

# Tattoo

Kentaro held the hot cup of coffee to his lips and blew at the rising steam. The back office of his tattoo parlour was dimly lit, and the light from his laptop screen gave his dirty white stubble a blueish hue. Reflected in his glasses, a long list of links on an open webpage scrolled up slowly. His hand gripped a Bluetooth mouse, the buttons covered with greasy finger marks. His coffee was still too hot to drink. He put it down, just to the right of a coaster on his desk, and idly scratched his crotch.

He clicked on a link and was faced with a loading bar.

A short pause, then a webcam live stream loaded. The screen showed the interior of someone's bedroom. A small apartment, with lots of legal textbooks on a shelf – perhaps a university student. On the bed a couple was kissing. Naked. Oblivious.

Kentaro sat and watched. Then he unzipped his trousers and reached inside.

The shop's doorbell sounded. Kentaro froze.

'Hello?' a girl's voice called out from the waiting area.

'Sorry, just a minute.' He shut the laptop quickly, composed himself and walked out to greet the customer.

Standing at the doorway was a high-school girl. At first glance there was nothing remarkable about her. She was wearing the typical sailor-style uniform with the standard bobbed haircut and baggy socks. She'd dyed her hair blonde to stand out, but that's what they all did these days. She looked to be in her final year. Probably made some kind of mistake coming in here.

‘How may I help you, miss?’ Kentaro did his best to put on his customer-care voice.

‘I’d like a tattoo, please,’ she said, her chin raised high.

‘Ah, miss. Excuse me, but how did you find this parlour?’

‘A friend recommended it.’

‘And your friend is . . . ?’

‘That doesn’t matter. I want a tattoo.’ She made to walk into the rear of the parlour.

Kentaro placed a hand on the wall to stop her. ‘Miss, don’t be silly. You’re too young.’

She looked at his arm. ‘I’m eighteen. And don’t call me *miss*.’

He lowered his arm awkwardly. ‘Have you thought about this properly?’

‘Yes, I have.’ She looked him in the eye. ‘I want a tattoo.’

‘Maybe you should go away and give it a few days’ thought.’

‘I’ve already thought long and hard about it. I want a tattoo.’

‘But maybe there are some things you haven’t thought about. You won’t be able to go to *onsen*.’

‘I don’t like hot springs.’

‘People will think you’re *yakuza*. Could be a bit scary for a nice young girl like you.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘I don’t care what people think. I want a tattoo.’

‘It’s expensive – can cost as much as three million yen.’

‘I have money.’

‘Listen, I do it the traditional way here – *tebori* – all of it’s done by hand. I’m not one of these upstarts you find in Shibuya with their cheating methods. Even the gangsters I tattoo can’t handle this kind of pain.’

‘Pain, I can handle.’ She looked directly at Kentaro, and he saw then something in her eyes, a soft brightness, a light green colour – almost transparent – that he had never seen before in a Japanese person.

‘I wonder.’ He flipped the sign on the front door over to CLOSED, then gestured for the girl to follow him. ‘Come through to the back room and we’ll have a chat.’

He flicked on the top lights as they entered the back room, and now the bed-like table his customers lay on was visible, as well as the photos of the various clients he'd had over the years – hissing dragons, gawping koi carp, topless women, Shinto gods and elaborate *kanji* sprawling across the naked backs, buttocks and arms of his customers. Most of whom were yakuza.

Kentaro had learnt his trade from one of the old masters of Asakusa, and was famous for his skill and dedication to his art. He loved nothing better than to tattoo a fresh piece of skin, elaborating scenes from ink onto small spaces of bare flesh. The only thing that came close to the satisfaction of creating a masterpiece on another human was the feeling of dominance over the gangsters he worked on.

'This might hurt a bit,' he'd tell them.

'I can take it,' they would reply.

*That's what they all say.*

And then he would begin work on them, and he'd feel the pain in their movements, in the subtle shift of their muscles and bodies, in the sound of their gritted teeth, as he gouged away gently at their bodies with his metal needles in the traditional style he had learnt from his old master, leaving his mark on them indefinitely. It gave him great pleasure to think of his mastery over these kings of men, these lords of the criminal underworld. His creative control was supreme; he alone decided the images and stories that would be a part of his client forever – sometimes even after death. If the client donated their skin to the Museum of Pathology it would be cut from their cadaver before cremation, then treated correctly and stored. Many pieces of Kentaro's work were on display behind glass at the museum.

