

The Baby Boom Generation

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PART 1

I

“Hmm, a convenience store chain . . .” Seizō Ohkura tilted back his bald head, gazing at the ceiling. He had already listened to the briefing about the new project. Advancing age and the problems of his company had darkened the thick fat on his face. Ohkura had been running the A-Electric Company for twenty years, from the late 1950s. He ran it as if he owned it.

“Yes, they are popular these days in the United States. . . .” Shigeaki Tomita started to answer, but stopped himself when he saw Junji Yoshifuji put his finger to his lips.

Yoshifuji had served Ohkura for eight years, first as his executive secretary, and later as the head of the presidential secretariat. He knew all of the old president's habits and idiosyncrasies. One of the things he knew was that the president, who lived by the logo “mature thinking and resolute decision,” didn't care for “noise” of any sort during his deliberations. Tomita, who had worked under Yoshifuji as an assistant executive secretary, had a lot to learn from him.

Ohkura pulled his obese body forward and began clumsily packing tobacco into his pipe. The deep vertical furrows on his fat forehead showed that the old man was still thinking. His eyes were still directed toward the paper on his desk. The several-page document had

been written by Tomita, and was titled "Convenience Store Chain Plan."

Tomita sat facing President Ohkura, on a leather sofa in the middle of the large office. The sofa was surrounded by unmatched furniture—a wood-grain print steel desk, dark mahogany ornamental shelves—and light-colored walls with geometric designs. Time seemed to move slowly in this room. The mixed tension of expectation and anxiety was something any employee would feel when he sat face to face with this autocratic president.

Ohkura seemed to be reviewing the document leisurely, indifferent to the young man's discomfort. Yoshifuji sat next to Tomita, as motionless as Tomita, poised on the edge of the sofa. The glazed window glass of the president's office shut out the July sun, and the room was comfortably air conditioned. Nonetheless, Tomita felt the perspiration oozing on his forehead and in his armpits.

Tomita, who had been chosen to be the section supervisor of the presidential Corporate Planning Office at the age of thirty-eight, understood that President Ohkura's evaluation of his "Convenience Store Chain Plan" would determine his future. He dropped his eyes to the paper piled on his lap. There was no need to review the paper; he could almost recite it by heart, line by line. But he had to do something to overcome the tension of the moment. The first page outlined in seven subcategories the company's "Current Situation and Problems." The next page had graphs showing various incomes and expenses of the company for the last ten years. On the left, there were three diagrams shaped like sake bottles.¹ These were the "Demographic Diagrams of Our Company Employees." Tomita had seen enough of these. There was an "Evaluation of Various Policies" on the third page. The fourth page defined the nature of the so-called convenience store: "It is a small but all-purpose retail store that maximally answers the needs of the general consumer. It operates from about eight in the morning till about eight at night. It sells preservable products for basic daily needs and general groceries; it takes catalog orders; it arranges for the repair of home electrical appliances; it is a small, friendly store."

After this definition, Tomita had listed the advantages of operating this type of store as part of a chain: costs cut by way of wholesale purchases, the reduction of inventories through the exchange of merchandise between stores, the possibility of developing intimate contacts with local residents, and so on.

The last page contained the list of merchandise, sales prospects, and

the floor plan of a typical store. Part of the information in this portion was borrowed from the examples of convenience stores in the United States. The total area of the shop and residence was about 1,440 square feet.

It's too bad that the A-Electric Industry—a light electrical appliance maker with 80 billion yen in capital, and 4,000 employees—has to get into such a marginal retail business. A perplexed feeling passed through Tomita's mind. This wasn't the first time he had felt this way, either. In fact, the bewilderment kept coming back. Among other things, he feared that President Ohkura's clay-colored lips might let out an enraged bellow and blow away his hard-earned position in the A-Electric Company.

But, no, I can't be wrong . . . Tomita told himself in an effort to calm down. He had done five months' hard thinking on this and had written it, with Yoshifuji's help, in the kind of language Ohkura liked.

II

Undoubtedly, Shigeki Tomita was exceptionally well-treated by the A-Electric Company. His luck began when he was appointed assistant executive secretary. That was six years ago, about ten years after he had entered the company straight out of the university. This was a top managerial position in the main office. In addition, the new position gave him ready access to the president and his favorite executive, Yoshifuji.

An assistant executive secretary, in a way, was a secretary's secretary. Opportunities to have direct contact with the president were few, but Tomita had plenty of miscellaneous work to do for him. Among other duties, he had to map out the president's schedule of activities, draw up rough drafts of presidential addresses and manuscripts for professional magazines, make plans for the president's golf matches with clients, arrange employment for relatives of bank executives and politicians, and get rid of petty *sōkaiyas*² who sought an audience with the president. He always had to be on top of these time-consuming and yet inconspicuous chores. A good performance was taken for granted and error was not tolerated.

Tomita had been at it for three years without making a serious mistake. His performance had cost him his personal happiness and home life. He reported to the office early in the morning, and went home late at night. He was summoned to join golf matches—which he

never enjoyed—on Sundays and special holidays. Frequently, he spent weekends and holidays drafting papers at the office. When his wife gave birth to her second child, he couldn't even take time off to visit her in the hospital. His absence had made a rubble of his home life.

He was very much involved in company work, yet had fewer exchanges with the president than he had hoped. Rare and brief meetings took place only a couple of times a month. Sometimes he was instructed by the president on how to handle a specific project, or even more rarely, they spoke in the car. Always, Secretary Yoshifuji was around, attending to the president's needs more zealously than anyone else.

Tomita had been released from this post about three years ago, although not to take part in anything more exciting.

"As you are aware, we send outstanding young men to the provinces. This is a three-year project we started last year. Its purpose is to strengthen our branch store network." Yoshifuji had gone out of his way to preface Tomita's transfer order. His apparent intention was to motivate the man who had gone through the ordeal of being his assistant secretary. It didn't work. The assignment to be the supervisor of a small store's business office in Shikoku³ flatly disappointed Tomita.

Tomita was familiar with A-Electric's three-year plan to send two hundred qualified young employees to the provincial branch offices and agencies. This was an attempt to make up for the inefficiency of the national railroad and the postal system, while at the same time strengthening the company's local network. But to most staff, the assignment meant nothing beyond a step into rustication. A common practice had been that those who had worked as an assistant executive secretary were given the post of deputy section supervisor of the business office in the main office, or else sent abroad, unless they were found to be incompetent.

Fortunately, it didn't take long for Tomita to realize that the secretarial position had paid off after all. He was called back to Tokyo in two years and two months. His new position, the section supervisor of the president's Corporate Planning Office, was a temporary arrangement; nevertheless, Tomita was in the main office. Not only that, this was a very respectable promotion, compared to those such as deputy section chief, branch company section chief, assistant executive of an agency, and the like, which were assigned to his peers and his immediate seniors. Yoshifuji himself had been promoted from secretary to executive chief of the president's office. How highly President Ohkura regarded Tomita was unknown, but it seemed obvious enough that his

immediate supervisor Yoshifuji was his strong supporter. That's what counted. For Yoshifuji—who had made it to the post of executive chief of the president's office at the age of forty-six—was second in line to succeed the president.

"Tomita is the first man in the Yoshifuji lineup." Gossip like this traveled, but didn't bother Tomita. He didn't go for the interpretation implying favoritism, but appreciated Yoshifuji's recognition of his three years of dedication. He swore to himself that he would answer Yoshifuji's good will with hard work.

For some reason, no big assignment came around after the promotion. His job was to make large investment plans and to draw sales plans for new products among other things, but there was no work in these lines. The Japanese economy, which had looked hopeful during the 1980s,⁴ had plunged right back into a deep recession. So, the order to "draft a radical recovery plan which would irradicate all the existing problems" was just what Tomita needed. It came on a cold morning several months ago. At that time, he didn't dream of proposing a plan like the one he had just handed to the president. At the time, he was not fully aware of A-Electric's chronic problems.

III

"A Radical Recovery." This phrase was cant by now. Its popularity spread in the 1970s, and it had been used frequently for a good four years. The duration of its popularity underlined the scope of the problem and the absence of a remedy. "Radical recoveries" were really needed everywhere in present-day Japan: in the national economy, local governments, the management of a majority of businesses, the household economies of many families, and so on. Ten years after the high growth period, ubiquitous distortions and strains in the economy had become far too numerous for any quick fix.

