Japan is hardly alone in its attitudes towards 'other'. India's scheduled castes ('untouchables') have often been compared to the eta/hinin of Japan's Tokugawa period, while the Romanies (the former 'gypsies') of central Europe are still widely feared and despised by some. Anti-Semitism remains extant in many European communities, and the native peoples of countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America are increasingly demanding redress of their grievances over traditional land, language and culture. Moreover, Indian, Pakistani, African and West Indian immigrants into Great Britain, France and Germany claim widespread discrimination based on colour. The buraku issue is but one of innumerable scenarios around the globe where the majority, for whatever reason, exclude those whom they regard as different. This does not make it any less obnoxious, but helps locate discrimination as a human condition, rather than as a specifically Japanese one.

[1] For a detailed explanation of this issue see McLaughlan, A. (2003) *Prejudice and Discrimination in Japan: The Buraku Issue*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

## Hell for Leather

An excerpt from the novel *Hell for Leather*

"Atseee..." (It's hot) A ruddy faced man in his early forties paused and glared through the doorway, spat and cursed again the heat of another evening in the endless Osaka summer. His left arm, from the shoulder down to the distorted and lifeless hand, hung limply by his side. Grasping the edge of the door with his right hand, he kicked and flailed furiously until one shoe finally came free. He continued thrashing in frustration to remove the other. The broken shoe cupboard waited for him to fill, for once, one of its grimy alcoves, but the shoe thudded into the wall and dropped to the floor among the clutter of other shoes.

The dark, unwelcoming porch had not been re-painted since the building was put up in the early 1970s. Under the government's new legislation, Taka's community was one of the first enclaves to see its sprawling slum of dilapidated wooden huts replaced with multi-storeyed apartment blocks. A human rights center was established, originally as a small office to register residents immediate housing requirements. A much larger building with offices, emergency accommodation, classrooms, a theatre, a library and a home for the aged soon replaced it. It rapidly became the hub of all community activities within the enclave and from there, the central office and headquarters for activists in east Osaka. The rebuilding program generated enormous opposition from families outside the enclaves, with many claiming that the government was spending so much money on the project that their own needs were being neglected.

Breathing heavily from the cheap alcohol, the heat and the flurry of physical exertion, the man turned back, sniffed and poked his head out of the porch. A sticky wad of phlegm flew from his mouth and sailed over the railing, hurtling down to the parched earth below. "Atseee," he cursed again before making his way unsteadily inside the flat where Taka and his mother and sister sat, listening and waiting. In a room where the humid heat made it difficult to breathe, idle chit-chat was avoided and people communicated with single words or gestures. Summer is the dread of every poor Osakan. Some hate it even more than the sticky rainy season which precedes it. Taka also hated the summer, although it was more than just the weather that he despised.

He knew from the surly look on his father's face and the way the man cursed that his parents would soon be arguing again about the air-conditioner. Since the government rebuilding programmes, most enclave families had purchased air-conditioners for the kitchen/dining area so that they could sit in relative comfort in the evening. But the machine in Taka's flat had been donated, second-hand, by the people at the center. "Just four bolts, one in each corner of the bracket, like this," explained the delivery man. "Drill the holes here and push the bolts... you've got a drill, haven't you," he continued. Taka's mother shrugged, possibly hoping that he would offer to complete the installation, but the man just said that he was too busy. In the end, neither the drill, the holes nor the bolts ever materialised. The unit was simply plugged in where the delivery man had left it on top of a television set that Taka had once rescued from the rubbish. For several summers the air conditioner had worked fine where it was, nodding up and down to its own mesmerising rhythm as it whirred away in endless battle against the heat.

Monday was "burnable rubbish" day in the streets surrounding the park, and there was seldom anything worth retrieving from the piles of paper, clothes and old containers. But Thursday was "non-burnable" rubbish day and an early scout along some of the streets on the "school side" of the intersection could result in good finds of furniture, bikes, sporting equipment, toys, in fact, just about anything. "Such a waste," people from the enclave would lament as they did the rounds at first light each Thursday morning. "Look at that...it's not even broken...some people have just got no sense of value...it'll fetch ten dollars at the market."

Early one morning while out scavenging, a much younger Taka spotted one of the latest colour television sets, full-sized and still in its cardboard box. He raced round to Ataru's place, his face alight with a sense of excitement that he had never felt before. Ataru was away, having stayed the night as a treat at his grandfather's place in Shiga, but Mrs. Ebisawa agreed to let Taka borrow her son's trolley. Struggling on his own, Taka managed to drag the set all the way home. Built to the absolute minimum government specifications, the new buildings in the enclave had no elevators so Taka parked his find at the bottom of the outside concrete steps and sprinted up to get some help. Taka and Rie were beside themselves. Their mother joined in their excitement as the three of them strained to get the giant box up the narrow, concrete stairs.

