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The Rule of Twenty  
by Areno Inoue

As I came up to the house, the aroma of cream stew wafted through the air. I was thinking about a curious encounter I'd had with a young man earlier that day. He told me that I was his "twentieth." I'd been on my way back from the library across from the train station when he approached me.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Now, when you get to be my age, it goes without saying that you have to be extra careful when strangers come up to you on the street like that. People are always trying to con older folks out of their money. I had a good feeling about him though. Something in his voice.

I turned my head. "Yes?"



"I'm back."

Before heading up to my room, I peeked into the kitchen. My only daughter, Sakiko, was busy chopping away.

"Cream stew tonight!" she said, turning from the cutting board to smile at me.

When she was a kid, my wife and I were always worried that no matter how much she ate and ate and ate, she always stayed thin as a rail. Now that she was nearing fifty though, everything seemed to stick right to her.

"Yeah, I can smell it."

"You sure do love your cream stew, don't you?"

I smiled warmly. She asked if I was going to take a bath before dinner, but I told her I'd wait until after. I was already home a little later than usual thanks to my conversation with the man.

For the last six months or so, I'd been living with Sakiko and her husband Yosuke in their house out in the suburbs of Tokyo after they invited me to move in with them. They'd

been getting worried about me living alone and I certainly wasn't getting any younger, so I decided to put my house in Sendai up for sale. I haven't found a buyer yet—one of these days, I'll probably have to lower the price a bit—but with whatever money I do get from selling the place, I plan to set a little aside for myself and give the rest to them.

I was staying in a room upstairs, a small tatami room right across the hall from my grandson Natsuo's. I could hear his music playing—safe to say he was already home.

Natsuo was eighteen, and had recently been rejected from his dream school. He sulked his way all through April, but by May he was back to his usual self. He wasn't the kind of person to dwell on things, much like his father. He was shy, sure, but there was a kindness about him too. All in all, I thought he'd turned out rather well.

When I opened the door to my room, I heard the music get a little quieter.  
Grandson-speak for "Welcome home."



There wasn't much to do in my room. Just as I was about to head downstairs, I caught Sakiko on her way up. Yosuke had called and said that he would be home early today. It'd been quite a while since we'd all eaten dinner together.

"So, would it be all right if we waited, like, thirty minutes or so?" Sakiko asked.

"Of course," I responded. Now that we were waiting anyway, I decided to go ahead and take my bath after all. Now I had some time to reflect on my meeting with the young man from earlier.

As I soaked in the tub, I found myself picturing him. At first glance, I thought he might've been in high school or something, but after talking to him, I could tell he was more like twenty-two or twenty-three. He was almost *too* friendly, which made him come across as fairly young. There was a kind of old-fashioned handsomeness to him as well, which

reminded me of Keiji Sada in his younger years—not really the kind of look girls are going for these days, though.



“Might I have a moment of your time?” he asked.

At first I thought, *Yeah, great. Another huckster. Or one of those religious types*, but I decided to hear him out anyway. My trip to the library had been a bit of a letdown—the book I’d wanted to check out was already on hold—so I figured, what the hell? It might be fun to bust this guy’s chops for a bit. And who knows, maybe I could even set him straight.

He led me to a coffee shop inside a department store near the station. I’d been there once before actually. There aren’t that many cafés around town to begin with, even though we were technically still a part of Tokyo. I mean sure, there are a few, but *good* coffee? Like the kind my wife and I used to get at our spot in Sendai? Not a chance. The second floor of the building was lined with clothing stores, and the coffee shop seemed somewhat out of place off in a corner. The look of it had gotten my hopes up the first time, but the coffee itself ended up being rather disappointing. Of course, I wasn’t here for the coffee this time, though, so I followed the man inside without a word.

We ordered our coffee—I, the daily special Kilimanjaro blend, and he, the Blue Mountain. *What a waste of money getting such an expensive coffee here of all places*, I thought to myself. We didn’t speak a word to each other until the coffee arrived. I was expecting him to speak up first, and he seemed to be thinking about how he was going to break the ice.

The coffee came. I took a sip, and frowned. “So?” I prompted.

“You are my twentieth.”

“Your...what?”

“My twentieth. I’ve been keeping count since I turned twenty. And today, at last, I have found my twentieth. And that’s you.”

Now it was my turn to fumble for the words, though all I could muster was another furrowing of my brow. At this point, I was pretty sure I was getting roped into some kind of religious thing, but I still couldn’t help the feeling that I should hear him out.

“There’s this... thing, called the ‘Rule of Twenty,’” he said.



I got dressed and came out of the bathroom just as the front door opened. Yosuke was home.

“Welcome back.”

“Thanks. Sorry for holding you guys up!” Yosuke sheepishly raised one hand and bowed repeatedly. It was kind of a silly gesture maybe, but when Yosuke says “sorry,” I know he really means it. Sakiko had picked a good man—he and my daughter make an excellent couple.