He knew he was the best – as did the yakuza who respected him greatly as an artist. But he'd never had many female customers – not even the female yakuza came to him for their tattoos. They all went elsewhere.

But here was a female customer now, standing right in front of him.

'Where shall I sit?' she asked.

'Oh! Hold on.' He pulled a chair from the corner closer to his own.

'Here, take a seat.'

She sat down gingerly and put her hands in her lap.

'So, what would you like a tattoo of?'

'The city.'

'The city?'

'Tokyo.'

'That's not very . . . *conventional*.'

'So what?' Her eyes flashed again.

'Where do you want it?'

'My back.'

'That's going to be tricky . . .'

'Look, mister. Can you do it or not?'

'Sure. I can. No need to be sassy. I just need to figure out how.' He put his chin on his hand, looked at his closed laptop, then it hit him.

'Oh! Just a minute.'

He opened his laptop and tapped his fingers on the keyboard, impatient for it to come to life again. It did, just in time to depict a girl facing the webcam, bent over, getting pounded hard from behind. The speakers of his laptop let out a low moaning sound.

He closed the browser window as fast as he could.

Kentaro's face was red as hell. He shot a furtive glance at the girl sitting next to him, but she was looking at the photos of his previous customers on the walls. Maybe he'd got away with it. Close shave.

He opened up a new browser and clicked on a saved bookmark that took him to Google Maps. The software loaded up and he typed 'Tokyo' into the search bar. The map zoomed in, and then the city filled the browser window. He clicked on satellite view, then zoomed in further, the detail getting larger and larger. Gridlines of buildings divided by roads, canals winding along thin alleyways, the sprawling bay, and the veins and capillaries of train tracks pumping people throughout the city.

'That's amazing,' she said. 'I want that on my back.'

'No, *that* is impossible,' he said.

‘I came to you because you’re supposed to be the best.’ She sighed.  
‘I guess they were wrong.’

‘No one could do this.’

‘I’m sure I could find someone for the right price.’

‘It’s not about price, it’s about skill. I’m one of the few true *horishi* left in Tokyo.’

‘So what’s stopping you?’

‘It’ll take time. Could be a year, could be four.’ He took off his glasses and rubbed his face with a sweaty palm.

‘I’ve got time.’

‘It’ll be painful too.’ He fought back a smirk.

‘I told you already: pain is not an issue.’

‘You’ll have to get naked and lie face down on the table.’

‘Sure.’ She began to unbutton her shirt straight away with no hint of shyness.

Kentaro felt a hot twist in his stomach and quickly looked down at the floor. He ran to the bathroom to get some baby oil. It definitely wasn’t necessary, but he’d had an idea that he would use it as an excuse to touch her body. He imagined his master who’d trained him when he was an apprentice – he’d be turning in his grave seeing him pulling this baby-oil trick. When he came back into the main room she was already naked, lying face down on the table. Kentaro couldn’t quite believe his eyes. Her skin was perfection, unblemished. The muscles of her lower back led perfectly down to her round buttocks, swelling briefly into powerful thighs. He swallowed as he walked towards her.

‘Uh, I just need to rub your back with oil.’

‘Whatever.’ She shifted slightly.

He squeezed out a glob of the oil onto his right hand – the bottle made a farting sound, which he almost apologized for, then thought better of it. He snapped the cap back on and began to rub the oil into her skin. It glistened under the lights, and the heat he’d felt in his stomach earlier began to spread downwards.

‘So . . . what’s your name?’

‘Naomi.’

‘Mmm . . . Naomi . . . Pretty name. And . . . do you have a boyfriend?’

She rolled over slightly to face Kentaro and looked straight at him again, her eyes a soft flash of green. He could see her breasts.

‘Look, mister. I’m not gonna put up with any funny stuff. I came here for a tattoo, and that’s all I want. I saw you looking at some weird stuff on your laptop earlier, and I’m fine with that – each to their own – you know. I don’t know how that couple would feel about you spying on them through their webcam though. Maybe that’s something you should have a think about. But I’m not gonna have you perverting on me. I’m paying you for a service, so be a professional. Okay?’

Kentaro held his oily hands limply in the air. ‘Spying? Webcams? I don’t know what you’re—’

‘Save the bullshit. I don’t want to hear it.’ She lay back down. ‘And by the way, your flies are undone.’

Kentaro looked down at his trousers, did up his flies, then got to work.



Work was something Kentaro had always been good at. He could concentrate for hours at a time – the client usually asking for a break before he himself ever grew tired. When he was tattooing a customer, he threw everything he had into the task, and his work had always been highly praised by fellow artists.