Japan had achieved "miraculously" high growth in the twenty-eight years between the end of World War II and the Oil Shock. The growth rate of its second half (1960s through the early 1970s), above all, was "outrageous." Like a huge avalanche, which accumulates speed and size as it rolls downward, the Japanese economy grew year by year until it reached second place in the global GNP ranking.

"It looked as if nothing could stop the high growth of those times. . . ." Tomita looked back every now and then. He had stepped into the "real world" at the mid-point of the high growth period.

As the twig is bent, so the tree shall grow. Shigeki Tomita's generation was a product of the culture created by a high growth society. He grew up while Japan raced up the ladder of economic growth, subscribing to the futurologists' prediction that "the twenty-first century will be a Japanese century." It all came about while he was dumbfounded by the scale of the projection and outraged by the blind force of an economy that trampled over everything else. Companies furiously invested for the future, and individuals bought land to build houses. This was when "everyone feared missing out on the growth, but none feared the snowballing debts." Everyone believed that "tomorrow meant more prosperity and that next year would be an improvement over this year."

In retrospect, it had been unreasonable to hope for endless growth, and worse yet, to fall victim to the belief. As if to punish this shortsightedness, a small war in the distant Middle East brought an end to Japan's vast growth, quickly and effortlessly.

The aftermath of the Oil Shock and the subsequent global recession was jarring. At least people felt so at the time. It appeared to mark a finale to the Japanese high economic growth period. However, the impact must not have been felt severely enough. The high growth theory, which had reached every corner of Japan, was hardly reexamined. Little changed in the economic structure of national and local governments, deficit-based industrial management, lifetime employment and seniority systems, the education craze, or the frivolous and flamboyant consumer pattern. The slowest to change was the mental framework of those who had become accustomed to the high growth economy. Everyone talked about economic stabilization, but didn't rid themselves of the belief in a better tomorrow. It goes without saying that politicians, managers, and labor union leaders didn't dare to take away the pleasant dream of the public. No one put any effort into expounding upon the true meaning, or the concrete impact, of stable growth. And then, for better or worse, the Japanese economy found itself on the way to recovery beginning around 1976, never experiencing a total collapse.

This seemingly strong recovery restored in the minds of the Japanese people a trust in their own economic system. It is true that the precipitous, madcap inflation ended in only a year. Production picked up faster than predicted. But this didn't mean that those who had ascribed their "rely on others" type of economic recovery to uniquely Japanese systems and customs, or to the personality and ability of the Japanese people, could claim any of the credit. They were too conceited to admit

that the growth of Japanese exports was helped by the United States and the Middle East. They were guilty of renewed praise for Japanese vitality, Japanese-style labor management, et cetera.

As an assistant executive secretary, Tomita had written a number of papers on this theme in Seizō Ohkura's name. A majority of them concluded with expressions like "The high growth period for the Japanese economy is definitely over. But there's no doubt that the Japanese economy has already skillfully placed itself in an orbit of stable growth. This orbit, I am confident, will lead the Japanese public to an even brighter future."

IV

Thinking back, that had been Seizō Ohkura's heyday. A-Electric's business grew steadily even during the 1974-76 recession. It did better than other companies during the economic recovery period. Although home electric appliances didn't sell, audio equipment—A-Electric's main product—sold remarkably well in both national and international markets.

The old president, seventy-three at the time, with twenty years of experience in management, gained influence and became convinced of his own worth. Others were just as happy to believe that Ohkura had single-handedly bailed his company out of the recession in its early stage by adjusting its major production to consumer demand. Whether or not proper management was the result of chance was nobody's concern. In the world of economics, results are what count. Explanations can be added afterward.

Naturally, the success magnified Ohkura's power and self-esteem. Coming from a large trading company at the end of the 1950s, he had rebuilt the nearly collapsed A-Electric Industry into a giant despite a series of poor conditions. An extremist flattered Ohkura as "too great a manager to belong to a middle-size electric appliance manufacturer." Financial journals welcomed Ohkura's arrogant "humanitarian" economic philosophy. Had Ohkura retired then, his reputation would have remained unscathed. But old men puffed up with power and pride are not inclined to step down. And of course, his luck did not last forever. It died down, keeping pace with the shrinkage of the age group that was crazy about audio devices.

Tomita had returned to the Tokyo office last fall, and found it completely changed. "It's only been two years and two months . . ." he lamented.

It was true that the Japanese economy had been sliding downward towards the end of his assistant executive secretary days, but he could at least feel there used to be some vitality left in his company. Ohkura used to be in high spirits. His instructions, "A company-wide campaign to increase sales," "Let's go, salesmen!" "Harness your skills and ideas," had boomed throughout the company like a military trumpet. The zeal had eroded while Tomita sweated blood, cutting minor expenses and supervising the inexperienced sales staff in his Shikoku branch store. The sales of audio equipment had slumped, indifferent to the old president's scolding and urging.

Ohkura kept on preaching, issuing one presidential instruction after another, sometimes sounding harsher than before and at other times appealing for sympathy. He also had goals and slogans posted everywhere. But they had no more power of persuasion than yesteryear's popular songs. All evaporated into thin air, leaving behind only an "end of the summer" atmosphere. No, it wasn't a matter of atmosphere. The "summer" of A-Electric was clearly over. The swollen population, which had generously expanded the market for audio equipment in the 1970s, had outgrown the consumer phase.

The Japanese population had multiplied to an unprecedented size from 1947 through 1949, just after World War II. Twenty percent more Japanese were born during these three years than the preceding years, and 26 percent more than the years that followed. This was an unusual distortion of an otherwise very stable demographic pattern. It critically affected the Japanese economy and society. There were shortages of school buildings and teachers when this generation reached school age. The generation left behind surplus facilities and instructors. The facility adjustments for the 20 percent population increase required more than a 20 percent increase in investment. Similar problems developed at high school and university levels. When this age group reached the upper teens, the consumer market fattened. When they reached the "young adult" stage, "young noise" blasted throughout Japan. And then in the early seventies, wedding halls had done a big business.

The baby boom generation constituted an invisible lump in Japanese society and created peculiar demands and vogues. Wherever it passed, it left the marks of surplus facilities and excessive competition. The growth of the audio equipment market in the seventies was no more than a by-product of this demographic event. When the population lump moved out of the business territory of A-Electric, it took the success of the company and its president with it. By now, the so-called

postwar generation lump had grown out of its adolescence and had entered the age of worry over the family budget and the children's education. The younger brothers, fewer in number, were content with the record players their elder brothers handed down to them.

The same demographic problem brought about another crisis for A-Electric in a totally different manner. The sake-bottle-shaped graph on Tomita's second sheet of paper illustrated the situation. The document was titled "The Demographic Charts of Our Company Employees."

V

There were three graphs in this document. Each had horizontal bars, mounted one on top of another. All represented the number of employees in each age group between the ages of twenty-two and fifty-eight. The graph on the right represented all employees; the one in the middle, female employees; the one on the left, male employees. The bars spread wide at the bottom, although only slightly in the female graph. The other two swelled in the center. The male chart was unique in that it swelled disproportionately in the center, and looked more like a high-hipped flower vase than like a sake-bottle. The contortion was caused by the company's hiring procedure. The company had hired many university graduates each year during the high growth period, but had cut back widely after the Oil Shock.

The chart alluded to A-Electric's current problems. It also revealed one of the hidden reasons for the company's earlier success. The postwar baby boom generation had poured in a massive fresh labor force during the high growth period. This age group was lucky to hit the expanded job market. Looking at it another way, the booming economy was due to this enormous young labor force. The Japanese seniority system had taken advantage of this demographic flaw. Low wages of young employees—meaning a majority—had kept the mean salary and personnel expenses low.

Unfortunately, the equilibrium broke about the end of the 1970s. The postwar generation, once a synonym for youth, was now over thirty. What used to be a beautifully proportioned pyramid in the demographic chart of employees now swelled unpleasantly in the middle. The lump, which climbed steadily every year, sought higher salaries and ranks. Those who had found jobs during the high growth period would not give up the dream of "a better tomorrow."

This was as big a setback for A-Electric as it was elsewhere. Compa-

nies at an economic impasse were unable to pay the ever rising salaries or to give proportionately higher ranks to the increasing number of senior employees. Economic stagnation prevented an expansion of the system or the building of ancillary plants. A-Electric temporarily sought its way out of this problem by sending two hundred middle-ranking university graduates to the provinces with the slogan "give strength to district branch offices," but it prepared nothing to reward them when they returned.