It took three rounds of his mother calling him before Natsuo finally came downstairs so we could start dinner. On the table was a steaming pot of cream stew along with a tomato salad, some greens, and *fuki* stalks.

The tablecloth was white, patterned with ears of rice in orange, black, and a muted blue. I figured it must be new, but then I had the sudden sense that I had seen it before—long ago, at our house in Sendai, back when my wife was still alive. Sakiko must’ve set it aside when she came to help me empty out the house. She served me a bowl of the stew and Yosuke poured me a beer—just us drinking tonight.

“That mozzarella’s really good!” Sakiko said, pointing to the tomato salad, which I then added to my plate. “What do you think?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

“Right? I got it online! They make it in Hokkaido. And how’s the stew?”

I brought a spoonful to my lips. “It’s good,” I repeated.

“It’s all right, but it’s not quite mom’s, is it? I don’t know... just feels different.”

Before I could even think of a response, Yosuke chimed in. “Well, cream stew can’t be all that complicated to begin with.”

“The simplicity of it is exactly *why* even tiny changes make a huge difference,” Sakiko said, meaning, *You have no idea what you’re talking about.*

“Fair enough,” Yosuke accepted, seemingly satisfied with that. Like me, he doesn’t pay much attention to what he eats. Sakiko’s passion for cooking came from her mother.

“It’s probably something like how long she cooks off the roux...”

“You didn’t use a boxed roux?” Yosuke had just made the same clueless remark I once had.

And, just as my wife had once responded to me, Sakiko raised her eyebrows and said, “Oh, please!”

I let out a dry kind of laugh. I wasn’t laughing at Yosuke, really, it’s just that to tell you the truth, cream stew isn’t exactly my *favorite*. More than anything, I think it was my wife’s favorite—more to cook than actually eat—and every time she made it, she would ask, “So, how is it this time?” and I’d always say, “Good. Good.” I guess after enough time, the whole family just took that at face value.

“This cream stew is good!” Natsuo said, probably thinking he should say something. “I like curry better, though.”

“All right, already!” Sakiko said, but her tone this time was palpably filled with familial affection. I let out a quiet sigh of relief. *Still, if only I had the guts to speak up like my grandson*, I thought to myself.

“So, you went to the library again today?” Yosuke said, steering the conversation to me.

“I did,” I replied. The story of me not getting a book I’d wanted from the library wouldn’t have been very interesting, so I decided to tell them about my encounter with the man instead.

“Actually, something a bit unusual happened today. I was introduced to something called the ‘Rule of Twenty.’”

As he explained it, while you go about your day, you’re supposed to count twenty people that make you think, *Oh, here’s one*, and once you get to the twentieth, you tell them and pass the torch. That’s the rule.

“‘Here’s one’? One *what*?” I asked him. I could hear a piano playing “Yesterday” over the speakers in the coffee shop.

“A person who catches your eye, someone you take a liking to... Anyone you think should be counted or who sticks in your mind. Provided, of course, that you’ve never met them before. Family, friends, and the like don’t count. Celebrities are out, too. If you come to find out that someone you’ve counted is actually famous, you count that number again.”

“So... for the first nineteen people, you don’t tell them anything?”

“Correct. Only reach out to the twentieth, and count the others in your head.”

“And that’s what you did, then? Counted nineteen people in your head first?”

“Right. I was approached when I turned twenty, and it’s taken me three years to get to you.”

“Three years?!”

“There’s no time limit or anything. You could choose all twenty in a single week—or even a day. You could count nineteen one day, and then take a whole year to choose the final person if you really wanted to.”

I walked everyone at the dinner table through the whole exchange—his story, my questions, his answers. I thought I was doing a fairly good job of it, too, but once I had gotten through the bulk of the tale—

“Sounds like a religion to me,” Yosuke said. He tilted a bottle towards me as if to ask, *More beer?* I shook my head. I didn’t dislike drinking, necessarily, but I was kind of a lightweight, and lately, I’d found that one glass with dinner was plenty for me.

“Yeah, I felt the same way at first, but it’s got nothing to do with religion—it’s just a little game.”

“Game or no, it’s probably best not to get involved in stuff like that, you know?”

“What’s the harm? He didn’t even ask me my name or my address. It’s completely up to me if I want to participate or not.” *Come to think of it, I hadn’t even thought to ask his name,* I thought.

“There was something like this a long time ago... a chain letter! It said something like, ‘Copy this letter by hand and send it to twenty people. If you do not, you will be cursed with misfortune!’ So... I did.”