Naomi came to visit him over the course of several months, whenever she had the time. And he was always glad to see her. He had some superfine needles especially made by the best knife-seller in Asakusa.

He began inking out the entire city all over her back, shoulders, arms, buttocks and thighs. He started with the roads, the outlines of buildings, the rivers – tracing the outline before he even started thinking about the colouring of the tattoo. He had to complete the ghostly shell-like skeleton of Tokyo, and only once this was finished could he begin shading and colouring. The entire tattoo would take a couple of years to complete and would require regular visits over that period, in which he would work on a portion each time – there

was also the small matter of how much pain the customer could take in a single session.

He jumped straight into the task of inking the city, which he always did in the traditional *tebori* manner, carving and inking lines deeply into Naomi's skin with his metal needles. She was truly one of the toughest customers he'd ever had. She didn't even blink at the pain. He used a pair of loupes attached to his glasses to draw the finest of detail in the tattoo and created microscopic features of the city, which retained its overall structure when viewed from afar.

Kentaro struggled only in one matter: it was impossible for him to hold the entire city in his mind while he worked. He would have to work on small levels and refer to a zoomed-in portion on his laptop. Unlike all his previous designs, which he had been able to visualize fully while working, the size and scale of the macroscopic city was just too much to retain in any human brain.

It took several visits to ink the outline. The last part he finished was his very own parlour in Asakusa. He planned on leaving the roof of his parlour blank as the final space to sign his name – keeping to tradition.

Once he had completed the outline of the city in black ink, he then faced colouring, the shading and the detail. He decided to start with Shibuya.

'Hmmm.' He paused in thought.

'What's wrong?' Naomi asked, lifting her head.

'Oh, I'm just trying to decide whether to have people actually *crossing* the intersection at the Shibuya scramble crossing, or whether to have them waiting for the green light.'

'I don't want any people.'

'What do you mean?'

She lowered her head back to the table and closed her eyes. 'I just want the city. I don't want any people.'

'But it won't be a city without people.'

'I don't care. It's my back, it's my tattoo. I'm paying.'

'Hmmm.'

Kentaro felt a twinge of pride. It was true that Naomi had paid regularly, and was a good customer. But he was one of the finest

tattooists in Tokyo. His customers agreed to *his* designs. They never told him what to do. His inner artist flared, but as the Japanese saying went: *kyaku-sama wa kami-sama desu* – the customer is a god.

Well. She had said no *people*. Animals weren't people, were they?

He smiled to himself and shaded in a small cat – two blobs of colour, like a calico – just opposite the statue of Hachiko the dog in Shibuya. And then he went about his work.



It was during the shading of the tattoo that Kentaro really began to lose his mind.

Naomi would talk during their sessions, asking him to describe the parts of the city he was working on. She would tell him the season she wanted for each location, and he would then colour the maple trees red for autumn, or the bright yellow of the ginkgo trees, or shade in the soft pinkish white of the sakura in Ueno Park in spring.

'Where are you now?' she'd ask.

'Ginza. I've just done the Nakagin building.'

'Good. It's winter in Ginza.'

'I see.' And he would begin shading and colouring the fine white snow that had fallen overnight. The city was becoming like a patchwork quilt of the seasons.

Often when Kentaro had been working on a part of Tokyo and talking to Naomi about that place, she would come back for her next session having visited that part of the city. She would bring a small present or souvenir for him – sweets from Harajuku, gyoza from Ikebukuro – and he would feel his face going red in embarrassment.

They'd sometimes drink green tea together and she would tell him stories of things that had happened, or things she'd seen – how the building of the new Olympic stadium was progressing each time she walked past it – she told Kentaro stories of all the people she saw going about their lives in the city, and he would listen quietly without interrupting.





One time, during a break in a session that had gone on for hours, as Kentaro was cleaning his instruments, Naomi had pointed at a large art book of Utagawa Kuniyoshi ukiyo-e prints and asked about it. Kentaro had got it down from the shelf and let her take it to an armchair and sit down with it. Utagawa had always been an artistic inspiration for Kentaro – his master had introduced his work to him and had made him practise for months copying Utagawa’s paintings before he was allowed to even touch a piece of skin. Naomi sat with the book on her lap, turning the pages slowly.

‘These are so great,’ said Naomi, examining each painting in detail, her finger on the page sometimes tracing the lines of numerous cats and skeleton demons.