They should have foreseen this problem a long time ago . . ., thought Tomita when he first became aware of it. As a member of the baby boom generation, Tomita found this discovery appalling. As best he could tell, the solution would be either a mass dismissal of his peers or a total cap on salary raises. So long as all other companies were suffering from the same syndrome, the surplus workers had no alternatives. The loss of a job in one's thirties was fatal. This problem, much more serious and imminent than the widely discussed financial viability of post-retirement life, was now falling on the baby boom generation.

The company must find a way to grow. It may just have to step into new business areas. This was the only conclusion Tomita could see while investigating ways for a "radical recovery." This was how he came to propose the installment of the convenience store chain.

VI

"So, a convenience store chain . . .," muttered Seizō Ohkura once more, after spending a luxurious amount of time looking at the paper. He slowly exhaled his pipe smoke.

Tomita's heart started racing again. He noticed that the vertical wrinkles on Ohkura's forehead had disappeared. The change indicated that the old man had come out of his meditation.

"This may be a good idea, Yoshifuji-kun.³ This is the time for 'Give a chance and wait for the result.'" Ohkura pointed a baggy-skinned finger at the top of an ornamental shelf.

There was a framed calligraphy—"Give a chance and wait for the result"—done by a certain high monk to whom Ohkura had shown his respects. The monk had passed away more than ten years ago, but the four ideograms in North Sung Dynasty style were very much alive. The saying, "Give a chance and wait for the result," expressed the crux of the "humanitarian management" the Meiji⁶-born president prided himself upon.

Tomita let out a sigh of relief. He wasn't sure exactly what kind of relationship the convenience store chain plan had with this philosophical saying, but he knew that the president was in a good mood whenever he brought the calligraphy to people's attention.

"Yoshifuji-kun, go ahead and try it." Ohkura ignored the proposer of the idea, Tomita, and continued talking to his henchman. "Outline concrete ways to go about this—financing, allocations, construction schedules, and a rough estimate of income—as soon as possible. Get everyone in the president's office involved, and if necessary, you may even want to ask staffs in other departments to help you. Don't forget to put it on the agenda of the department heads' meetings. It also needs the approval of the board of directors. You should let banks know ahead of time, too. You need someone well-informed to handle this; otherwise people will start saying all kinds of things about it." Out of a wish not to be called an autocrat, Ohkura made Yoshifuji follow normal procedures.

"Yes, sir." Yoshifuji bent his stubby body double in a show of gratitude. Tomita copied Yoshifuji, ducking his forehead between his knees. The thrill of success and the release from tension made bending difficult. The prospect that the autocratic president and his leading henchman would have more confidence in him from now on was exciting.

PART 2

I

The company launched the convenience store project that very day, right after the president's approval. Yoshifuji had a four-hour conference with Tomita, reexamining Tomita's ideas and American examples. His diligence and commitment were obvious. The prompt start and Ohkura's instruction to do it quickly, however, did not build up momentum. Yoshifuji first had to organize a committee to study the proposal, rather than acting directly on it. Diligent, motivated, and capable though Yoshifuji was, his abilities did not include innovative planning. He was better at coordinating people's opinions, mediating inconsequential communications, and keeping everyone happy. This was probably a trademark of the executives who were born in the late 1920s. They had joined large organizations in the 1950s and had enjoyed the benefits of the high growth period.

Yoshifuji spent the entire month of July talking with related department chiefs and organizing a "CS (Convenience Store) Planning Committee." This was staffed by the section chiefs of every department. There was nothing wrong with Yoshifuji making himself the chairman of the committee, but it amazed Tomita to find that the committee had more than thirty members. As one who honored harmonious communications and a balanced organization, Yoshifuji had staff members from every division which had even the remotest relationship to the project.

Committees like this present a façade of having tremendous potential, but in reality they are usually ineffectual. Most staff members showed up at meetings held once every 10 days or so. They asked questions and stated opinions to suit their whims, but left all the work to Tomita and his three assistants. All that this collection of people meant to Tomita was the distribution of more paper, more time spent explaining things, and a lot of busy work. But the inefficiency did not bother workaholic Yoshifuji, who prided himself on assiduousness. On the contrary, he was now about to build an executive superstructure, "Special Committee," atop the existing "Planning Committee."

Yoshifuji ran around among executives and department chiefs daily, took care of endless chores, and scrupulously examined the reports that were piled up on his desk. Without fail, he met with President Ohkura for at least three hours a day. Yoshifuji's office hours from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. were always divided into small segments, and were clogged up with endless tasks. But these tasks did not seem to satisfy his hunger for something more to do. As a rule, he called Tomita after six o'clock to tell him something like, "Managing Director X said . . . today," or "I heard . . . at Department Chief Y's place just a while ago." All were more or less related to the convenience store plan, but rarely did Tomita gain anything from this chitchat. To begin with, it was highly unlikely that executives or department heads of an electrical appliance manufacturer knew much about convenience stores. To make matters worse, the chitchat was merely Yoshifuji's starting point. It usually developed into questions and requests for more work, sometimes keeping Tomita at it until midnight.

The company work was not Tomita's exclusive interest. He really resented having the long gossipy sermon take up his personal and family time. He was fed up with the cold restaurant dinners catered to his office. It was also a financial strain to take a taxi home once or twice a week. He could not charge the taxi fare to the company as Executive Yoshifuji did, nor was he paid overtime as managers were. Tomita's

home life this summer consisted of guzzling down *ochazuke*,⁷ taking a bath and going to bed, his wife's unhappy face, quick glances at his withdrawn children, savings that stopped increasing, and incurable exhaustion.

II

The first draft of the convenience store chain outline was completed in mid-September, and it was approved in principle by the Planning Committee and the Special Committee. Although the first draft was a large volume of 250 folio-size pages, most of it was a lengthy preface plus reference material culled from overseas. Major points were summarized in the first fifteen-page abstract. The abstract defined convenience stores: they operate between 8:30 A.M. and 9:00 P.M. An average store space is 70 to 90 square meters; it sells (1) canned food, packaged food, spices, snacks, and other preservable items; (2) basic clothing such as underwear, socks, and so forth; (3) detergent, soaps, papers, and other daily needs; (4) periodicals; and (5) inexpensive consumer electric goods such as light bulbs and batteries. An annotation read that a store could also carry cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs, if a permit was obtained. The report insisted on providing catalog sales⁸ and electrical repair service. The latter would mobilize the existing technology of A-Electric, while coping, at the same time, with a shift in the consumer buying pattern from that of disposable goods to durable goods.

In short, the new draft was not much different from Tomita's July proposal, in spite of the long discussions and research conducted since then. Most of the new ideas and criticisms had been wiped out before maturation, either because of their unrealistic nature or by the force of conflicting viewpoints. One might also simply say that Tomita's original proposal had been well drafted.

Tomita concluded the summary with a note that a convenience store must not be a mini-supermarket. It should be like a supermarket in the sense that it carries a larger variety of merchandise than a traditional retail store. On the other hand, it should retain the charm of a traditional retail store where the shopkeeper lives in the store and has intimate contact with his customers. In brief, a major selling point of a convenience store should be accessibility and friendliness.

"This is pretty well written." President Ohkura was as happy as a clam when he summoned Yoshifuji and Tomita a day after the first draft

was approved by the Special Committee.

"I thought of this myself a long time ago." Ohkura pressed the last paragraph of the abstract with his wrinkled finger. That portion of his copy was even underlined in red. "Really, we don't get friendliness in supermarkets. Shopping should be enjoyable. Japanese in particular seek intimacy. That's why mail order and self-service shopping centers with vending machines haven't taken root in Japan."

Ohkura was unusually talkative. He took the trouble of quoting technical information about retail stores whenever appropriate. In all likelihood, Ohkura had done his share of research on convenience stores.

"This plan is good in that respect. Ours will be a convenient, inexpensive, and friendly store. The shopkeeper will be a resident of the area. I bet we can get good catalog orders, too." Ohkura concluded by flattering Tomita, "It's great that we have a young man who comes up with a novel idea like this. Don't you think so, Yoshifuji-kun?"

Varying from his habit of making himself look obliged, Yoshifuji ventured this time to smile and pat Tomita's shoulder.

But after going through a series of compliments and jokes, Ohkura stiffened up and said, "However, the true battle hasn't started yet."

