

The Rule of Twenty

By Inoue Areno

As I neared the front door, I caught the scent of creamy chicken stew. The young man I'd met earlier that day was on my mind; it had been an unusual encounter. Apparently, I was his "twentieth person."

He first approached me as I was leaving the library across from the train station, his opening line a simple, "Hello." At my age, you often hear about scammers striking up conversations like this with old folks, hoping to fleece them for all they're worth, so naturally I had my guard up. But there was something about the young man's voice—something reassuring—that made me turn around and say "hello" in return.

"Hi, I'm home," I called out. Before heading upstairs to my room, I poked my head into the kitchen.

"We're having creamy chicken stew tonight," my only daughter Sakiko said, flashing a smile as she turned from the cutting board where she'd been chopping something. When she was little, my wife and I used to worry about how scrawny she was despite how much we fed her. But now that she's nearly fifty, everything she eats seems to go straight to her hips.

"Yeah, I could smell it."

"One of your favorites, huh, Dad?"

I smiled. She asked if I wanted to take a bath before dinner, but I told her I'd wait until afterward. I had come home a little later than usual because of my conversation with the young man.

I'd been living with my daughter and her husband, Yosuke, for about six months, in the house they'd bought out in the Tokyo suburbs. They had asked me to move in, saying they were worried about me living alone at my age. So I put my old place in Sendai up for sale. It had been slow to attract buyers, though, so I figured I would need to lower the asking price before too long. Once it sold, I planned to keep just a little of the money for myself and give the rest to Sakiko and her family.

They were letting me stay in a small room on the second floor, with my grandson Natsuo's room directly across the hall. I could hear music coming from his side, so I figured he

must be home already. He was eighteen. Getting rejected by his top-choice university had put him in a bit of a funk all through April, but by May he already seemed to have bounced back. He probably gets that happy-go-lucky attitude from his father. He's shy, but he's a sweet kid. By today's standards, I think he's turned out pretty well.

As I was stepping into my room, the music across the hall got a little quieter. That was Natsuo's way of saying, "Welcome home."

There was nothing to do in my room, and I was just thinking of heading downstairs when Sakiko came up to see me. Yosuke had called to say he'd be getting home early that night, so it looked like we'd all be able to have dinner together for the first time in a while.

"Do you mind waiting another thirty minutes or so for him?" Sakiko asked.

"Of course not," I said.

I figured I might as well take that bath while I was waiting, which worked out nicely—it gave me a chance to think about the young man from earlier. As I soaked in the tub, I tried to picture his face. At first, I'd thought he was in high school, but over the course of our conversation, I realized he must've been twenty-two or twenty-three. Maybe it was his overly friendly demeanor that made him seem younger than he was. He had the classically handsome looks of an old movie star—he reminded me of a young Keiji Sada—but I had a feeling that wasn't the type young women were attracted to these days.

"Do you have a moment?" he had asked.

Ah, here we go, I thought, either a sales pitch or some kind of religious thing. But I decided to humor him. I hadn't been able to check out the book I wanted from the library—all the copies had already been reserved—so I was at a loss for something to do. I figured I might as well get a few kicks out of this young man instead. *Maybe I can even steer him down a better path, I thought, depending on how things play out.*

He led me to a café inside the department store by the train station. I'd been there once before. Even though the neighborhood is technically part of Tokyo, there aren't many cafes around to speak of. Well, there are plenty, I suppose, but not a single one serves decent coffee—nothing like what my wife and I used to drink at our favorite place back in Sendai. The first time I found this café, tucked away in a corner on the second floor and surrounded by clothing shops, I'd walked in with high hopes, but the coffee turned out to be a complete

disappointment. Coffee wasn't the point of this visit, though, so I held my tongue and followed the young man inside.

We both placed our orders: Kilimanjaro, the daily special, for me; Blue Mountain for him. *What a waste of money*, I thought, *choosing such expensive beans at a place like this*. We sat in silence while we waited for our drinks. I figured he ought to be the one to start the conversation, but he looked like he was still trying to figure out how. When the coffee finally arrived, I took a sip, grimaced at the taste, and prompted him with, "Well?"

That was when he said it: "You're my twentieth person."

"Your twentieth person?"

"Yes. I've been keeping count ever since I turned twenty. And today, I finally found my twentieth. It's you."

Now it was my turn to search for words. All I managed was a furrowed brow. *Maybe he is trying to recruit me into some cult*, I thought. Still, I found myself wanting to hear more.

"It's called 'The Rule of Twenty,'" he said.

I had just finished getting dressed when the front door opened—Yosuke was home.

"Hi, Yosuke."

"Hey. Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, giving a wave and a few quick bows. It looked a little silly, but I knew Yosuke truly meant every apology. My daughter had picked a good partner; he suited her well.