‘He was a legend.’ Kentaro sighed.

‘I love this one.’ She tapped her finger on the page, and Kentaro looked across to see the courtly scene with a ghostly cat head floating in the background. Cats stood on their hindlegs and danced like humans with handkerchiefs on their heads and arms flung wide.

‘Yeah.’ Kentaro swallowed a chuckle at the thought of the trick he had played on Naomi by tattooing the cat on her back.

‘And look at these ones.’ She held up the book to him. ‘He’s turned these kabuki actors into cats!’

‘Now that’s an interesting story,’ said Kentaro, pausing while putting away his tools and coming over to look at the book over Naomi’s shoulder.

‘Go on.’ She looked up at him with her strange eyes.

‘Well, back then, kabuki had become a raucous and decadent affair – almost like an orgy.’

‘Fun,’ she said, grinning cheekily.

‘Well, the government didn’t think so. They outlawed any artistic depictions of kabuki actors.’

‘That’s crazy!’

‘It is. Anyway, Utagawa replaced the human actors with cats. That was his way of sidestepping the censorship.’

‘Clever guy.’ She glanced back down at the image of three cats dressed in kimono, sitting around a low table playing shamisen.

‘My old master was obsessed with him.’

‘Where is your master now?’

‘He passed on.’ Kentaro pointed at a photo on the wall. ‘That’s him.’

Naomi looked at the photo of the gruff-looking man standing with a younger Kentaro in front of the same tattoo parlour they were both in now. ‘Looks kind of serious.’

‘He was. So strict. Had me waking up at 4 a.m. and sweeping and cleaning the parlour all day. Wouldn’t let me so much as touch a needle or a bit of skin until I’d done that for two years. Mad old bastard.’ He shook his head and smiled.

Naomi gazed at Kentaro thoughtfully. ‘How come you don’t have a disciple?’

He sighed, softly, without the usual condescension. ‘Where to begin . . .’

‘At the beginning?’ She shrugged.

‘Well, the government did another great job of giving *irezumi* a bad name – just like the old kabuki censorship. They’ve associated the practice with criminals, so fewer people want to get into the trade. You know, it was once an honourable thing to get a tattoo in the old days – it was the mark of a fireman. The public loved and respected firemen – not like these crude gangsters who show off their tattoos these days. Anyway, I’m getting off the point . . . what was I saying?’

‘You were saying why no one wants to be a *horishi* anymore.’

‘Oh, yes. Now, of course you’ve got your amateurs in Shibuya who use all this new-fangled technology to tattoo. No one wants to learn the old *tebori* method. No one wants to do hard work. Everyone wants to do things the easy way. But none of them are true artists.’

‘Like you.’ She smiled at him.

Kentaro blushed and looked at the floor. ‘Come on, Naomi,’ he said, finishing his tea. ‘We’d best continue.’

And that was the day it first happened.

When Kentaro was halfway through colouring the tattoo, his eyes happened to pass over the Shibuya section of the city that he had

already completed. He saw the statue of Hachiko the dog, his eyes carried on to the shopping streets of Harajuku, but then something clicked in his mind. He flicked his eyes back to the statue.

*The cat was gone.*

He blinked and shook his head. Maybe tiredness was finally getting to him. But he looked again: no, the cat was not there anymore.

Perhaps he had imagined drawing the cat on her body? Yes, that was the simplest explanation for its absence. He had probably dreamt of drawing the little cat in, and it had seemed so vivid he had imagined it to be reality. Yes. Everything was surely fine. Dreams could sometimes invade reality, couldn't they?

But that very same day, when he was about to shade the area around Tokyo Tower, he caught sight of something that gave him a cold shiver. He was making his way with his eyes up the street from Hamamatsucho Station towards the area around Tokyo Tower. And just down a side street branching off the main road, he saw the cat.

'What the . . .'

'Is everything all right?' Naomi stirred.

'Oh, yes,' he replied. The needle in his hand was shaking a bit, but he steadied himself. Perhaps he had misremembered the location he had originally put the cat in. Surely that was the explanation. He ignored the cat and began to work again, colouring the red and white pattern of Tokyo Tower.

But the next session, before working, he searched for the cat in the side streets near Hamamatsucho Station again, and could not find it. And then when he was colouring in the trees of Inokashira Park in Kichijoji, he saw the cat lurking by the lake in the middle of the park.

It was definitely moving.