III

Ohkura pointed out the weaknesses of the plan with an astuteness abnormal for a seventy-seven-year-old man. He commented with amazing accuracy on serious problems pertaining to the site selections, site purchases, wholesale purchases, repair service, merchandise selection for the catalog sales, financing, bill collecting, the relationship between the shops and the distribution center, and the balance between the existing A-Electric retail stores and the new outfits.

"At any rate, I would like to build at least thirty chain stores before the bonus season next summer. And I would like a total of 300 stores by the end of the following three years. That will bring the annual income to 50 billion yen. The larger the scale, the larger the profit. So we should expand rapidly. Also, a nationwide network of these shops will make our company better known and will facilitate the sale of our products."

Ohkura's determination thrilled Tomita once again. The time schedule, the size of his sales plan, and the accuracy of Ohkura's directions pleased Tomita. It was likely that his hard sum-

mer work would be rewarded sometime soon.

But Ohkura broke the brief silence, "The most important thing is to get this started right away. You know what kind of world we are living in." The cheerful expression had left his face and he had lapsed back to his lonely and worn old self. A-Electric had done very poorly in this summer's sales; it had made 18 percent less profit than the same period last year.

The Japanese economy was on its way down. The net GNP during the April-July months declined by 24 percent compared with the same time last year. The electric industry as a whole produced 7.8 percent less. A-Electric was in a more perilous condition than its competitors because it had fallen behind in the introduction of energy-saving devices and solar equipment which were now in great demand.

IV

Because the latter half of September had been spent "organizing," the second phase of the convenience store chain did not start until October.

The Planning Committee and the Special Committee were left intact, but a "CS Plan Promotion Headquarters" was set up inside the president's office, and active members were chosen from various departments. Unlike the first two, this new organization was strictly practical. It was divided into four units: General Planning Unit, Placement and Planning Unit, Facility Building and Repair Unit, and Management and Operations Unit. According to Yoshifuji's "Duty Assignment," the task of the General Planning Unit included overall management, obtaining licenses and permits, and seeking funds; that of the Placement and Planning Unit was planning store buildings and actually seeking sites; that of the Facility Building and Repair Unit was buying land, making rental agreements for buildings, building stores, and interior decorating; that of the Management and Operations Unit was purchase, distribution, repair crew, and catalog sales. Tomita was made in charge of the fourth unit. This meant that he now had the title "Chief of the CS Plan Promotion Headquarters, Management and Operations Unit" in addition to "Head of the Presidential Office Planning Section."

Tomita was satisfied with this arrangement. The leader of the General Planning Unit, Kiyoshi Arikawa, was five years his senior; he was a man of high caliber with a record of having served as a section supervisor in the General Business and Accounting Office. The leaders of the

Placement and Planning Unit and the Facility Building and Repair Unit were veterans in management and industrial facility installment, respectively. Comparing his own background and age with those of these selected few, there was no question but that Tomita was well recognized by his company.

In Tomita's mind, the project gave him a firm standing in A-Electric. He could picture himself taking a seat in an executive board meeting as the "Department Chief of the CS Project Headquarters" some years later. The project by then would have expanded into a huge organization of over 500 chain stores. He took a chance and shared his views with his wife Sachié. Sachié listened to him with a glitter in her eyes, calling off her often repeated complaints about his late returns from work and about the little savings they had left.

Women are eager for everyday enjoyment and future dreams. While being somewhat critical of his wife's attitude, Tomita was still happy.

There was a manpower shortage in the CS Plan Promotion Headquarters. In relation to the size of the system, the ratio of underlings to unit leaders was small. There were only fifteen of them counting Yoshifuji. And two of the fifteen were nearly fifty years old, each titled the Coordinator and Attaché to the Headquarters Chief. This meant that the structure was top heavy: one headquarters representative, two coordinator attachés to the headquarters representative, four unit leaders, four chief clerks, two rankless men, and two female secretaries. The structure mirrored the A-Electric employee demographic chart with its bulging middle.

All the unit leaders labored at their duties. Yoshifuji now had too many chores of his own to talk with Tomita during the day. The two coordinators lacked ambition and vitality. The two female clerks had families to take care of; they were sure to go home before six. The two rankless men were ignorant and uncommitted. Consequently, the actual work piled onto the unit leaders and chief clerks.

"If necessary, we can have other divisions help us. Don't hesitate to ask me," repeated Yoshifuji, but the work load was not something that could be reduced by cutting up and parceling out. As is typical anywhere, the true work force in the organic system consisted solely of those who were familiar with and responsible for the entire process. Soon, pressure from work generated an unhealthy atmosphere. At times it developed out of discrepancies in the unit leaders' opinions and later deteriorated into deep-seated antagonisms.

The first of these disputes cropped up in early December between Tomita and the leader of the Placement and Planning Unit, Kuroyanagi. It began with Tomita's violent objection to Kuroyanagi's site selection.

"Stores should be put in small cities outside the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan areas," proposed Kuroyanagi.

Tomita's idea was to put them near housing blocks in the outskirts of the metropolitan areas. In particular, they should be at such places as the entrances to apartment developments and bus stops in the recently developed suburban residential zones.

Tomita argued vehemently, drawing examples from the United States. He insisted, "From the standpoint of wholesale purchases, group deliveries,⁹ repair crews, and so on, it's impractical to scatter the stores in dispersed cities."

Kuroyanagi refuted on the basis of the effectiveness of the catalog sales, and the utilization of the preexisting A-Electric retail stores.

The dispute continued for nearly a week and was settled by Yoshifuji. "Both of you make sense. I am in agreement that we are wise to give serious considerations to the country if we want to expand this plan in the future." So saying, Yoshifuji cited the recent population migration, the growth in consumption and purchases, and the deterioration of the national railroad and mail services in the country. This was to save face for Kuroyanagi. Having done this, he concluded, "But it is also true that we would be unwise to build our stores in remote regions from the start, mostly because we won't have very many. So I would say that we probably ought to concentrate the first thirty stores for the next year in the Tokyo and Osaka regions."

This was apparently a compromise, but in essence it supported Tomita's position. It meant to Kuroyanagi that he had wasted time on extensive research, traveling all over the country four days a week for two solid months.

A similar argument ignited in late December between Tomita and the leader of the Facility Building and Repair Unit, Tanaka. Tanaka held that each store had to be decorated differently to suit the tastes of the consumers in the region, the available land, and the size and nature of the leased building. But Tomita demanded maximal uniformity in design. He believed that uniformity of shop design and merchandise worked advantageously for both wholesale purchases and image build-up.

"All the display shelves and the rest of the interior decorating material should be standardized as much as possible. That's how American chain stores are built," Tomita concluded.

Tomita's assertion cut deeply into architect Tanaka's professional pride. This quarrel was suspended by the coordinator's double-edged comment, "Well, we can decide after we get the actual plots and buildings." But it left hard feelings.

"Tomita is despotic because he thinks he is the originator of the plan."

"That guy gives himself airs under the shelter of President Ohkura and Executive Yoshifuji." These and other such statements were made, mostly in departments unrelated to Tomita's.

VI

The New Year and cold days deepened Tomita's frustration. Work and arguments multiplied. His work did not progress at all smoothly. The wholesale purchase negotiation, aiming for the large supermarket price range, added more problems. Most wholesalers and manufacturers distrusted the sales ability of the A-Electric convenience stores.

"We'll be happy to renegotiate the prices after you've sold as much as Supermarket Z." The future plans and estimates Tomita showed had no persuasive powers.

The same was true of the catalog sales. A good number of manufacturers and trading companies wanted to have their commodities printed in the catalog, but most asked to use full department store prices.

"It won't help to give an impression that we are high priced," said Tomita.

"We can't discount for a market we don't even know," the manufacturers retorted.

The most amazing development was A-Electric's refusal to discount its own products. Tomita felt totally betrayed.

"If we sold our products in a catalog, our commissioned retail stores would be all over us." A-Electric's business manager lost his temper.

"The printed discount prices will make our products look cheap," the head technician protested.

From late January through February, Tomita walked himself lame in unfamiliar food stores and everyday grocery suppliers. He flew at least once a week to Osaka, and negotiated with wholesalers and factories, only to learn that few would enter into business agreements under the

conditions he proposed. Because of all this, Tomita was downright touched by the goodwill of a large wholesaler who pleasantly accepted the "large supermarket" price. But again, there was a repercussion to even this success: some talked behind his back, saying that Tomita stuck to business dealings with chosen dealers. Such uncalled-for talk hurt him, but there was no way to talk back.