We waited for Natsuo, who finally came down after the third time his mother called, and then sat down to eat. A steaming pot of creamy chicken stew sat on the table, along with a tomato-and-mozzarella salad, some sautéed greens, and a side of simmered fuki stalks.

The tablecloth had a white background with a pattern of rice stalks printed in orange, black, and pale blue. I wondered if they'd bought it recently, but then I felt like I had seen it somewhere before, a long time ago—back in Sendai, when my wife was still alive. Maybe Sakiko had found it while helping clear out the old house and decided to save it to use here.

Yosuke poured some beer into my glass while Sakiko ladled stew into my bowl. Only Yosuke and I were drinking.

"That mozzarella's really good," Sakiko said, pointing to the salad, so I helped myself to some.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s good,” I responded.

“Isn’t it? I ordered it online—they make it up north in Hokkaido. How’s the stew?”

I took a spoonful and said again, “It’s good.”

“I think so, too, but it’s nothing like Mom used to make. Not worse, necessarily, but it’s just not the same. Don’t you think, Dad?”

Before I could answer, Yosuke cut in.

“Chicken stew can’t be all that complicated, can it?”

“It’s because it’s so simple that the differences stand out,” Sakiko said, her tone patronizing.

“That makes sense,” Yosuke readily agreed. Food had never interested him much, same as me. Sakiko must’ve gotten her passion for it from her mother.

“It’s all in how you brown the flour for the roux – little things like that.”

“I thought the roux came from a packet,” Yosuke said, making the same mistake I once had.

“Oh, come on!” Sakiko groaned, giving him the same exasperated look her mother used to give me.

I smirked. Not at Yosuke, but because, truth be told, I’ve never been particularly fond of chicken stew. If anything, it was my wife’s favorite dish, not mine – and even then, I think she enjoyed making it more than eating it. Every time she cooked it, she’d ask, “How’d it turn out today?” and I’d always say, “Delicious,” until, somehow, the whole family came to believe that it was one of my favorite meals.

“Chicken stew is nice and all,” Natsuo said, probably feeling it was his turn to chime in. “But I like curry better.”

“Oh, come on!” Sakiko said again. But this time her tone was warm, full of affection for her family. I felt some relief, but I also found myself wishing I could speak as freely as my grandson.

“Did you make your usual trip to the library today?” Yosuke asked, thoughtfully bringing me into the conversation.

“I did,” I replied. Not wanting to bore them with talk about the book I hadn’t been able to check out, I decided to tell them about the young man I’d met instead.

“Something interesting happened today,” I began. “I was introduced to something called ‘The Rule of Twenty’.”

The idea, as the young man had explained it to me, was to simply go about your daily life while keeping count of people who struck you as somehow significant. Once you reached twenty, you were supposed to approach that person and then pass the baton to them.

“What do you mean by ‘someone who strikes you as significant’?” I had asked at the café, as a piano instrumental version of “Yesterday” by the Beatles played in the background.

“Someone who catches your eye. Someone who captures your attention. Someone who seems like they should count. Like I said, someone who strikes you as somehow significant. But it has to be someone you’ve never met before. You can’t pick family or friends. No public figures, either. And if you count someone only to realize later that they stood out to you because you’ve seen them in the media before, you have to cross them off your list.”

“And you don’t say anything to the first nineteen people?”

“Right. You just keep count silently, in your head. Until you get to the twentieth.”

“So that’s what you did? You counted nineteen people before me?”

“Yes. I was twenty when I started, and it took me three years to find my twenty.”

“Three years?”

“There’s no set time frame. You could find all twenty in a week – or even a single day. Or you could find nineteen in a day and then take a whole year to find the last one.”

I explained all of this to my family over dinner, weaving together my questions and the young man’s answers as I went. I thought I was managing to cover all the key points pretty well.

“It sounds like some sort of cult,” Yosuke said, as I was nearing the end of my story. He tilted the beer bottle in my direction as if offering me a refill, but I shook my head. I’ve never minded alcohol, but I’ve never had much of a tolerance for it, either. These days, one drink is enough to whet my appetite.

“That’s what I thought too,” I said. “But it’s not a cult—it’s just a game.”

“Even so,” Yosuke went on, “it’s probably best not to get mixed up in that kind of thing.”

“There’s nothing dangerous about it. The young man never even asked for my name or where I live. And whether or not I choose to participate is entirely up to me.”

As I spoke, I realized I hadn’t even thought to ask the young man’s name.

“I remember something kind of like that from back in the day,” Sakiko said. “Chain letters. You were supposed to copy the message inside and then send it to twenty other people, or else you’d have bad luck. I did it once myself.”