Taka's father had ruled that television was a "bloody waste of money...and no money from this poxy house would ever be spent on a poxy television set." But to a nine-year old boy, it was the find of a lifetime, a treasure which might even help him gain some coveted credibility in the school-yard chatter every morning before class. Taka had only been able to stand and listen as the others talked about what had been on TV the previous night. He wanted nothing more than to be able to join in and be able to say "did you see the bit where...?" and "I liked the part where so and so..." Excuses such as "Our TV isn't working at the moment," and "Mum and Dad wanted to watch another channel while that was on" were just one more invitation to another round of cruel jibes and teasing. But when Taka got to school that Thursday, he beamed with delight as he announced to the few classmates willing to listen what he was going to watch when he got home that afternoon. "Of course it's a colour set...yeah, big screen...course it's ours...of course dad paid for it...of course it's got teletext." By the time school was over, Taka had dealt with every angle of sarcastic questions and sneering that his classmates could think up. Oblivious to the afternoon heat as only excited children can be, he and Rie ran non-stop all the way home, their minds on fire with the thought of sitting in their own flat and watching their own television.

The design of the apartment buildings reflected a clear expectation that enclave families were not expected to have more than one, two at most, electrical appliances. Each tiny dwelling had two tatami rooms with one socket set into the floor between the two rooms, and one more outlet in the kitchen/dinette area. But by a strange twist of logic, the government's special measures spending had gone much further than just providing the minimum in accommodation. Much to the jealous horror of many families outside the enclave communities, residents were able to access government money to purchase many of the commodities that everybody else had always taken for granted. As a result, the floors of those families in the enclave which had TV, video, electric toilet seat, stereo, hair dryer and the like resembled plates of spaghetti with extension cords joining onto more extension cords and crawling their way round furniture and through doorways. Some elders had tripped over the tangled maze on the floor and broken a leg or an arm, while other families had lost everything when overloaded circuits had shorted and burst into flames. Several residents had been burned to death in their tiny flats. Fire had always been one of the greatest fears in the enclaves and those who had lived there prior to the government building program often talked about the terrible blazes and how the lack of water and the narrow roads made the problem so much worse.

"Push this button," shrieked Eri, "I think I can hear something..."

"No I reckon you have to...give me the remote and see if..."

But no amount of twiddling knobs, or aiming the remote and pushing every button on it made any difference. The coveted find produced neither picture nor sound. Taka and his sister dragged the set into the other room to try the other socket, but to no avail. Then they used a stick to lever out the plug for the fridge and Taka all but stood on his head to insert the shiny TV plug into the grimy wall-socket directly behind. Still nothing.

When Ataru returned from his grandfather's place and came bounding in later in the evening, they went through all the same routines again and again, begging the god of television to send an electronic crackle or flicker into their lives. But Ataru's advice was useless and finally the three despondent youngsters flopped down, unable to hide their disappointment. The two boys were about to drag the lifeless set back outside in disgust when Taka's mother suggested they use as a small table. "Oh yeah, bloody nice table, just so posh, haa haa," Taka hissed, no stranger to giving and receiving sarcasm and derision. But it was the first time he had ever sworn directly into his mother's face and the burning hurt in her eyes made him immediately regret it.

"You know what they'll all say tomorrow at school, don't you," Taka began quietly as the two friends headed disconsolately towards the park. "Why not just pretend", Ataru suggested. "Just say 'yeah that was great eh' and 'nah, we were watching something else' and things like that."

"They'll know straight away.... And I bet that rich Mizuno jerk won't be able to keep his gob shut when he finds out...just 'cos they're so rich. He gets everything he wants and anyway, he's long overdue for a smack in the gob." Taka was already preparing himself mentally for the next morning at school.

"Mizuno? That clown," retorted Ataru. His dumb mother won't even let her precious son talk to me...and his old man told Mrs Nishi that he's not allowed to sit next to me in class either."

"But, I'll tell you what," concluded Taka, "if he starts skiting about their giant fuckin' TV with built-in DVD and all that..."

"You said fuckin'..."

"So what? I don't care what I fuckin' say. I can say what I fuckin' like..."