Ah, that’s right... We *did* get something like that once, around the time Sakiko was six or seven. I tried to explain to her that there was really no point in doing it—that it would only serve to annoy the people she gave them to—but she just cried “Nooo! I don’t wanna get cursed!” And of course, later that night, my wife really gave me an earful for not letting her do it. I remember it clearly—just the two of us in our bedroom. She was letting me have it while she put on a fresh pillowcase. I can still picture that delicate, blue floral pattern.

“You sure it wasn’t ten letters instead of twenty? I mean, come on—writing twenty letters by hand? That’s way too much work,” Yosuke said. He turned to me. “So why twenty?” he asked. “In that game, I mean—where you talk to the twentieth person.”



This took me a little off guard. Why *was* it twenty? I hadn't really given it much thought. What could I say? "Well, for one thing, it's a lot simpler than writing letters. You just count the first nineteen people in your head."

"And you can cheat," Natsuo added.

"Maybe the person who started it wanted to do something to celebrate their twentieth birthday or something like that? Sakiko said.

"Yeah, makes sense," Yosuke said with a shrug.



After "Yesterday," "The Sound of Silence" came on. In the coffee shop, I mean. I liked both songs—I had them on vinyl, and had even bought a Simon & Garfunkel CD—but having the original melody replaced by the sharp plinking of a piano didn't do them any justice. As I said, the coffee there was no good, but besides that, I couldn't even enjoy the music! I never thought I'd come here again after the first time.

"I understand this is a rather... strange proposition," the man said, probably in response to the uncertainty in my expression.

"So, why did *you* choose to participate in this... uh, 'Rule of Twenty' thing?" I asked, trying to show my willingness to keep the conversation going.

"I was approached," he began, "precisely on my twentieth birthday—" (That's right. Just as Sakiko would later come to intuit.) "—by a woman who looked around forty. I even felt a little happy, you might say, about the fact that I had been chosen."

"This woman... I mean, did you ever think that she might be one sandwich short of a picnic? Or that she might've just been lying?" I said, adding in my head, *Of course, there's always the possibility that you're doing the same to me, too.*

"Well, you can kind of tell when it comes to things, right? From people's expressions, or the way they talk? Whether something is a lie, or pure delusion? And besides, even if she

had been lying, what difference would it have made, really? It's up to you to decide what you believe, and what you don't." His eyes were sparkling. Was that enough for me to base a decision on, though?

"All right then. Why me? What about this old man could have possibly caught your eye?"

"What can I say? My eye was caught. That's all there is to it." The man smiled gently. I couldn't help but smile back.

*Good answer*, I thought. It wasn't about anything I'd done, or who I was. I just happened to have been there. That was all.



"I've already picked out my first one," I said.

"Who?"

"A girl, maybe thirteen or so..." I tried to elaborate, but somehow I was having trouble picturing the girl now. Maybe all this talking was tiring me out after all. I scooped up a piece of chicken from the stew, but then set it back down. I realized then that cream stew wasn't just "not my favorite"—I genuinely didn't care for it.

"The man and I went to a coffee shop. While we were in there, there was this girl that came in with her mother, and..."

"You didn't count the mother then?"

"She didn't... deserve it..." The image just wasn't coming to me, which caused my words to come out strangely rough—enough that Natsuo looked up, a little startled.

"Wait, you said it was on the second floor?" Yosuke said, now having switched out his beer for sake. How could he stand more drinking with a dish like cream stew?

"Yeah. It's a little coffee shop tucked into the corner of the second floor of the department store by the station."

“No, that can’t be... that place went under a while ago. I think it’s just some 100-yen store now.”

I froze. The building was generally geared towards a younger crowd, so if not for the coffee shop, I would never have had a reason to set foot in the place to begin with. I had no idea what to say. I lowered my head and stared at the stew on my plate.

“Dad, why don’t I just... heat that up for you?”

When I lifted my head to look at Sakiko, I realized that she knew. My grandson was looking away too. They had heard it all before—the same story night after night.

“I mean, am I wrong?” Yosuke said uncomfortably, searching the faces of his wife and son for confirmation. Of course, wasn’t really trying to back me into a corner on purpose, he simply hadn’t had dinner with me as many times as they had.

“I guess... I got a little mixed up,” I said softly.

As Yosuke was about to add something else, Sakiko interrupted, “Dad, your food’s stone cold. Sure you don’t want me to heat it up?”

“No, no—it’s fine. Fine like this.” I raised the spoon to my lips.

“Thanks for dinner, mom,” Natsuo muttered, getting up from the table. I’m sure he didn’t know what to do either. Neither did I. I could hardly blame him for wanting to get out of there. Yosuke still had the same puzzled look on his face.

You know what? I *hate* cream stew. If someone were to just grill me up a nice, salty piece of salmon, that’d be good enough for me. And at this point, I feel like I should just say something already! Like I should be *able* to say something...

But I don’t. I shovel a spoonful of tepid chicken into my mouth without a word, and chew, chew, chew.

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