Kentaro began to dread his regular sessions with Naomi. He couldn't begin work until he had first found the cat, and he would sometimes spend an hour scouring the city in search of it before he could get to work with his needles and ink. This, in turn, was delaying the overall progress of the tattoo, which had begun to take longer than he had planned. Naomi never commented on how much

time he took, and gradually their sessions grew exhausting as he became haunted by the spectre of the cat. He would dream about it roaming the city, and he would spend most of the night in a waking nightmare, sweating in dread at the scramble to find the elusive cat. *Can't catch me*, the cat taunted, blinking its steady green eyes at him. *Stupid old man. Can't can't can't*. He wanted to grab it by the scruff of the neck and shake it, carve it out, pluck it clean away from his work – *his art, his Tokyo and his Naomi* most of all.

Because she *was* his, wasn't she? Sprawled out before him day after day.

One session, he spent most of the afternoon looking for the cat, scanning the streets and alleyways, but it was nowhere to be found. The relief soaked over him like warm water – he must have been imagining the cat's existence from the beginning.

But as his eyes flickered through Roppongi his heart fell: the cat was there, emerging from a subway exit. Its tail raised high, as though taunting him.

He only managed thirty minutes of hurried work on the tattoo that day before Naomi had to leave.



It was when Kentaro was nearing the end of his work on her that he understood what he must do. He had black rings under his eyes; he had lost his appetite, was finding it hard to swallow food and had grown skeletally thin. His dirty stubble had grown out into a shaggy beard, and his eyes, like black inked dots sunken deeply into his skull, stared vacantly at the walls of his parlour. Even before, he'd rarely gone out much or been hugely social. He'd usually spent most of his time on the Internet, looking at art books or drawing and painting designs on paper. But now he made his way along the old streets of Asakusa, muttering to himself as he went. He walked quickly, bumping into a homeless man wearing a purple bandana. Kentaro lost his temper and shouted uncontrollably at the stranger, who apologized profusely until he continued on his way. He bought a

knife from the famous blade master of Asakusa he always visited. The blade master looked at him a little strangely, but didn't comment on his haggard appearance or the fact that Kentaro usually bought only needles from him, never blades.

Kentaro took the knife home and sharpened it. He tested the blade against his finger and it drew a burst of blood from his skin with only the slightest pressure. He taped the knife to the underside of the table, where Naomi wouldn't see it. And he waited.

Naomi came for what they both knew would be her final session, undressing quickly as usual. Kentaro did his best to act naturally as she talked to him about a summer fireworks festival she had been to, showing him photos of the yukata she had picked out. He nodded and smiled, pretending to listen.

He worked well, in a kind of giddy contentment that this waking nightmare would soon be coming to an end. He finished a final section of shading Kita-Senju on her arm, then he cast his eyes around the Asakusa area, looking for that last blank space to fill – the roof of his very own tattoo parlour. He traced his way from the Kaminari gate at Sensoji Temple to his parlour. Here's what he would do: he'd sign his name on the roof of the building declaring the tattoo as finished. And then he would reach for his knife and begin.

But as soon as he went to sign his name, he saw the cat sitting outside his shop.

He knew then, with a terrible certainty, that if he were to glance up from the tattoo on Naomi's body and look outside the door, he would see the cat sitting there, its green eyes watching him.

He gulped and closed his eyes.

The city was still there though. Like he was seeing it from space. His mind's eye was a camera looking down on it. Then the camera began to zoom in, down onto the globe, onto Japan, onto Tokyo, all the way down to street level. It flew through the red roof of his tattoo parlour, and there he saw himself working on Naomi's perfect back, on the tattoo of the city. The camera didn't stop. He'd lost control. It flew once again into the tattoo, and kept going down: through Japan, through Tokyo, into Asakusa, through the roof of his

parlour and into the tattoo once more. And on and on endlessly.

Unless he opened his eyes, he would be stuck like this. Looping round and round, zooming in on the city forever, trapped. But he kept them shut.

For when he opened them, he would see that there was no longer space for him to sign his name in the roof of his parlour. It would be filled with a real red roof. He'd be faced with a city, with the millions and millions of people moving in and around, through subway stations and buildings, parks and highways, living their lives. The city pumped their shit around in pipes, it transported their bodies around in metal containers, and it held their secrets, their hopes, their dreams. And he'd no longer be sitting on the other side watching through a screen. He'd be part of it too. He'd be one of those people.

With his eyes still shut, he reached under the table, hand scrambling desperately for the knife.

He trembled as he opened his eyes.

The muscles in Naomi's back flexed and came to life.

And so too, did the city.