

Tokyo Private Eye

Excerpt:

“Are you a poker player, Mr. Adelstein?” Oldman asked me. As we were drinking Nikka 17 at Lady Jane in Shimokitazawa, he asked this question with a gleam in his eyes. It was a good whisky; it warmed me up. It was a wet, cold night in January, and the bar was chilly as well. A Sonny Rollins album was playing over the speakers, and we were catching up under the giant black and white Marilyn Monroe picture on the wall, at the big table. I didn’t answer the question immediately.

He followed up by saying, “Perhaps, you’ve never played poker?” He had a New England drawl that made everything he said seem a little like a challenge.

«I don’t like games of chance,” I replied. «In reality, it’s a game of skill and chance. Both,» he said. «I think we should try a real-world round.» He got right to the point.

«I read the report that Tony sent me about Suburban Corporation, and it was convincing. I assume you did most of the research. The report makes a strong case for declining any business with the company. Unfortunately, the business department is not on board. Suburban is huge in the real estate field—they’ll do anything to close the deal. Suburban’s president said Goldman Sachs made millions on their deals. ‘You could too,’ he tells them and they believe, because they want to believe.” I sipped my whiskey. “Whenever Goldman Sachs invests in shady companies, they profit. The next sucker who does business with the shady company loses his shirt. You can predict it.”

(...)

«Well,» I replied, «why don’t we invite their representative to a meeting and ask them what we know, and see how they answer? If they’re not straight up, they may have something to hide. Let’s see what their anti-organized crime and compliance protocols are.» “You mean, interrogate the company president?” “Well, at least the vice president,” I countered. Oldman ran his index finger around the edge of his shot glass in clockwise circles for a minute, looking very satisfied and relaxed. Then he finished his drink. “Mr. Adelstein, you and I think alike. I think that may be a splendid idea. That’s going to be our poker game. And we will be the house.”

Oldman prepared the meeting, made sure that video cameras were in the room, and I made a list of suggested questions. It was a simple plan. The meeting would be opened by Oldman, who would greet the executive, and then a young female employee who was bilingual would interpret for him and ask the questions. They would introduce me as an intern who had spent a year in Japan.

On a very cold afternoon in mid-January, everything went according to plan. Suburban’s VP showed up dressed in a dark gray suit, a white shirt, and a white and gray striped tie. Gold-rimmed glasses

adorned his face, and his salt and pepper colored hair had been slicked back. He wore a massive gold LeCoultre watch. He got points for good taste in classic Swiss luxury watches, in my opinion. The interview began with a series of softball questions. Everyone served coffee. I sat in the corner reading a copy of The Economist, looking bored.

“Tell me your vision of the future of Suburban Corporation?” “Why do you need a loan from our group?” “Tell us about your REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts).” And then, Oldman lobbed the first grenade. “Have you or your firm, now, or ever, had any ties to organized crime? In other words, the yakuza.” The VP waved his right hand dismissively and slicked back his hair. «Certainly not. We operate under very strict guidelines. The board of directors of our organization includes an ex-prosecutor. We have partnered with Goldman Sachs and other firms that are very strict about compliance. We are confident that our business model will meet your needs.»

Oldman nodded and went completely silent for a moment after the interpreter translated the answer. He remained silent for a minute. You don’t know how long a minute can be. With the tip of his finger, he circled his coffee cup clockwise and then counterclockwise, and then he abruptly stood up. He told the VP, «You’ll have to excuse me. I’ll have to make a call now. Please wait here for a moment.” And then Oldman and his company’s interpreter left.

After making eye contact and shrugging my shoulders, I spoke in English, «He may take a while. Do you want another cup of coffee?” The VP said, “No, thanks.” I went back to reading my magazine. Minutes passed. The VP took out his cellphone and began making a frantic call, speaking in Japanese, in hushed tones. “I think they know. What do I say? How much do I admit? When did we supposedly get rid of the guy?” The irritated voice on the other end was shouting, calling the VP stupid. Telling him he had failed to fulfill his role. The VP bowed deeply while talking on the phone. His ears started sweating. I didn’t know ears could sweat that much. He hung up the phone.

After fifteen minutes Oldman came back alone. This time he motioned to me. “My colleague will be conducting the rest of the interview,” he said with the slightest trace of a smile on his face. He sat down and I stood up. I introduced myself in formal Japanese and began the second round of the interrogation.