The next morning as the boys and girls in Mrs. Nishi's class were filing into the classroom, one of the boys called in a loud whisper over his shoulder. "Hey Taka. You know that TV that you reckon your old man bought, well my Mom saw you dragging it back from the junk pile in our street yesterday. It was our neighbour's but it blew up as soon as they plugged it in...that's why they chucked it out. The shop just brought them round another one." A hiss of sniggers erupted from those who had heard the comment. "So, what cool programs did you watch last night?" chortled another boy, followed by one of the girls who sneered, "did you watch a nice piece of glass, Taka?" His face scarlet with humiliation, disappointment and anger, Taka said nothing as he shuffled to his desk and sat down. Morning break came and as the line of pupils snaked outside and divided up into the usual cliques, Mizuno sidled up. "Hey, it's old no-TV Taka. Don't turn it up too loud or you'll piss the neighbours off," he snorted. "We've got surround sound on ours and we can..."

So Taka's coveted television find had brought nothing but more teasing and a makeshift table to put the air-conditioner on. But at least it did serve that purpose and the air conditioner had worked well for several years, in spite of the annoying hum which accompanied its equally annoying wobble, until Taka's father tripped one afternoon in a drunken spiral, sending himself and the machine crashing to the floor. That was almost six years ago and in spite of the endless fights over it every summer, it was no nearer being fixed now than ever. Repairs cost money and that was the end of the matter.

The tiny flat in Apartment 2 where Taka's family lived was known as a "middle flat" because it had no side windows for through ventilation. As a result, every day in summer the place baked like a furnace. The teachers at the center used to tell stories to the children about babies dying from the heat in their apartments and about how the government was not doing enough to help.

Taka's mother glanced sideways across to where her husband was sitting with his back to her. "The heat doesn't get any more bearable," she ventured nervously. "Sometimes I think someone's going to faint and die right here if we can't fix the air conditioner or find somewhere else to live. I hope the people at the center can find something..." She knew she had already gone too far, but it was too late. Taka's father spun round from his sullen retreat at the kitchen table where he was puffing clouds of cigarette smoke into the already stifling room. "Stop your damned nagging...I'm sick of asking...I ask week in and week out at the center...but still you don't shut up, do you..." he hissed, no longer even looking at the woman he was screaming at. "They're as sick of me asking as I am...so bloody sick of it that I'm not asking again...they haven't got enough apartments...alright?...can't you get that into your thick skull." He glared a lifetime of resentment at the woman before scurrying off to curse and jab his feet into the reluctant shoes lying untidily in the entrance porch. The family sat in silence until the "clack" of the broken lock banging against the door-jamb signalled his departure.

Most of the enclave communities in the eastern part of the city had been rebuilt over the last three decades, but the folk who ran the after-school sessions at the center regularly showed the children slides of the old enclave ghetto with its rotten, wooden shacks which leaked and which had no plumbing. They talked about the river that had flooded several times a year, causing the contents of the communal long drop toilet to flood through the houses.

"It used to sweep all our shoes out of the entrance porches and leave them covered in a huge pile of crap at the end of the alleyway," the woman who did the cleaning at the old person's home explained. Another, her back so bent that the children used to joke that she could hardly see where she was going, added that her mother had once slipped down between the two planks which formed the seat on the long-drop toilet. "We had no hot water so all we could do was rinse her with buckets of cold water from the pump," she recalled. She reminded the children that they used to call the toilet the devil's shit hole and that lots of people had often fallen right in. But the mood always became serious again when she added that some children had drowned after falling into the toilet.

The men told stories about how there was no street lighting and how the roads were so narrow that the fire engines could not get through. In the 1950s and again in the 1960s, the wooden shacks had simply burned to the ground. The single communal pump at the end of each of the barrack-like buildings couldn't generate enough pressure to force water through the fire hose. "And none of us went to school...we were just too poor...couldn't afford a book or a pencil," explained one old man with heavy tattoos showing below his short-sleeved shirt and down his open neck. "No money for medicine or visits to the doctor either..." he yelled excitedly as his tongue flipped in and out over his toothless gums. "Anyone who got sick, well, their mums would go and ask the people in the noodle shop to try and mix up something. Even our injuries were never properly fixed." Rolling up his left trouser leg, he revealed an unsightly lump about the size of a small mandarin half way between the ankle and the knee. "Broke it when I slipped over...I was ten," he slurred, minute beads of saliva sparkling in the light. "Of course we couldn't go to the doctor so my mother just bandaged it tightly and didn't let me walk on it for a couple of months...that's just how it was...we never mixed with anyone on the outside..." The men also talked about working in the tannery and other things about life in the old days, but the children always thought the stories about the devil's shit hole were the best.

Taka was 16 now, almost 17, and he thought the new apartment buildings looked like cold, concrete blocks. The people at the center referred to the individual flats honeycombed inside the concrete towers as "rabbit-hutches".