There was another snag in February. One of the suppliers of canned goods offered to do business with Tomita on the condition that he be paid in cash or have a comparable financial arrangement. Obviously, all that A-Electric had to do was to conduct its transactions through the supplier's business bank. Tomita was happy to have found the solution until Arikawa, leader of the General Planning Unit yelled at him, bringing his senior authority to play, "Who are you to make arbitrary decisions like that?"

"I should be able to make some decisions," rebutted Tomita.

This time, Yoshifuji unwaveringly declared Arikawa the winner. Behind Arikawa was the M-Bank, A-Electric's host bank. Tomita had no choice but to revoke the entire contract with the canned goods dealer, only to be upbraided again. The sudden awareness of the complicated power mechanisms in the world of finance, and of the politics within the company crushed his confidence in himself.

Agony awaited him both at work and at home. His family life had lost meaning and warmth. No family enjoyed having its head routinely late or not returning at all. There was no celebration for Christmas or his daughter's birthday last year. The end-of-the-year bonus, which was very small because of the company's business doldrums, was reduced even more by accumulated taxi bills. His life in a public housing apartment was a far cry from affluence or relaxation. Life insurance was practically all he could manage to invest in. There were hardly any savings or securities investments. A private home was just a dream within a dream.

Tomita was worn out. For some time, it had become burdensome even to talk or play with his children. Nor could he keep his wife company. The so-called postwar generation had already turned thirty-nine years old.

How many more years do I have to live like this? Anxiety ate at him as he lay on the floor of his small Japanese-style apartment one Sunday afternoon. Although he was ahead of his peers in the company, an executive's chair was some distance away, and he wasn't sure if he would finally get there. And even if he did, it seemed all that was

waiting at his destination were busy and uneasy days, the kind Yoshifuji led.

Was he really fortunate to be trusted by President Ohkura and Chief of the Presidential Office Yoshifuji? The question made his head swim. This was the first real sense of defeat felt by one who had climbed up the success ladder: first as an outstanding high school student, then as a serious student at a prestigious university, and now as a select member of a large company.

Beside Tomita, his wife Sachié kept talking like a broken record about their third grade son's report card and his work at a cram school.¹⁰ She was blindly enthusiastic about reproducing the life-pattern of an outstanding high school student, a serious student at a prestigious university, and then a select member of a large company.

PART 3

I

After many twists and turns, the Convenience Store Chain Project suddenly got off the ground in March. The move ahead helped Tomita out of his winter depression. As is typical with a project organizer, Tomita's emotions were rather unstable. Joy and fear alternated with every step he took. But the project began walking on its own like a growing son. In March, the talks suddenly became concrete and the responsibilities of each unit became clear cut.

First came the problem of site selections. There were some forty prospective sites that the Placement and Planning Unit and the Facility Building and Repair Unit had nailed down through trust banks and local real estate agents. They were all different: wooden buildings, currently operating stores to be sold, a part of a large building, a section of the first floor in a condominium to be rented, and others. Most bore little resemblance to anything Tomita had in mind.

One was in a nice location in front of a large housing development, but the plot was small. Another was a nicely shaped spacious lot, but it was hidden in an unfrequented back alley. Then there was some fine land in a good location, but the street in front was closed to motor vehicles during the day. This last one would prove very inconvenient for large orders, group deliveries, and the electrical repair crew.

But the members of the two units preached with the torrential eloquence of a city realtor on how ideal each site was. They gave examples

of how other shops had succeeded in such locations and land conditions. Given the time and budgetary restrictions, the A-Electric Company couldn't exactly be particular.

In any event, the site selection was no longer within the jurisdiction of the Management and Operation Unit leader. Tomita had to keep his internal dissatisfaction and disappointment in check. He could only comment on the forty odd sites from the viewpoint of merchandise delivery and the repair crew.

Luckily, Department Supervisor Yoshifuji and President Ohkura were very cautious. The president visited some of the prospective sites in person. The result was the purchase of only fifteen sites out of the possible forty. And because three of these fell through during negotiation, the project finally started with only twelve stores.

The trimming down of the project from the original thirty to only twelve shops required a thorough revision of the purchase agreements already made. What did not change was Tomita's and Ohkura's insistence on annexing the manager's residence to the shops. A residence connected to the shop had always been Tomita's first priority.

President Ohkura still supports my basic ideology, thought Tomita. And he pictured the life of a low-income hard-working young couple as store managers. They would work for their own profit and for the welfare of the local community. They would be thankful, meanwhile, to A-Electric Industry for giving them the home and shop. Tomita reveled in his dream plan and found General Planning Unit leader Arikawa's "CS Plan Management Guideline" ideal. It proposed a "Three-way Division Profit."

II

The "Three-way Division Profit" plan stipulated that all profits would be equally divided among the company, the shopkeeper, and the consumers. "On principle, each convenience store earns an independent income. The profit (the net profit after taxes) of each store will be divided in three ways. One will go to the parent company, one will be spent for lowering future prices, thereby contributing to the local community, and the remaining portion will go to the shopkeeper." Equality and harmony had always been major components of Ohkura's "humanitarian management" philosophy. Arikawa's document had converted these concepts into a realistic system.

"That should motivate the shopkeepers," said Tomita in agreement.

According to Tomita's calculations, if a store grossed 15 million yen

per month, there should be a net profit of about 1.2 million yen per month, after taking out the salaries of the shopkeeper and two part-time workers, interest, refunds, heating bills, and other expenses. After paying the corporation and local taxes, there would be 700 thousand yen left. This would give the shopkeeper a 230 or 240 thousand yen income besides his salary, which would be a rather substantial sum even in these days of inflation.

"This extra benefit will attract a lot of outstanding young people." Tomita indulged in a bit of optimism.

But all that Yoshifuji did was to say "Do you think so?" and smile wryly.

There were more things to confuse Tomita. One of these was the "CS Project System Guideline." It said that two branch companies would be set up in Tokyo and Osaka to facilitate wholesale purchases, deliveries, catalog merchandise purchases, and mailing, and for the repair crews.

Why bother? thought Tomita. It made no sense to attach six (including the two wholesalers) intermediary companies to twelve retail stores whose annual income would not exceed about 200 billion yen. This puzzle was partially explainable in view of future plans for more shops. But the next puzzle in the "Guideline" was more difficult to unravel: "Each store building of the convenience store chain will be considered an independent branch company."

These days it was not unusual for greengrocers and variety shops to register themselves as joint-stock companies for tax and inheritance reasons. But there seemed to be no reason to take the twelve-store unit apart. It was also doubtful that the formation of such small companies would generate tax breaks. The gain and loss of individual stores can be balanced out for tax purposes only if they are registered as part of a company.

Tomita used this argument to try to change Arikawa's mind.

"It's to give independence to each store and to give substance to the divided income system," Arikawa answered lamely.

Yoshifuji, who overheard the exchange, injected, "This arrangement is essential to giving independence to each store. Our company owns the stores' shares, but each shopkeeper works independently." He spoke in an unusually forceful tone as if to stop any further debate. Tomita was still not convinced. He sensed something ominous in the system and in Yoshifuji's unusual reaction. And the bad news was not long in arriving.

In about the middle of April, a personnel rotation was posted. This was unannounced and totally unprecedented. A-Electric's rotations were usually announced at the end of March and April. The spring rotation had just been completed. It confused Tomita, who was told that he would remain in the same post until the CS Project made headway. It seemed strange that this special rotation applied only to the ranks of section supervisors of branch offices or to deputy section supervisors of the main office. These ranks belonged more or less in Tomita's age group. Normally, personnel rotations were like a chain reaction. Mr. B takes Mr. A's place, Mr. C takes Mr. B's place, then Mr. D, etc. In other words, the lower-ranked staff could move only if the higher-ups did. A sizable shift at the deputy section chief level suggested that a fairly large number of new posts had been created.

What's going on? Tomita's curiosity was aroused. *More than ten people received the written order to be "Attaché to Personnel. What's an attaché supposed to do? Does he go for training in a foreign country?* Tomita mulled it over, looking at his close friend Hiromasa Fukushima's name on the list. Fukushima joined the company with Tomita. *Come to think of it, Fukushima spoke some French; maybe he'll be sent to Africa or the Middle East.* Tomita felt like congratulating his friend who had worked in obscurity in northeastern Japan for three years. But he soon learned that his speculations were far from the truth.

That very day, Fukushima came to visit the CS Project Promotion Headquarters during Tomita's lunch break.