Ah, yes—I remembered that. One of those letters had come for Sakiko when she was about six or seven. I tried to reason with her, telling her it was pointless to write all those letters, that they’d just be a nuisance to whoever received them. But she had burst into tears, terrified that she would be cursed with bad luck if she didn’t. Her mother scolded me afterward, saying I should’ve just let Sakiko do as she pleased. It was later that day, when my wife and I were alone in the bedroom at night. She was reprimanding me as she changed the pillowcases—I can still picture the little blue flower pattern on the fabric.

“Wasn’t it ten people, not twenty?” Yosuke asked, referring to the chain letters. “Writing out twenty of those things would be a bit much, don’t you think?”

Then he turned to me and asked, “So why is it twenty? In this ‘Rule of Twenty’ you told us about?”

His question took me by surprise. *Why twenty?* I hadn’t given it any thought, and I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Well, it’s easier than writing letters, at least until you get to the twentieth person. Before that, it’s all just in your head.”

“And you could always cheat,” Natsuo added.

“Maybe the person who came up with it was trying to commemorate their twentieth birthday,” Sakiko said.

“That makes sense,” Yosuke readily agreed.

The next song that came on after “Yesterday” was “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel—I’m referring to the music that was playing in the café. I like both songs—I used to own them on vinyl, and I even bought a Simon and Garfunkel CD. But those café versions were terrible, with nothing but the main melody tinkling faintly on a piano. I remembered why I’d sworn never to go back there after my first visit. It wasn’t only because of the coffee; the music was just as bad.

“I know this all must sound strange to you,” the young man said, possibly in response to the slight darkening of my expression.

“What made you decide to take up ‘The Rule of Twenty’?” I asked, to show I was still willing to continue the conversation.

“Because I was approached about it on the day that I turned twenty.”

Ah, yes—that’s what he had said. Sakiko had been on to something with her speculation about how it all began.

“The person who picked me was a woman in her forties,” he said. “It actually felt kind of nice, being chosen as someone’s twentieth.”

“Did it ever cross your mind that she might’ve been... a little off? Or making the whole thing up?” I asked. *Of course, I silently added to myself, the same could just as easily be true of you.*

“You can just tell with these kinds of things, can’t you? From someone’s expression, the way they talk—you can tell if they’re lying or delusional. And even if she was, well, I figured that was okay, too. In the end, whether to believe or not is up to you.”

His eyes were sparkling, and I found myself wondering what, if anything, they could reveal to me about him.

“So why me? What about this old man caught your eye?” I asked.

“You just did, that’s all,” he said with an easy laugh.

I had to laugh, too. It was a good answer. He hadn’t picked me because I had some special quality or aura. I had just so happened to be there, that was all.

“I’ve already picked my first person. A girl, about thirteen or so...” I said.

“What was she like?” Sakiko asked.

I tried to answer Sakiko’s question, but for some reason, I couldn’t summon a clear image of the girl. *Maybe I’m just tired from having talked so much*, I thought. I scooped up a piece of chicken from my bowl, but then set the spoon back down. *It’s not that I’m not particularly fond of chicken stew*, I realized. *It’s that I don’t really like it at all.*

“She came into the cafe,” I continued, “while I was still sitting with the young man. She was with her mother...”

“But you didn’t count the mother?” Sakiko asked.

“She wasn’t worth counting.”

Still struggling to bring the image of the girl into focus, my words had come out more harshly than I'd intended. Natsuo glanced up at me in surprise.

"Wait a second. You said this cafe was on the second floor, didn't you?" Yosuke asked, having just switched from beer to sake. I couldn't fathom why anyone would drink sake with creamy chicken stew.

"Yeah. It's that little café tucked away in the corner of the second floor, in the department store by the station. Nothing special, really."

"But didn't that place shut down a while ago? I think it's a discount store now."

I froze. There was no reason for an old man like me to go to that trendy department store if not for the café, so I hadn't set foot there in ages. *Yosuke might be right.*

At a loss for words, I lowered my gaze to the bowl of stew in front of me.

"Dad, do you want me to warm that up for you?" Sakiko asked.

When I looked up at her, it hit me: she had known all along. But not just her—my grandson, too, sitting there staring off into space. And it wasn't just that night. Every time I told my stories, night after night, they had always known.

Puzzled, Yosuke looked to my daughter and grandson for back up. Not that he was trying to corner me—he simply hadn't dined with me as often as they had.

"I guess I just got mixed up," I said quietly.

"Your stew must be cold by now, huh, Dad?" Sakiko said, cutting Yosuke off before he could say anything else.

"No, it's fine. I'll finish it as is," I said, lifting a spoonful of stew from my bowl.

"Thanks for the meal," Natsuo muttered as he got up from the table. Not knowing what else to do, he probably thought it best to make an escape. Yosuke still looked confused.

The truth is, I hate chicken stew. I'd be much happier with a piece of salty, grilled salmon. It felt like this might finally be the moment to say so—like I could actually bring myself to do it. But in the end, I didn't, and instead put all my effort into chewing that lukewarm piece of chicken.