Taka's "rabbit hutch" had two tatami rooms where he, his parents and Rie slept, although the sliding doors to the futon cupboards had long since disappeared. Apart from a tiny kitchen/dINETTE which had a fridge, a gas cooker, the derelict TV with the broken air-conditioner and a table and chairs, there was just a bathroom which had a mirror, a wash-basin and a cracked toilet which leaked, but no bath. When Taka was about 13, he asked his father why it was called a bathroom when it didn't have a bath. The reply taught him not to question the family's circumstances.

Taka's flat was on the fourth floor of Apartment 2, the middle of the three grey buildings. It was fifth in from one end of the drab concrete corridor and sixth in

from the other end, its entrance guarded by a dented, metal, paint-less door which led to the porch where shoes were removed, and from there into the tiny kitchen. At the back end of the flat, the remains of a sliding shoji door led to a balcony. Most of the paper panels of the door had long since been ripped away, leaving only the bare wooden lattice which reminded Taka of how it must feel to look through a prison window. He often pretended, as he slipped out onto the balcony, that he was escaping through the bars of his own cell, even though the balcony itself was just another dead-end to nowhere. The grimy balcony was big enough to hold the rack of hangers for drying clothes, no more. "If there's ever a fire and you can't get out through the entrance porch," his mother used to warn Taka and his sister Eri, "at least get out on the balcony." The warning had once seemed important to a small boy who, like all Japanese children, had been taught to be afraid of fire. But the same balcony now only seemed to offer a choice between being burned alive inside and leaping to a certain death onto the baked earth below.

Taka often used to stand out on the balcony to get away from the heat and the cramped, unpleasant atmosphere inside the flat. Each argument between his parents would quickly turn into a slanging match which Taka's father invariably won, not through superior logic or common sense, but because his mother, physically and mentally worn out, would simply go silent in the face of her husband's abuse. Following a particularly bitter argument late one humid evening when Taka was about twelve, he had sat on his futon and listened as his father physically grabbed his mother round the neck with his good arm, shaking her as if he were holding an empty dress. "You knew...you slut, you bloody well knew...didn't you...didn't you," he spat. Taka's mother didn't answer and the enraged man screamed the accusation again and again. Taka closed his eyes and wished that they lived in a big house where his mother could slip away into another room or into the garden. When Taka appeared at the doorway, his mother's seemed to be pleading with his father, even more desperately than usual, not to say anything more.

None of their previous arguments had ever come to physical violence because Taka's mother would quickly surrender as the signal for her husband to stamp out of the flat. But on that occasion, he was far more agitated than usual. With a sudden shove he sent his distressed wife spinning into a heap. After the inevitable silent glare, he stormed into the entrance porch and struggled to force his feet into a pair of old leather scuffs. Thereafter, a well-aimed kick sent some of the other shoes in the porch skidding away like startled rats across the floor. With the usual click from the steel door, he was gone.

Taka despised his father, yet he also envied him his freedom, even if that freedom only led him to the nearest vending machine outside the public bathhouse. There, he would slide whatever coins he could scrape together into the slot, wait impatiently for a bottle of the poorest quality shochu to clank into the collection tray and swagger off to the neighbouring park. From the balcony, Taka used to watch his father and the other men during their binges under the trees. If the air was still, he could hear their drunken singing, including one song which mocked their wives by chanting "I pretend you're a princess as you turn it up, turn it up..." Sometimes, they would settle into a game of mahjong although Taka's father seldom had any cash to bet with. Taka avoided asking him for money, even for school or sport, and could only stand aside and listen in silence as the other kids at school talked about their fathers giving them spare cash for ice creams and whatever. They would also bring things to show their mates at school saying, "This is what dad brought me after work last night."

One evening, Taka had been watching and listening, unobserved, from the balcony when his father's luck at mahjong ran out and he wagered a very different sort of bet to cancel out the evening's debts. He eventually won that "all or nothing" last round and, while Taka never let on to anybody what he had overheard, he felt sick with rage the following morning as he walked with his mother along the narrow path that curved through the enclave. Leaning up against the iron railing at the bottom of the steps to Apartment 1 were two of the men from the previous evening's gambling session. "Hey missus, lucky for you your old man's good at mahjong, eh," one of the men called out with a huge grin. "Yeah, it's not that we're fussy or anything, but we're not sure now if we wanted to win or not," chimed in the second man. The one who had spoken first had a distinctive speech impediment and Taka's mother hated him. He was the most frequent caller to their flat, always to entice his mate away on yet another drinking spree from which he might not return for two, sometimes three, days.

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