"I'm not sure if I can do this. I don't feel confident. . . ." Fukushima broached the subject. Worry and shock had made Fukushima's fair and handsome face look paler than usual. "I'm lost. In my family, my father was a salaryman, and there's no merchant even among my relatives. They have no advice to give me. . . ." Fukushima kept complaining to Tomita, who knew nothing of Fukushima's situation.

"What's happening?" Tomita interrupted.

Fukushima looked at Tomita warily and suspiciously. But by the time he had said "You didn't know about this either?" several seconds later, Fukushima was feeling flat again.

"I was told to be a shopkeeper of a convenience store or something like that," Fukushima said resignedly.

Fukushima had come to Tokyo the day before at the brief order of his branch office manager in the northeast who said no more than "Your

post will be changing, so go to the Main Office and receive your orders." The new title given to him that morning was "Manager of a Convenience Store in Hannou in Saitama Prefecture.""

"I'm supposed to be trained for three months until the building is finished. The first month is for classroom instruction and the other two for hands-on training at supermarkets and elsewhere. Do you think a layman can learn the new trade in only three months?" So saying, Fukushima showed Tomita a booklet he had just acquired.

It was the "Outline of an A-Electric Convenience Store" that Tomita himself had written. *How could they do this to him?* Tomita was outraged. He had never dreamed until this moment that an A-Electric employee and, worse yet, a university graduate and a middle-ranking staff member would be made into a convenience storekeeper. In the bright and hopeful plan that Tomita had imagined, a shopkeeper was a young and friendly man, born a shopkeeper, whose healthy, simple-minded wife worked with him. Fukushima in his mid-career wasn't one of those. Tomita's store was supposed to be more cheerful and hopeful.

"It seems that I have to live where the shop is. Because the store is open from eight thirty in the morning till nine at night. . . ." Fukushima's voice dropped lower.

"I know. . . ." Tomita answered morosely, recalling his own plan. The anger switched to sympathy, and sympathy grew into regret.

IV

Tomita's heart sank deeper and deeper from that day on. The spring sun had grown brighter every day. New leaves became greener and glossier, but nothing lifted his spirits. There was no romantic vision or passion attached to the convenience stores any more. They were overshadowed by his feelings for Fukushima and the rest of the twelve middle-ranked employees, who must be practicing "Welcome" and "Thank you very much" in some conference room. Obviously there was no way out of it. Depression and anger didn't help. If he wanted to stay in the company, he simply had to keep working on the project. So far, President Ohkura and Chief of the Presidential Office Yoshifuji were supportive. But a single rebellious act would mean the end of his career. Falling off the success ladder was synonymous with the loss of A-Electric employee status. Carnivores starve when they stop fighting.

The convenience store chain project progressed steadily, indifferent to the changes in Tomita's feelings. The Facility Building and Repair Unit became livelier every day. They already displayed the floor plans

and sketches of the twelve stores.

What a crummy design! thought Tomita.

Probably in an attempt to create uniformity for shops in different localities and plot sizes, each shop sported an awning of yellow and green stripes with a red "A-Electric CS Chain" on its lower end. This design reduced the stores to cheap variety stores, completely different from the American examples Tomita had collected at the beginning of this project.

Employees of building contractors walked between room dividers which had floor maps and sketches pasted all over them. They were builders of homes and shops in the localities of the twelve different stores. They knew how to build what A-Electric wanted. They were also contact people in the community. But they knew nothing of aesthetics.

Even if this is temporary, it's something A-Electric is doing. The company shouldn't risk its own reputation. . . . This was basic to Tomita's belief.

Arikawa's "Management Guideline" made no more sense. The salary guidelines struck him as demoralizing. Each shopkeeper's salary was set at nearly 10 percent less than that of a new university graduate.

"It's not really that low," Arikawa explained, showing a detailed statement of accounts. "To begin with, rent is free and electricity is part of the store cost. Right there you save 60 to 70 thousand yen more than living in public housing. On top of that, the shopkeeper's wife, as an assistant, gets paid 40 percent of his salary."

Of course his wife gets paid if she works. Forty percent of the shopkeeper's salary is less than a part-time high school student's wage, thought Tomita, but Arikawa nonchalantly went on with the simple arithmetic.

"And the major portion of their income comes from the profit sharing you know of. The company takes only half. Forty-five percent of the net profit goes to the shopkeepers in the first two years. If things go as planned, a shopkeeper will earn about 2 million in the first year, and 4 million in the second year. All in all, he earns more than a section chief in the Main Office."

"If the store makes a profit, that is." Tomita tried to sound sarcastic, but couldn't impress Arikawa.

"Of course, the store has to make a profit. We are counting on your bulk order strategy." Arikawa turned the sword tip around.

You don't have to tell me that. . . ., thought Tomita. As a matter of

fact, the wholesale purchases and catalog arrangements were well under way, in spite of the decrease in the number of stores and the delay of the opening date. And Yoshifuji had complimented him about it just the other day.

The news that the stores were actually being built, although they numbered only twelve, put some pressure on wholesalers and manufacturers. They were nursing the romantic vision that A-Electric would "do something big," large company that it was. No one had told them that the middle-aged staff were about to be converted into shopkeepers.

V

"... Akihiko Suzuki-kun." A voice from a loudspeaker called in a high-pitched ending. Sporadic applause echoed forlornly in the large hall. Ornate chandeliers glittered and formally attired waitresses wove among the guests. The hall was packed with people, but they lacked spirit or unity. It was late July at a hotel in central Tokyo.

"Ryōji Inoue-kun to Toride City, in Ibaragi Prefecture . . ." The microphone voice cried again. As before, the announcement was wiped out by the gabbing of uninterested guests. About ten men filed across the platform in front. Each wore a large man-made flower on his chest and stood up as straight as he could, but they all looked despondent and worried. One of them took a step forward, bowed deeply, and listened to more sporadic clapping. Hung above his head was a long sign board which said "A-Electric Convenience Store Chain Inauguration Ceremony."

Those lined up on the platform were the company employees now appointed as storekeepers of the convenience stores. They were thirty-six- to forty-year-old university graduates of middle-level rank. Watching them from the hall entrance, Tomita found himself counting them. *Eleven . . .*, he thought. There was no reason to count. He knew already that there were only eleven. The twelfth man had left the company just two days ago on the pretext of a "lack of confidence."

That makes four . . . Tomita was saddened. Three out of the original twelve nominees had resigned in April and they were immediately replaced.

"Saitama Prefecture, Hannou City, Iwasawa Store Manager, Hiro-masa Fukushima-kun." The voice rang out again. Fukushima, in a dark suit, stepped forward from the line and bowed. The clapping was fainter than before.

"Good for him!" Tomita muttered.

Fukushima had vacillated about this appointment. He had also visited Tomita twice for consultation since his first return from the north-east.

"My wife won't have it . . .," he once said.

Tomita knew that Fukushima's wife was a good-looking woman who had graduated from a Christian college in Tokyo. She was not the type to humor uneducated housewives as the mistress of a small retail store.

"I don't think I can do it," he kept whimpering at another time. "I'm training at a supermarket now but I can't memorize the names of the merchandise. I'm all thumbs when it comes to wrapping things. When a man reaches thirty-eight years old, I'm afraid both his brains and hands slow down."

It was obvious that the economist, who had spent many years at A-Electric as an accountant, had lost his aptitude for manual labor. It was impressive that Fukushima didn't leave the company.

"My wife gave in. We shall see what we can do. If I do well, they may put me back in the Main Office. If things go wrong, they'll replace me soon enough," said Fukushima, trying to sound hopeful. "When it comes right down to it, starvation is worse than shame." He smiled sadly.

To Tomita's eyes, Fukushima's bloodless face, as he stood rigid on the platform, was proof of this last sentence.

What a dull celebration this is! Tomita was beginning to feel weight-down.

Yoshifuji stood next to Tomita, wearing an extra-large red man-made flower on his chest. He curried favor with guests who were going home early.

"What do you know! We're embarrassed to get in this silly business, but it doesn't mean we are forgetting our proper trade. . . ." Yoshifuji was talking to an elderly man, most likely an executive in a large company. A ribbon with "A-Electric CS Chain Company, Vice-President" dangled below his large man-made flower. He was now the vice-president of the wholesale company for the convenience stores.

PART 4

I

"I'm sure you aren't all that keen about it, but please agree to do this, Tomita-kun." President Ohkura lowered his huge bald head, although only slightly.

The October evening sun, glowing through the shaded glass, lit the bald head in a shade of nauseating russet.

Tomita stiffened. He had never in his life imagined that the old president would kowtow to him. But Yoshifuji, in the seat next to the president, languidly slumped down and didn't so much as sit up.

"You know very well that our company is in a fix. And the convenience store chain, which we started in hopes of a business upturn, hasn't even seen daylight yet." Ohkura spoke in an agitated voice.

He's fallen apart with age. . . . The discovery startled Tomita.

In a matter of one year, Ohkura's skin had lost elasticity, his voice had become oppressively shaky, and his eyes were clouded gray as if they were set on a far away target.

"We've spent 1,800 million yen altogether: 800 million on the buildings, 700 million on circulation and repair crews, plus office expenses, research costs, and advertisement, but the revenue since the opening is below half our estimate."

Ohkura quoted detailed figures. The clarity of his thinking offset the waning strength of his body. His passion for the convenience stores seemed intact but the pitiful figures revealed his defeat.

"What is particularly bad is that there's no sign of recovery. And even worse is the instability of the store managers."

There was good reason for concern. Four out of the original twelve appointees had resigned before the opening. During the past three months, three had given up and left the company and two were hospitalized. This meant that in a matter of three months, eight stores had changed managers and three stores sat closed due to two consecutive departures of managers.

The situation destroyed the image of a "convenience store frequented by local housewives." Needless to say, sales were weak and some inventories were miserably wasted. Other supplies, the delivery system, and the repair crew for thirty stores, lay idle. Worse yet, the shortfall of the first twelve stores had eliminated the possibility of finding new volunteer store managers.

"Some say that I started the silly project to get rid of unwanted employees," Ohkura continued despondently, "but I had no such intention; I really did it in the spirit of 'Give a chance and wait for the result.' I wanted to give as many of our people as possible a chance to prove their ability. But nobody understood me. I couldn't believe it. There were times when I lost my temper. As they say, children don't

know how their parents feel. But, you know, parents make mistakes, too. I puzzled over what was wrong and what went wrong. . . ."

This was the first time Tomita had heard that Ohkura had intended from the beginning to turn his staff into storekeepers. The difference between the prewar companyman's mentality—who had wandered around throughout Southeast Asia—and that of a contemporary salaryman with university degrees painfully took on meaning in Tomita's mind.

Ohkura's talk was finally getting to the heart of the matter. If the president asked for suggestions, Tomita decided to propose that A-Electric stop sending company staff to the stores and start recruiting young people who were genuinely interested in operating small stores.

"I finally figured it out the other day," continued the president, "we gave those people stores and merchandise, but we didn't give them souls. I mean, we built the facility, but didn't teach what to dream. This is precisely what they mean by 'you made a statue of Buddha, but forgot to put a soul in it.'" Ohkura stopped there and began packing tobacco in his pipe. The slow motion of his fingers reflected the speaker's remorse and grief.

"We need a dream at work," continued Ohkura, "particularly when we are starting on a new project. It's important that one have a goal, a model, and a rival. It was the same when I first came to this company. National Electric and Sanyō Electric were my goals, models, and rivals. My wish to be like them, no, my belief that I could be as good as they were, bolstered me. But there's none of that for our store project. This is why nobody has found a dream or a goal. Most felt abandoned the moment they were appointed store manager." Ohkura was blowing out from his brick-colored lips a mixture of purple smoke and words of self-justification. His talk now seemed to be veering in another direction.

"It dawned on me that I should have selected the company's very best employee. I should have asked him to be the model, a successful example for our convenience store. I should have thought of this earlier. I don't think it's too late to correct my mistake."

Tomita felt a chill run through his body. He thought that Ohkura's face had flared red. He missed his last words. Whatever he might have said, it was all decided. Yoshifuji rudely thrust a sheet of paper at him. It read, "I transfer you to Osaka Kawachinagano¹² CS Company, Inc. as its Store Manager, Director."

II

"Is Kawachinagano close to the Naniwa Middle School?" This was Sachié's first reaction to Tomita's report of his transfer. Her son's future education concerned her the most even at the moment when her family's life and her husband's future were at stake.

"It couldn't be. Naniwa Middle School is in Kôbe. Kawachinagano is on the southern edge of Osaka." Tomita answered impatiently.

"Oh." Sachié took a deep breath. "I don't think I would like it."

She got angry first and then started making rambling protests. She had neither experience nor interest in working in a store. She was a poor talker and not exactly sociable. It was onerous for her to make friends with neighborhood housewives. The irregular work hours would exert a bad influence on the family's physical and mental health. In fact, she had been feeling weak lately and her little girl was in delicate health. Her husband didn't seem fit for the trade. Wasn't there anyone in A-Electric who had better judgment? She kept every appearance of being extremely cool-headed and logical. "I'm sure your company would understand if you talk sense as I do. Why don't you explain to Yoshifuji-san tomorrow and ask him to reverse his decision?" she finally declared.

Sachié's suggestion was totally out of place. Tomita had already considered it. He had taken a chance by saying, "I am not prepared to be a model manager." But it didn't work. He knew that the company, which had let go so many employees for the same reason, would never consider withdrawing the written order of transfer. Tomita told this to his wife, but she wouldn't listen.

"You're always left holding the bag because you aren't aggressive enough." She was keyed up. "I married you because you were a promising companyman out of a prestigious university. I would have married a young store master with fifty employees had I known that I would have to turn myself into a shopkeeper's wife," the "educated woman" who had gone to school in the United States yelled.

Shall I leave the company? The thought flashed in Tomita's mind. Momentarily, Fukushima's sorrowful face revisited his memory with the remark, "Starvation is worse than shame." He had received a long letter from Fukushima only a few days ago, griping about the hardships and complications of a convenience storekeeper's life.

III

It was in late November of the same year that Tomita, his wife, and their two children moved to the Kawachinagano store in Osaka. So that the store could be reopened before the end-of-the-year sale, Tomita underwent only four weeks' hands-on training at a supermarket in Tokyo. The company had skipped the classroom training, saying that the man in charge of the project from its start had no need for it.

"As you all know, Tomita-kun is our company's hope and the father of our convenience store," announced Yoshifuji at Tomita's farewell party. "I have no doubt but that Tomita-kun will soon make a triumphant return to our Main Office as the savior and foster father of the CS Chain."

A majority of the listeners did not take Yoshifuji seriously. Rumor had gone around in the company, "Tomita's days are numbered now that he is being sent away as a storekeeper."

I'm different from others. I was personally asked by President Okura. Tomita himself did not give up hope.

That hope didn't spare him from the disappointment he felt at the first sight of the A-Electric CS Chain Kawachinagano Store. The two-story wooden building, standing against the magnificent Mount Kôgô, was much smaller and shabbier than the conceptualized drawing that hung on the Main Office wall. The store had been closed for over six weeks since the departure of the previous manager. The interior was filthy. Rats and cockroaches had built nests inside the bags of sweets and toilet paper. The inexpensive plastic tile floor was covered with a mixture of detergent spilled out of torn boxes, underwear which had dropped from shelves, and broken glass from tipped over electric floor lamps. The stench from these filled the damp store space as well as the dust-laden residence rooms.

While Sachié complained and wailed, Tomita spent four days cleaning up the building and stocking new merchandise. He spent the entire one million yen "New Store Preparation Fund" loan from A-Electric for advertisements, matches, and other mementos to distribute at the Grand Opening Sale. He also hired a part-time high school student and a middle-aged widow from the neighborhood. The two, who had worked for a nearby supermarket, were to help cope with the end of the year rush. In short, Tomita did everything he could for the "Refurbished Reopening."

Perhaps because of the thorough preparation, earnings were fairly good from the first business day in early December. He earned 500 thousand yen on the first day, 620 thousand on the second day, and 480 thousand yen on the third day (Sunday) of business. In fact, the store ran out of mementos.

If things go at this rate, I can make at least 12 million yen a month. That will make a profitable business. Tomita did figures till late every night, tapping on a desk calculator.

Going like this, I'll have 1.5 million yen per month a year from now. The day of 'triumphant return to the Main Office' Yoshifuji had mentioned may not be that far away. He began to feel optimistic.

But his optimism died out after the third day. Customers disappeared. The daily earnings gradually dropped: 330 thousand yen, 280 thousand yen, 220 thousand yen, 250 thousand yen, 200 thousand yen. From the third week on, it wasn't unusual to earn less than 200 thousand yen a day. Tomita learned the hard way that the shrewd Osaka housewives had only come for the opening sale and mementos.

This will give me only 5 million yen a month, groaned Tomita.

Tomita's depression and Sachié's nagging increased in inverse proportion to the number of customers.

IV

There were many additional problems. A couple of times a day a housewife would yell at Tomita for selling defective merchandise. Unpriced items often confused the checkers. At other times, broken merchandise and falling shelves made chaos of the store. And then there was the time when a checker caught a female shoplifter. Tomita didn't know what to do with her. Another time, the cash was ten thousand yen short. Tomita suspected the widow checker and questioned his own fairness.

Most unpleasant was the ordering and sending back of merchandise. It was arranged so that the wholesale purchases were made via the company Tomita himself had set up. But the items that were delivered to him did not always agree with the consumer tastes of the area. And many were priced higher than those in the Dobuiki and Matsuya areas. Tomita was indignant about this situation because he had made sure that the wholesale prices were compatible with those of the large supermarkets. But the A-Electric Osaka Wholesale Company refused to consider

a discount. The costs of transportation, storage, and interest charges had to be included. The primary problem was slow turnover. Business expenses had fattened the per item price.

Return shipments caused more problems. The wholesale company made an issue of damaged or stained merchandise. Refunds had to be negotiated every time. Tomita tried to get his way but was never very successful. His stockpiles multiplied; mountains of them rapidly took over his home of three small rooms.

As anticipated, business was strong in late December despite these problems. There were three or four days when a day's gross exceeded 500 thousand yen. These few days kept Tomita and Sachié busy but happy. But January took customers away, and so did February. Tomita started hearing unfavorable remarks like "People are unfriendly in that store," and "They think nothing of selling spoiled things." Efforts to disassociate himself from these problems didn't work. Meanwhile, he tried to economize on maintenance costs by using the part-time helpers only on weekend afternoons and turning off lights during the day. These efforts had the reverse effect, making the store look deserted. He lost customers.

The idea of making ends meet, let alone showing how a convenience store should be run, started looking absurd. Tomita stood in front of his empty store, gazed at the snow-capped Mount Kongō, and sighed. The magnificent mountain stood there, like an unfeeling wall separating him from his protected company life and his dream for the future.

I wish I could get back to the salaryman's life . . ., thought Tomita.

More and more often he felt like following his predecessors by sending a letter of resignation to the company, and returning to Tokyo. The only reason to hang onto the store was the slim hope that the company might take him back someday. But a big blow to this hope came on a cold day in late February. He happened to read a small newspaper article captioned "A-Electric Industry President Seizō Ohkura Resigns."

V

The snow had melted, and the mountain was now shrouded in thick green. Six months had passed since Tomita had moved to Kawachinagano. A token sign of recovery showed in the long-depressed Japanese economy and perked up Tomita's store a little. His son, a fifth grader,

became an outstanding student in the elementary school nearby and had picked up a fluent Osaka dialect. Sachié stopped complaining. It became her habit to push up the grillwork of the store after she saw her children off to their schools. She had acquired the art of passing out a compliment or two to her customers. She also bought foreign-made foodstuffs and craft work and put them on the display shelves. The items did not have a large market, but helped make the store look more interesting. These changes in Sachié may have been the cause for the small improvement in business.

Nonetheless, Tomita's worries and depressions were not about to go away. The income from the shop barely provided for wages and other expenses. It did not return even half of the interest on the investment. It was very unlikely that he would receive any "divided benefit." His family economy suffered. The news that Seizō Ohkura was gone worried him to death. Ohkura's resignation had weakened the bond between him and A-Electric. Still, Tomita was not quite ready to discard the hope of returning to the Main Office. He resisted as best he could the idea that Ohkura's departure would lead to the jettisoning of the president's promises into the nearest wastebasket. After all, Yoshifuji, one closer to Tomita than Ohkura, was still going strong. Junji Yoshifuji was promoted to be the first executive in charge of General Business and Personnel at the executive board re-election following Ohkura's resignation. According to an amusing account in an economics magazine, Ohkura's resignation was the result of a kind of coup d'état carried out by an intrigue between rebels in the company and A-Electric's main bank. The reason was given as bad management. Amazingly, the hidden choreographer was Yoshifuji.

On a fair day in late May, Yoshifuji surprised Tomita with a phone call. He asked Tomita to report to the A-Electric Osaka Headquarters.

VI

"Oh, hello! It's been a while since I saw you last. How have you been? . . . Oh, I'm glad to hear that." Yoshifuji stood up from his chair with a friendly smile. He welcomed Tomita in the guest room of the Osaka Headquarters.

"There are a lot of things I want to go over with you, but I don't have the time," began Yoshifuji in a businesslike tone of voice after he had listened to a brief report of Tomita's recent situation.

"To be honest, our company is still in bad shape. We haven't gotten the strength to expand the convenience store chain. It's a shame that we put you to so much trouble, but the whole thing was really no more than old Ohkura's hobby, you know."

Tomita had come with great expectations, but now felt that a wet blanket had been thrown over him. Yet a hidden joy softened the feeling of victimization. It was a hope built on the belief that he could return to the Main Office if the company disbanded the convenience store plan and if his present assignment were called off. But Yoshifuji said something totally different.

"So this is what we decided: We'll ask the present store managers to keep their stores. That is, they will buy the stores they manage and operate them on their own."

Tomita didn't understand right away. But Yoshifuji's intent soon became clear. Currently the manager of each store was the staff of an independent branch company. Technically, he was not an employee of A-Electric. The company had been keeping their retirement benefits only to leave the possibility open for their return to the main company. Yoshifuji wanted Tomita to take charge of the shop and the residence in exchange for the retirement benefits.

"I'm not forcing this on you. We can pay your retirement benefit in cash if you would rather. If you take the store and the home, you only have to pay 80 percent of the original acquisition cost. And the difference will be converted to a ten-year loan. You definitely gain that way." Yoshifuji rattled on as he opened a file folder on the table. The document said that Tomita only had 1.2 million yen per year to pay for ten years.

Tomita got back to the two-story store/residence in Kawachinagano while the sun was still high. The tremendous shock delivered by Yoshifuji had totally disoriented him. He had no recollection of how he had reached home. All he knew was that the sole reward for the long arduous struggle since his graduation from the university was this tiny building burdened with a substantial debt. His lifetime destination was a dingy retail store in a new housing development. He wanted to scream.

"What did Yoshifuji-san have to say?" Sachié was at the shop. She asked in a whisper, probably because she was shaken by the gloomy look Tomita had on his face.

"I'm fired."

Sachié was panic stricken, although she had thought that she had steeled herself against any bad news.

“And what about this store?”

“This thing?” Tomita glanced around disgustedly. “He’s giving it to us instead of my retirement benefit,” he spit out.

Sachié’s reaction was beyond belief. “How wonderful! This will be ours then.” So exclaiming, she walked up to his back and gently pulled off Tomita’s suit coat. “Some people say that they feel uncomfortable shopping with us because you wear a suit,” she whispered into his ear.

Tomita wordlessly looked at the dark suit in Sachié’s hands. The glimmer from the silver A-Electric pin hurt his eyes.

Notes

The section translated here is the first “Episode” (*Dai ichiwa*) named “Give a Chance and Wait for the Outcome” (*Yoki taika*) in *The Baby Boom Generation* (*Dankai no Sedai*) published by Bunshun Bunko, 1984, pp. 7-67.

1. The shape of a sake bottle is narrow on top and wider from about a third of the way down.

2. For definition, see Shiroyama’s “Kinjō the Corporate Bouncer,” translated in this collection.

3. Shikoku is the smallest of the four major islands in Japan, located between the largest, Honshū, and the southernmost, Kyūshū.

4. This is a near-future novel staged in the late 1980s.

5. This *-kun* suffix indicates a superior’s intimacy with his junior staff.

6. The Meiji period was the time of the Meiji Emperor’s reign between 1868 and 1912.

7. *Ochazuke* is cooked rice mixed in tea or soup.

8. In this sales system, the catalog is kept in the retail stores and at the homes of clients, and orders are made to the retail stores; it is slightly different from the American mail order system.

9. This is a system whereby goods are delivered to a house that represents a group of other houses.

10. Cram school, or *juku*, is a private school of various sizes, where supplementary instructions are given on certain hours of the day, or a few times a week. The subjects of teaching vary depending on the *juku* or the class one takes.

11. Saitama Prefecture is a northern neighbor of Tokyo. Hannou is a tourist town.

12. This is a residential area within 40 km of Osaka.